

Fostering Critical Literacy through Family Literacy: A Study of Families in a Mexican-Immigrant Community

Flora V. Rodríguez-Brown
Margaret M. Mulhern
University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract

This article argues that parents can become critically literate with respect to their children's education by first addressing their needs for functional literacy. The study presented here illustrates how parents' critical literacy was fostered through a family literacy project serving Mexican immigrants. This project, administered by a university, aimed at increasing the literacy skills of 3-5 year old children by educating their parents at three elementary schools in an urban, dominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood. Data collected from parent interviews, participant observation and anecdotes showed that the parents had gained new knowledge from the program. They learned the importance of reading to their children, providing more reading materials in the home, and enhancing relations with the school. In addition, parents used their new skills to participate actively in the school and in the community.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased focus on the need for critical literacy instruction. Critical literacy can be defined as a set of actions that acknowledges participants' knowledge and promotes democratic change. It refers to the integral part of people's lives whereby they "produce, transform and reproduce meaning" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 142).

In contrast, functional literacy emphasizes developing skills in order to meet individuals' needs for functioning in society. Definitions of functional literacy often include minimal levels of proficiency such as grade levels or basic competencies (Sharon, 1973; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977).

In this article we argue that it is necessary to address literacy on a functional level in order for critical literacy to take place. To support this position we offer data from a family literacy program in which Mexican-immigrant parents learned how to encourage the development of literacy in their children. The design and goals of the program will be described below followed by an explanation of

functional and critical literacy as defined within the context of the program.

Project FLAME

Literacy learning is a culturally bound activity, highly influenced by home and community factors (Heath, 1983). Therefore, the literacy culture in low-income and/or minority families is likely to differ from that of schools which are based on mainstream patterns of interaction. Home-school differences may exist in communication styles, views of literacy, and the nature of literacy interactions (Au & Jordan, 1981; Heath, 1986). Children of Mexican-immigrants are among those who have home literacy experiences that differ from those of mainstream children. For example, research has indicated that low-SES Hispanic families are less likely to engage in shared-book reading (Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991; Teale, 1986), an activity that positively contributes to literacy development by allowing opportunities for meaningful exchange about texts (Teale, 1984). Because many Mexican-immigrant parents have not been schooled in the U.S. and have limited English proficiency, they are less likely to have appropriate sociocultural knowledge of school expectations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

Academic failure has been a persistent problem for Latinos, evident in high dropout rates and low scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures of reading proficiency (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1987; National Council of La Raza, 1990). Because school efforts to alleviate the disparity between mainstream and minority students have been only partially effective, Project FLAME (Family Literacy Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando (Learning, Improving, Educating) was designed. The project, sponsored by the federal government and administered by the University of Illinois at Chicago, aimed to increase the literacy skills of 3-5 year old children by educating their Mexican-immigrant parents. It attempted to go beyond school efforts and into the homes of the families in order to attempt to equalize children's literacy opportunities when they entered school. Goals of the program included: increasing parents' ability to assist their children's literacy learning, increasing their access to literacy materials, and improving their children's literacy achievement in school (Rodriguez-Brown & Shanahan, 1989).

The program design included four major components of home literacy influence. The first component, *literacy modeling*, aimed at increasing the availability and salience of literacy models for children. This component included community literacy sessions in which parents were encouraged to use the community and home culture as literacy tools. Parents became literacy models through their attendance at ESL classes and were encouraged to model their use of literacy at home to their children in Spanish or English. *Literacy opportunity* referred to the amount and type of literacy materials in the home. The program showed parents how to increase the availability of literacy materials for their children by using the library and authoring books. In addition, parents were provided with materials to create home literacy centers and coupons to select free books at book fairs. *The literacy interaction* component was designed to give parents information and techniques that would better enable them to engage in literacy activities with their children. For example, sessions on shared-book reading, language games, and emergent writing offered parents new ways of sharing literacy with their children that drew on the families' knowledge and home culture. The final element, sessions on *home-school relationships*, gave parents the opportunity to meet with teachers in order to share their concerns and to learn about American schools and teachers' expectations. Parents also made classroom visits in order to see the kinds of activities their children engaged in at school.

Parental participation in the program was voluntary, and the sixty participating families were recruited through three elementary schools by teachers and community liaisons. Literacy sessions such as those described above were held every other week from October to May. In these sessions, parents shared their experiences and tried out the ideas presented with their children. Additionally, ESL classes for the parents were held twice a week throughout the year. The program teachers were graduate and undergraduate students majoring in bilingual or ESL education. During the summer a Parent Leadership Institute was held at the university and parents attended workshops led by community leaders or educators.

Defining Critical Literacy within Project FLAME

Literacy has multiple meanings and uses that are socially constructed within the contexts in which they occur. Defining literacy is problematic as it can be viewed as reading and writing

only or more broadly, including its oral forms. However, researchers have demonstrated that oral and written forms of literacy are on a continuum rather than dichotomous (Heath, 1982; Shuman, 1986; Tannen, 1985).

In formulating our definitions of critical and functional literacy we examined the changes that took place throughout the family literacy program. Entering the program, parents expressed their needs in terms that we considered functional. For example, they wanted to learn how to negotiate the new worlds they were encountering by communicating in English with medical personnel, teachers, and their own children. The project directors believed that the parents also needed information about how they could help their young children become interested and involved in literacy activities that would foster school success. In addressing the functional needs of the parents they began to express more critical attitudes toward institutions in their lives. This change in attitude indicated how critical literacy evolved within the project, exceeding the intended goals. We reevaluated our definition of literacy to include the critical actions and attitudes that emerged as parents participated in the project.

This broader definition of literacy is reflected in the work of Freire and Macedo (1987) who believe that "literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (p. 141). In project FLAME, parents' learning was not limited to increasing their literacy skills although this in itself was empowering. Rather, they found that writing and speaking about their experiences led to changes in their relationships with the broader society. In other words, functional literacy developed into a set of cultural practices that promoted emancipatory changes in their lives. For example, they became aware of ways in which they could address their lack of power in the schools. Hence, critical literacy consisted of the parents' increased awareness that they lacked knowledge about educational processes in the United States and that they could improve their children's chances to succeed in school. Such a view of critical literacy is expressed by Giroux (as cited in Freire & Macedo, 1987) when he states that "the issue of literacy and power does not begin and end with the process of learning how to read and write critically; instead, it begins with the fact that one's existence is part of a historically constructed practice within specific relations of power" (p. 7).

Given this view of literacy, this study supports the belief that “to be literate is *not* to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one’s voice, history, and future” (Giroux in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 11 emphasis in the original). Thus, our understanding of critical literacy developed out of the FLAME classroom sessions which enabled parents to begin to view their lives from a more historical perspective, to voice their opinions more publicly, and to re-envision their futures.

Method

Participants and Setting. Most of the participants in project FLAME were mothers who had recently immigrated from Mexico and had an average education of seven years. Fathers participated less frequently, since the classes took place in the morning while they worked in factories and other service jobs. The neighborhood was a point-of-entry community for new immigrants as it offered economical housing and many native language support services. Despite the parents’ concerns about high gang activity in the neighborhood, they found it difficult to leave the area because of their economic circumstances and desire to remain nearby family and friends.

Data Collection and Analysis. There were two major sources of data collected and analyzed in this study. First, case studies of three families from one of the participating schools were conducted. Each one of these families had a child who was between 3 and 5 years old. The families were chosen from among several families who were available and willing to be observed at home. The case studies involved several visits to the families’ homes over five months, interviews with parents, and audio-recordings of parents sharing books with their children. These data were significant because they documented how parents were putting into practice at home the knowledge gained from the literacy sessions.

Interviews of parents were another data source. Parents were interviewed at the beginning of the year about their use of literacy at home. End-of-year interviews provided information on the knowledge parents had gained from the program as well as their perceptions of their role as educators in their families and the community. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and subsequently translated into English. Later, they were analyzed and categorized by their content as it applied to the four components in project FLAME’s design. For example, some of the categories

included in literacy opportunity were: the availability of children's books at home, the accessibility of writing materials, and visits to the public library. Additional sources of data were the anecdotes and field notes collected by the project staff. These notes proved to be a rich source of evidence of critical literacy functioning among the parents.

Compiling these sources of data, a comparison was made between the patterns that had emerged from the case studies, field notes, and parents' interviews. The analysis indicated that the original goals of the program were achieved in the areas of literacy modeling, literacy opportunity, literacy interaction, and home-school relationships. Some of the patterns indicated that FLAME parents: a) believed the home played a central role in their children's education, b) understood the importance of oral language interaction with their children, c) were more aware of the types of instruction received by their children in school, and d) participated more actively in school activities. The data also revealed that the families involved in the program were using the knowledge and skills learned in Project FLAME more critically than we had originally foreseen.

Results

Critical Literacy in Action. The results presented here are organized according to the four components of home literacy outlined in the project design. A summary of the findings of the case studies in each area is reported as well as several quotes that are typical of parent responses to end-of-year interview questions. Anecdotal evidence from FLAME staff and school teachers is also presented.

Literacy modeling, or the extent to which parents used literacy at home and modeled the uses of literacy to their children, varied. The three case studies revealed that the parents who had the highest levels of formal education used literacy more frequently and for a wider range of uses than the other two families where the functional uses of literacy were more apparent. Parents modeled to their children the importance of education by attending ESL classes.

Several mothers reported in the interviews that their role in helping children to read was to set an example for their children by reading and writing themselves. Berta, one of the participating mothers, said, "I should read and write in front of my children, so that they will do the same. In other words, to set an example so that

they can follow.” And Lorena told us, “We as parents need to motivate our children to read and we should be an example of this reading ourselves.” Thus, parents believed that they could motivate their children to read by displaying their own interest in literacy.

In the category of literacy opportunity, the case studies demonstrated that the accessibility of literacy materials advocated in FLAME classes seemed to make some difference in the amount of time children engaged in literacy activities. In the homes of two children where books and writing materials were always in view, they (and their younger siblings) engaged frequently in book reading and writing. However, in another home where books were kept in a bedroom the child did not use the materials during any home visits. Teachers in the program also reported a marked difference over the course of the year in other parents’ attitudes towards allowing children access to books. Whereas early in the program they did not allow their children to handle books, they realized later the value of getting young children interested in books.

Two of the three focal families reported that they visited the library and in one home several library books were always in the living room. One mother did not go to the library on her own although she was excited about taking out books based on her children’s interests during a class library visit. According to the teachers in the program, not all the families went to the library on a regular basis. Some parents mentioned reading library books to children while others read books they had obtained through the program.

Isabel said:

They [the parents] ought to be teachers and friends so that children don’t look at reading as a chore, but as fun. Parents should take kids to the library; they should have and share books with the family. Parents ought to help kids write, and write themselves to help the reading process; make pictures, work together.

Overall, many parents realized that they were unfamiliar with the library and the services provided there and were eager to learn more about it with the assistance of the program staff.

In the category of literacy interaction the data revealed that the parents reads to children at home. This finding is significant because of the limited amount of reading found in other studies of Latinos

(Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1989; Teale, 1986) and because of the widespread agreement that being read to allows children to learn about written language (Holdaway, 1979; Teale, 1984; Wells, 1986).

Findings also showed that sharing books became a common activity, and that parents used reading strategies taught in the program. When asked to share a book with their child, the parents in the case studies demonstrated similar ways of reading to children which were appropriate to the children's ability levels. Both parents and children asked each other questions and the parents related the content of books to their children's lives.

Additionally, all three focal children engaged in pretend reading, or reading re-enactments, an activity which allows children to reconstruct written text (Holdaway, 1979; Pappas & Brown, 1988). Two of the children also engaged in other reading-like behaviors which are considered learning to read strategies (Doake, 1985). Other types of literacy interactions occurring in the homes included teaching the ABC's, writing stories with children, and playing games.

In interviews, several parents in the project said that one of the most important things they learned in the program was how to share books with their children. Parent self-reports revealed that they shared books with their children frequently, from daily to once a week. These interactions were initiated by the children and their parents and siblings, with mothers reading most frequently. The following responses were typical of those the parents gave at the end of the year about how they shared books in their families.

Margarita J. reported:

I read with them everyday because I enjoy it. However, my children look through and "read" their books all day long. They like to look at the books they chose at the book fair and they're always after me to read them with them. We talk about the pictures in the books and they always ask a lot of questions, too many, I would say.

Isabel told us:

We read everyday in the living room, in the afternoon. I read short children's stories from the library, or our own, over and over. We read round-robin, and even though my son doesn't read, he "reads" from pictures and memory and

imagination. My husband reads, too. I initiate, and we have a regular schedule. We, me and my husband, ask prediction questions and inferential questions. We sometimes don't read the conclusion until we all imagine and tell our own.

Shared book reading, then, became a rich context in which families created new routines around literacy in the home.

Writing was a second area in which literacy interaction took place. Parents retained many of their traditional beliefs about writing, that is, learning how to make letters correctly is necessary before being able to write. This was especially evident when parents gave children words or letters to copy. However, two mothers in the case studies also accepted their children's emergent writing as meaningful and one mentioned that she had learned this from the FLAME program. Of the three children observed at home, one engaged in writing more frequently and was not concerned about "correct" writing since her mother accepted her emergent writing.

In interviews, few parents mentioned writing as a way of helping children learn to read. Compared to book reading, writing proved to be a more difficult area in which to affect change since parents retained traditional notions of how writing is learned. They may have held onto these beliefs because of their learning experiences in Mexico and their children's exposure to skill-based instruction in U.S. schools.

Beyond written language, the importance of oral language interaction was also recognized by parents. One mother said that books had helped stimulate dialogue between her and her child.

Another parent, Rosa, said:

I feel I know how to help them, my children, better now. For example, when one of my children comes home in a bad mood or feeling down I remember what we've been told, to talk to them and find out what's wrong. Before I would yell at them but now I know by talking to them I can help them more.

This mother's experience indicates how the impact of FLAME classes extended beyond the original goals of increasing young children's interaction with written language.

The interviews and anecdotal notes revealed many changes in parents' home-school relationships. After participating in the program for a year parents considered themselves as having a fundamental role in their children's education. They felt they now knew how to support teachers' efforts and work with them. Parents realized that they could have an impact on their children's education by reinforcing what children learned in school at home and by learning about school instruction.

In regard to the roles of home and school in learning to read and write, parents responses demonstrated that they believed the home played a central role in their children's education. For example, Iris reflected, "Both places help each other. Reading and writing at home help the child in school and vice-versa." Similarly, Isabel learned that, "The school and the home have the responsibility to teach them [children] to read and most of all to facilitate the comprehension of what they read. Because we know our children, we can inspire them by giving life to books."

Parents learned to pay more attention to the instruction their children were receiving in school, reported changes in their children's enjoyment of reading, and claimed they had better relationships with their children's teachers. Leticia spoke about the difference she noticed in her knowledge and ability to help her children. She said, "What I learn to do in the program FLAME I do with them [the children] and then they know more. I'm glad I joined this program, because with my oldest child I didn't know all this and even though I tried to help him in school I didn't feel I could. Now I feel I can help my children." Irma commented, "Now we have a better idea of how to support teachers' efforts and work with them. It's not a matter of just dropping them off in the morning and that's it. One must know what's going on. One must work with children at home." Statements such as these illustrate not only the parents' desires to support their children's learning but also their realization that they had lacked this knowledge before attending the program.

In interviews, parents referred not only to what they had learned from the FLAME staff but also to the ways in which their children and classmates helped them. One mother said that the program had opened her mind as she learned ideas from her classmates and the teacher. Likewise, Maria noted, "I liked what we learned and the strength and enthusiasm of the teachers, being able to interact with the other students and learn from them." Lorena liked the patience

that the teachers demonstrated in their explanations of concepts as well as the companionship between the teacher and the students. Parents were able to make friendships, share ideas and food, and enjoy dialogue with other parents during classes.

School teachers of the children in the program reported that the parents were more active in the school. Parents found ways to address their lack of power in the schools by working at home with their children, by finding out about school instruction, and by becoming actively involved. This was evident not only in their participation of school events but their willingness to serve as members of local school councils. Three FLAME parents became candidates for the local school councils, ran their own campaigns, and were elected by public vote. They were able to express their own views about schools and have a voice in their children's education.

The community built through the FLAME classes also helped change parents' attitudes about going to school council meetings. One of the University staff members noted that during one local school council meeting where uniform policy was being discussed, the FLAME parents were the more active participants in the discussion. This assertive behavior contrasted with their reticence evident at the beginning of the program. One mother reported, "We feel powerful when we come to school meetings, we sit together, we feel useful."

Parents felt that the information and experiences gained in the program could not have been obtained on their own. Previous lack of information had made school difficult for their older children. Thus, the knowledge parents gained extended beyond the specific literacy skills they first felt were necessary to acquire. Moreover, some parents found that the program had made an impact on relationships within their own families. Asked about what the family had learned through FLAME,

Margarita L. answered:

I have learned more English. I have learned to help my children learn to read. Now I know how important it is, because now my son likes to read, before he didn't. I know more about discipline and child rearing. I have a good relationship with the school teachers.

Margarita J. said:

My family has become more united as a result of the program. My husband has witnessed what a change spending more time with his children can have. He has changed and really enjoys his sons more now. I have learned how valuable it is to share ideas and be part of the group. My children now have a more responsive father who is more interested in what they learn, in what I learn.

These reflections demonstrate that the effects of the project moved beyond the functional aspects of literacy originally included in the program. Parents conversed about family and community concerns and built their own community of leaders within each school.

These data reveal the knowledge that parents have gained through FLAME and how it has influenced their lives at home, their views of schools, and their roles as parents. The program has been effective because it has brought together parents who would otherwise have been more isolated, and has provided them an opportunity to dialogue and to participate in school. This is not functional literacy but critical literacy at work. Parents have validated their knowledge and potential and can express more openly their desires and dreams.

Conclusion

The findings presented here illustrate the ways in which parents are using the knowledge they have gained in FLAME classes at home and in the school. The case studies, interviews, and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that FLAME has had an impact on the availability of literacy materials in the home and that the materials are being used effectively. Parents are aware of the importance of reading to children and both parents and children enjoy reading together. They have enhanced their home-school relationships by learning more about schools and how they can effectively work with teachers to facilitate their children's education. Increasing their ability to communicate in English has raised their confidence levels, enabling them to meet their needs independently. Further, they have assumed more active roles in the schools and fostered greater interaction among family members.

For Freire (1987), literacy is part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's

experience. In this program, we feel that parents were able to name their experiences or “read the world” because they gained the knowledge and skills necessary to see their experiences contrasted with the American culture they now live in and which affects their daily lives. This was evident when parents refused to exit the program after one year. They felt that although they had learned a lot, they desired to continue learning and did not want to leave the supportive community they had helped create. By the end of the first year parents had taken ownership of the program, promoted it within the schools, and helped to shape its goals.

Project FLAME, the family literacy program in which these changes took place, can easily be considered parent training. Training programs are often criticized because they aim to bring minority groups into mainstream ways of using literacy. However, these arguments ignore the voices of those served in such programs who realize that their dreams of educational success and increased educational opportunity for their children will not be achieved without access to learning the dominant language and sociocultural knowledge of negotiating new systems, in particular, schools in the U.S. Parents in Project FLAME are not interested in giving up their own traditions, language, and values; yet, they realize that they cannot negotiate the dominant culture without learning about it. According to Macedo, people “have to become literate about their histories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environments. On the other hand, they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so that they can transcend their own environments” (Freire & Macedo, 1987 p. 47). From our experience we found that parents voluntarily participated in the program and repeatedly requested information that would allow them access to middle-class success. They realized that they are currently at a disadvantage because of their lack of linguistic ability in English and sociocultural knowledge. It is only by gaining the confidence and ability to negotiate a new culture that people can become empowered to make changes in their lives and their community.

The writing in English of Bernalda, one of the women in the project, beautifully illustrates how she read her world of childhood in Mexico and has carried it over to her dreams for the future:

Sometimes I remember my personal story, when I was a girl climbing a tree and I use to remember the tales that my

grandmother told me at night about princes and princesses whit [with] big castles. I throught [thought] at that moment I was the princess of the story, all the panorama that was around me was lovely, the tree was my castle, and the flowers I was watching, the white margaritas and the red roses, and all the other were the flowers that my eyes had ever saw until now. And I think my spirit of a little gril [girl] is with me, and I am still living a story because when I came to the city I like to read and see the magazines of fashion and dream of having the things that rich people have. (Bernalda, 1990)

In remembering her childhood and sharing her dreams with others, Bernalda reveals that there is nothing wrong with dreaming. Dreams can become reality.

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