

EL PROYECTO DE LOS LIBROS ABECEDARIOS: EARNING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Cheryl Marie McElvain, Ed.D. Lecturer, Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Education and Basic Teacher Credential Programs, Santa Clara University, California

Abstract

This study describes how a bilingual literacy project influenced the development of a community-based, after-school literacy program connecting home, school, and the community for Mexican immigrant children and their families. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is used to examine the funds of knowledge expressed in ABC books written by eleven immigrant families living in an affordable housing complex in Northern California. Content analysis results reveal strengths and weaknesses in the transactional processes that often occur between minority families living in Anglo-majority communities. The researcher relates how an after-school program used the analysis results to customize its approach to learning and strengthen connections on all levels of the social ecological system.

Introduction

All families have a story to tell. Generational discourse nurtured by *confianza*, the implicit trust embedded in Latino interpersonal relationships that define identity and a place of belonging. Family stories frame a child's worldview and are fundamental to a child's notion of what it means to be literate.

Scholars now understand that literacy education involves more than conveying information to students. Literacy learning occurs through an in depth, critical understanding of the world (Freire 1983). Students are not the objects of learning to read and write, they possess knowledge and experiences that can be leveraged in the classroom as they become literate (Freire 1970).

Yet a recent review of family literacy research found that publications were less focused on analyzing family literacy as a means to understand the student within a community of social interactions and more focused on analyzing the structural differences between home-school literacies (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, and Lewis 2012).

Cairney's (2002) twenty year review of family literacy initiatives investigated programs in three categories: a) home/school programs involving parents in literacy activities that often exclude their children, b) intergenerational literacy programs designed to provide literacy instruction to adults while teaching parents how to develop literacy skills with their children c) partnership programs using home/school literacy initiatives to establish more effective partnerships between schools, families, and communities. He concluded that there has been little progress in addressing a number of significant doubts related to program effectiveness. Many of the programs failed to address questions related to the use of European English speaking cultural practices that met the diverse learning needs from minority groups and established a genuine partnership between home, school and community. Community-based literacy projects have failed to provide a clear purpose for the community they serve (Moje 2000).

Furthermore, many family literacy programs have exclusively applied to school based programs that only reinforce perceptions of privileged school literacy activities rather than richly varied family oriented literacy practices.

Forum on Public Policy

What is needed is a broader definition of family literacy. Very few programs address literacy as a social practice. Effective literacy programs focus on the people not just the practice. Researchers investigating culturally diverse family literacy practices need to engage the community from a sociocultural context. Moll (1993) recommends “a shift away from a view of individual learners to a view of learning as participation in a community of practice” (Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference). This shift changes the perspective of family literacy away from how the school can help parents develop literacy skills or school related partnerships and progresses toward an understanding of why and how people learn within their individual community groups. Educators would be able to see how families and children negotiate their world of multiliteracies within the broader context of community, one that investigates literacy from a social ecological stance (Cope and Kalantzis 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Sociologist Charles Wright Mills wrote “the powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live yet in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern” (1956, p. 3). This statement rings particularly true in regard to minority Mexican immigrant families living in Anglo-majority communities. Lack of economic mobility, obstacles faced in accumulating intergenerational wealth, and persistently low education levels appear to make it harder for Mexican immigrants to assimilate into the mainstream (Martin 2006; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Low-income Mexican immigrant parents often lack the cultural and social capital essential in supporting their children’s educational achievement (Steinberg 1996). Deficient knowledge of how the system works, rudimentary English language skills, low educational background, and limited access to important social networks often cause impoverished parents from Mexico to refrain from interacting with teachers and school administrators, accepting the school’s decisions at face value and continuing the cycle of isolation in the educational community (Clarkson 2008; Laureau 2003; Orfield and McArdle 2006; Ramirez 2003; Valenzuela 1999).

As educators and community members, we casually move in and around our spheres of influence rarely stopping to investigate the lives of those who exist on the outside. We need to look beyond the existing ideologies to create new spaces and new possibilities that utilize social semiotics to study how people use language to find meaningful existence within a community. This necessitates learning from the inside out. The purpose of this study is to:

1. Utilize Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory model (1979) to understand how Mexican immigrant families situate themselves within a community.
2. Utilize Halliday’s (1973) seven functions of language model to understand the functional language patterns found in Mexican immigrant family literacy practices in order to develop an effective community based, after-school literacy program.

Diversity Lens

Worldview is influenced by what one knows, and what one knows is influenced deeply by one's worldview (Ladson-Billings 2003). Therefore, diversity needs to be placed at the center of family literacy programs. Traditional school approaches to literacy incorporating linear, sequential, and measureable progress remain modernistic in their assumptions about the family and traditional print medium (Carrington and Luke 2003; Gillborn 2005). Many literature anthologies and required reading in the K-12th grades predominantly feature white protagonists and Protestant, middle-class values. Similarly, some family literacy efforts promote white, middle-class literacy perspectives (e.g., systematic and skill based reading and writing tasks), while the literacy practices of diverse families that incorporate an emphasis on oral language and narrative story telling are neglected (Auerback 1995; Cairney 2009; Luke 1995). Moreover, the curriculum, activities, materials, and resources present in language arts classrooms convey cultural models (Gee, 2001) that provide tacit representations about what is regarded as normal and what is not.

Looking beyond the classroom walls creates an open space for investigating authentic notions of literacy within a community setting. Traditional funds of knowledge research gives teachers insight about home knowledge and literacies that students bring to school providing a platform for more effective instruction (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). The role of the teacher changes to one of learner as she uses the diversity lens to re-envision the households of her students. Students are viewed as family ambassadors full of rich cultural and cognitive resources that can provide relevant content for culturally responsive lessons that directly link to students' life experiences.

The diversity lens informed by students' funds of knowledge transforms curricula by transforming teacher-student perceptions. Pedagogy that is culturally relevant creates a classroom community full of respect and a perspective that all students can succeed.

Strong connections are forged between the home, school, and outside of school community resources (Ladson-Billings 1992). Students' lived experiences are legitimized and the purpose of education evolves to transform individual lives so they can transform the world. Such pedagogies entailing negotiations between familial funds of knowledge and schools that serve as power brokers within a community are critical for family literacy scholars who actively engage in collaborative action with members of diverse communities to change attitudes and make strategic policy decisions.

Building Literacy Bridges With English Learners

Every child comes to school with a cultural identity that shapes and is shaped by their home literacy experiences. As children learning English as a second language enter early childhood school settings, they often face unfamiliar social practices that give mismatched messages related to their cultural definition and significance of literacy. The variety of English expected of students within a school context is drastically different than the interactional language they use for social purposes outside of school. School related literacy difficulties "may be related to inexperience with the linguistic demands of the tasks of schooling and unfamiliarity with the ways of structuring discourse that are expected in school" (Schleppegrell 2004 p. 16).

Literacy for English language learners can be greatly improved when teachers build bridges of learning, rather than walls of knowledge. This can only happen when the learning process is reciprocal, respectful, and inclusive. Teachers begin instruction by learning about their students' life experiences. This means the teacher must depart from standards based instruction long enough to assess whom the student is and what the student brings to the classroom community. The teacher must take on an ethnographic stance becoming a careful observer of students.

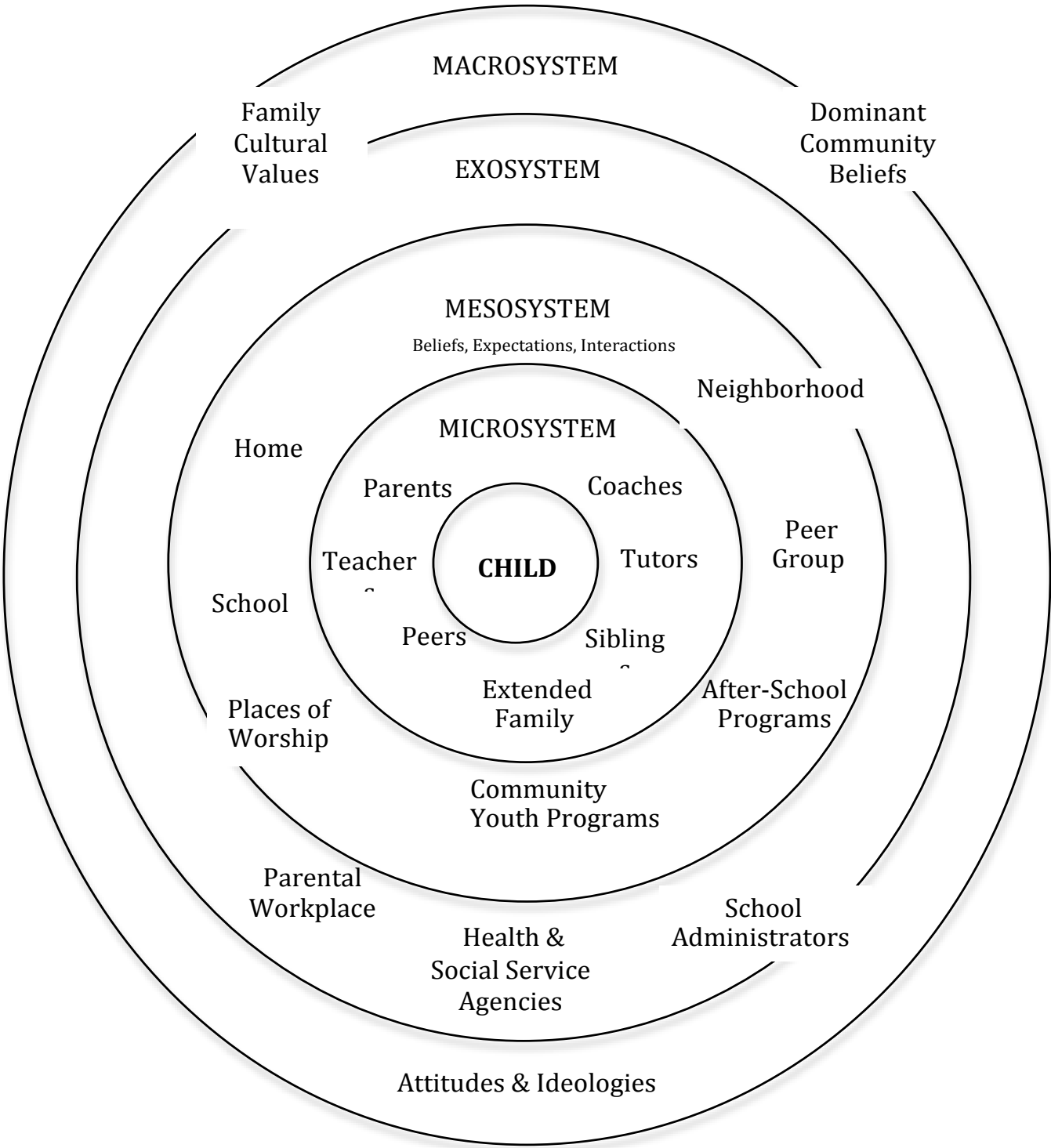
A Social Ecological Approach to Family Literacy

Researchers believe that successful community-based family literacy models are rooted in social constructivist learning theories where learners actively construct their own understandings within social contexts (Au 1993). This study utilizes Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to understand the transactional language processes that exist between low-income, minority Mexican immigrant families living in a middle class, majority Anglo community.

The literature on interrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty among Mexican immigrant youth and their families include providing family educational programs and increasing social support systems within a community base (Johnson 2007; Moore 2004; Zhou 1997). Effective programs for Mexican immigrants strengthen families by offering community-based, culturally and socially relevant information, resources and emotional support (Connard and Novick 1996; Strug and Mason 2007).

Community based family literacy programs that reconstruct the social networks that exist between the family and the community are grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theoretical model. Bronfenbrenner suggests that a child's maturation is strongly influenced by various people and institutions that directly or indirectly impact the sense of self and place in the world. His theoretical model is visualized as a set of concentric circles representing various levels of influence surrounding the child (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Model



SOURCE: Adapted with permission from Weiss, H.B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M.L. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing Educators To Involve Families* (p. xiv). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Forum on Public Policy

The child is positioned at the center, surrounded by layers of relationships that affect his/her social, emotional, and academic wellbeing. The inner circle, referred to as the *microsystem* (p. 25), describes settings where the child has direct, face-to-face contact with significant people such as parents, siblings, teachers, etc. These people nurture, teach, and frequently socialize with the child. This is where the child experiences daily life. It is the womb of emotional and cognitive development.

Cross-relationships between individuals within the microsystem form lateral connections that make up the *mesosystem* (p. 25). It is comprised of communications between the child's parents, teachers, tutors, etc. and represents the degree of support that exists within the child's microsystem.

Beyond this is a third level of people who are indirectly involved in the child's development such as the parents' employers, health and social service agencies, and school administrators. These relationships exist within the *exosystem* (p. 25) and provide the community support for the child's caregivers.

The *macrosystem* (p. 25) is the fourth level within the system. It operates at the broadest level of influence and includes political systems, social policies, cultural values, economic trends, community attitudes and ideologies. Interactions within the macrosystem often determine the resources, opportunities, and constraints present in the lives of children and their families.

Inclusive approaches to family literacy serve as bridging agents between the family, school, and community within the social ecological model. Effective family literacy programs target relationships within each level of the system by assessing the families' literacy resources and practices, utilizing the heritage language and culture as resources (micro), acknowledging how families may be disempowered or disadvantaged by schools and society (macro) and seeking ways to empower parents and schools (meso) to improve children's achievement (Faltis 2006; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg 2005).

Method

Design and Procedures

This study utilizes M.A.K. Halliday's (1973) seven functions of language model as a means to investigate a) the functional language patterns present in Mexican immigrant family ABC books and, b) how those patterns can be used to develop an after-school literacy program that connects families at all levels within the community.

Halliday maintains that the linguistic system is a "range of possible meanings, together with the means whereby these meanings are realized or expressed" (1975, p. 8). He identified seven functional language categories and felt that it was important for children to be proficient in all of them in order to communicate effectively in the home, school and community (Pinnell 2002).

1. Instrumental Language (*I need*) – Used to satisfy our needs. This language is innate in all children and becomes more complex with age, taking on the forms of persuasion and argument.
2. Regulatory Language (*You will*) – Used to control other's behavior. This language in young children includes demands that can evolve into more subtle manipulation. Positive regulatory language is a skill needed by children in cooperative learning environments. Parents, teachers, coaches and tutors use positive regulatory language within the home and community environment to set limits on children's behavior.

Forum on Public Policy

3. Interactional Language (*We*) – Used to socially interact. This language function is present in all relationships. It may include expressions of encouragement or negotiations of meaning. For adults, it may involve casual, friendly conversation that employs surface level meaning. It is typically used by children in friendships or team building settings.
4. Personal Language (*I am*) – Used to express personal emotions or some element in an individual's personality. This language function enables children to express strong opinions related to their personal life experiences. Positive personal language is demonstrated in assertive expressions, which convey confidence and build self-esteem. The personal language function is replete with cultural nuances that govern word meaning and social use among children and adults.
5. Imaginative Language (*I imagine*) – Used in creative expression when children engage in make believe. In more sophisticated forms, it is used in creative story telling, narrative writing, poetry, drama, or in figurative language.
6. Heuristic Language (*I wonder*) – Used to question, explore, and problem solve. It is an important metacognitive skill used in reading and scientific inquiry. It involves reflective thinking, and the self-analysis needed to fix up confusions when children are learning new information. It is an important element of self-talk as children engage in critical thinking.
7. Informative Language (*I know*) – Used to communicate information. Usually employs a declarative sentence form that is meant to teach. It is the language often used by teachers in school and required by students in fact recall. It is used in information processing as children synthesize main ideas and inferences in reading. Academic English is the more formal form of this language function, and is particularly difficult for English language learners in their endeavor to acquire the “language of schooling”.

For this study, three questions were posed related to the social semiotic nature of language within a community:

1. What are the functional language patterns found in a predominately Anglo, middle class community?
2. How do low-income, Mexican immigrant families situate themselves within a middle class, Anglo community?
3. What language functions found in Mexican immigrant family ABC books can be used to build an effect community based, after-school literacy program?

Participants

Participants in this study (N=45) included a diverse set of Mexican immigrant parents and their children living in Northern California. Parent gender was evenly distributed between males and females and the average age was 35 years old. Most were married, and employed as skilled laborers. The average annual income of the parent participants was \$31,000.

Although 4 out of the 19 parents were U.S. citizens, most were undocumented (N=12). All but one of the parents was born in Mexico. The amount of time that the parents had been living in the U.S. ranged from 3-17 years. Half of the parents were bilingual with varying degrees of English proficiency. All of the bilingual parents had lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years and all of the Spanish-speaking parents had lived in the U.S. for 6 years or less. Only 30% of the parents had a high school education or higher. Most had less than a 6th grade education and almost half of the parents experienced poverty levels below the 2010 poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau 2011).

Forum on Public Policy

There were an approximately equal number of male (N=11) and female (N=15) children who participated in the study. At the beginning of the study 9 children were in preschool-3rd grade, 11 were in 4th – 6th grade, 1 was in 7th – 8th grade, and 6 were in 9th – 12th grade. All of the children were identified as English language learners with varying degrees of bilingualism. Most of the children in the study had citizenship status equal to their parents. Seven of the children were U.S. citizens living with undocumented parents. *The Los Libros Abecedario Family Literacy Project*

The Los Libros Abecedario (The ABC Books) family literacy project was conducted from February - March 2008 to provide neighborhood services to low-income Mexican immigrant children living in an affordable housing complex and evolved into a community based, after-school literacy program in September 2008 that included two hours of Pre K-6th grade tutoring four days per week, monthly parent meetings, life skill classes for students, and frequent community celebrations. It was funded through a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and staffed by community volunteers from local churches and high schools.

In March 2008, the families met in the community center of the apartment complex with the researcher and a Spanish translator to discuss the literacy project. Each family was given a copy of Alma Flor Ada's (1997) Spanish and English alphabet book titled *Gathering the Sun*. After the parents read the book with their children, they made text-to-self connections about Mexican heritage themes interwoven throughout each letter of the alphabet. The researcher discussed the importance of reading in the home and shared the academic value of retaining one's heritage language and culture.

The families were then given a disposable camera and a blank book bound with twenty-six pages. Each family was instructed to develop their own family ABC book, which would be shared within the neighborhood community. For one month, the families decided what concept would best represent their family for each letter, and how to represent it visually. Families were encouraged to use multiple medium sources including family photos, sketches and drawings. They were also given the choice to write bilingually, or exclusively in Spanish or English.

In November, the families met again to share their ABC books. The children translated their family book if it was written in Spanish. Of the 12 families that came to the initial meeting, 11 finished their books in one month.

In order to form relationships outside of the local community, the researcher organized a field trip to a local university to meet the renowned Latino children's author, Francisco Jiménez. The author shared his life story with the families, and the families shared their ABC books with the author. This was the first time any of the families had crossed the threshold of a university, and the first time a teacher had legitimized and validated their life experiences. The author raised the perceived literacy status of each family by writing a note at the beginning of each ABC book in Spanish. Many families felt so honored that they immediately shared their books with the local neighborhood community and family members living in Mexico. The larger community responded by publishing the event in the city newspaper and reporting it on the university website.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study examined the functional language patterns of eleven Mexican immigrant families living in North California in order to develop an effective after-school literacy program that improved literacy skills in English, increased social capital within the family, and built intercultural connections within the community.

The researcher first analyzed the corpus of ABC books as a whole to determine topical meaning units. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the topics families chose to identify with each alphabet letter. The topics were mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory model in order to understand how families situated themselves within each ecological level of the community. Using the emergent coding approach (Haney, Russell, Gluek, and Fierros 1998) the researcher identified 60 topics within the corpus of ABC books, which she later collapsed into 5 categories relative to each level in the social ecosystem: self, family interactions, community interactions, employment/social agency interactions and socio-cultural interactions. Subsequently, she identified 296 topically related speech units amongst all of the family ABC books and coded them a priori (Weber 1990) into appropriate social ecosystem levels.

The researcher and one Spanish speaking graduate student assistant then looked for speech units within each family ABC book associated with Halliday's (1978) seven language functions: instrumental, interactional, imaginative, informative, regulatory, personal, and heuristic. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the functional language patterns present within each family that could be used to design an after-school literacy program that was built upon the child's internal language models (Halliday 2002). They identified 364 speech units in the text of eleven ABC books developed by the families in the study. The speech units were identified by looking for natural meaning units that could be categorized under at least one of the seven Halliday (1978) language functions. Using a priori coding (Weber 1990), the researcher and her assistant sorted and coded the meaning units within each family book by language function, then tallied the total number of units across language functions. When substantive differences in interpretation arose, the analysts worked them together into a dialogue leading to an intersubjective agreement of .98 (Krippendorff 1980).

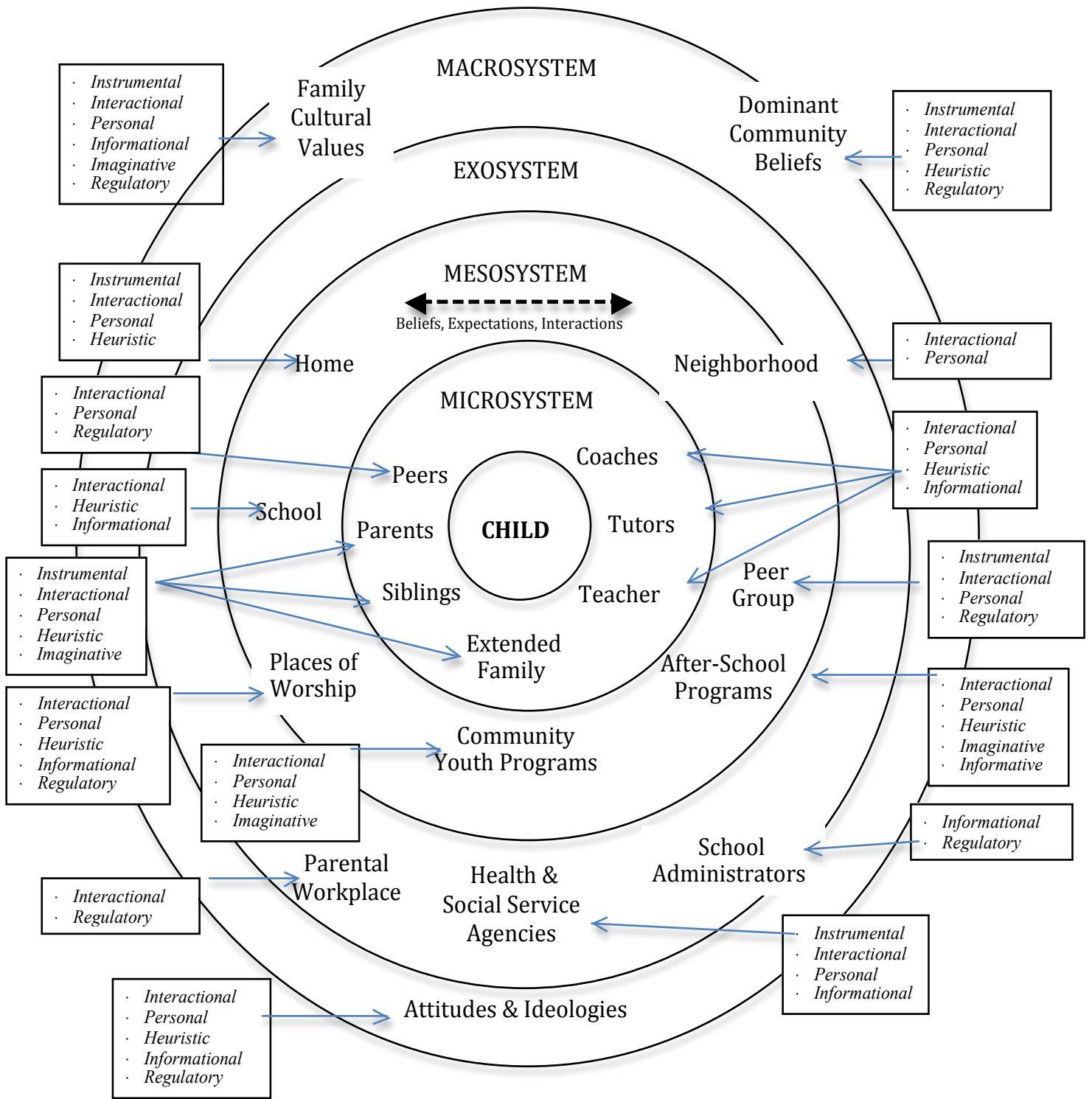
Results

The results examining the functional language patterns existent in the ABC book texts written by eleven Mexican immigrant families are presented as they relate to the three research questions posed for this study.

Research Question #1

What are the functional language patterns found in a predominately Anglo, middle class community? To determine the language functional patterns needed for a child to acquire communicative competence within the community, the researcher developed The Community Language Functions Model by assigning Halliday's (1978) seven language functions to various levels within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory model (see Figure 2). Each level within the system incorporates targeted language functions that enable the child to purposefully interact and make relevant connections with people at various social levels throughout the community. This builds social and cultural capital for lower-class language minority children living in a middle class community

Figure 2. The Community Language Functions Model



SOURCE: Adapted with permission from Weiss, H.B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M.L. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing Educators To Involve Families* (p. xiv). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Forum on Public Policy

Model serves as a guide to locate language functional protocols as they exist within a community context. An individual involved in the social and language development of a child could use the map to foster social language discourse within various community contexts. For example, at the microsystem level, when meeting with the child's teacher, the parent could model socially appropriate language patterns involving functional elements that are personal, informative or heuristic such as, "Hello Mrs. Swain, I am Gustavo's mother. I don't speak English very well, so I would like to know if there is a translator available for the upcoming parent teacher conference." In school interactions, the teacher could build heuristic language patterns by modeling how to ask questions during reading to increase reading comprehension. She could build informative oral language patterns by modeling how to organize an expository essay for a speech. Moreover, she could build the "language of schooling" by making connections between academic and social vocabulary through word maps and word walls.

At the mesosystem level, volunteers in after-school programs could provide activities, which stimulate imaginative language in children by introducing various art, or music projects that could be shared orally within the neighborhood community. In religious education classes, children could be encouraged to use heuristic language to ask questions about the fundamental tenets of the faith. Youth leaders and other lay counselors within the congregation could promote healthy family programs that encourage the use of effective personal language patterns for children.

Finally at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, health and social service agencies could build regulatory language patterns by offering assertiveness, or life skill training classes for parents and children. Faith based community organizations could model informational language patterns for children as they present religious or cultural viewpoints to the public. Children could be encouraged to attend intercultural dialogues that would model interactional language functions.

Research Question #2

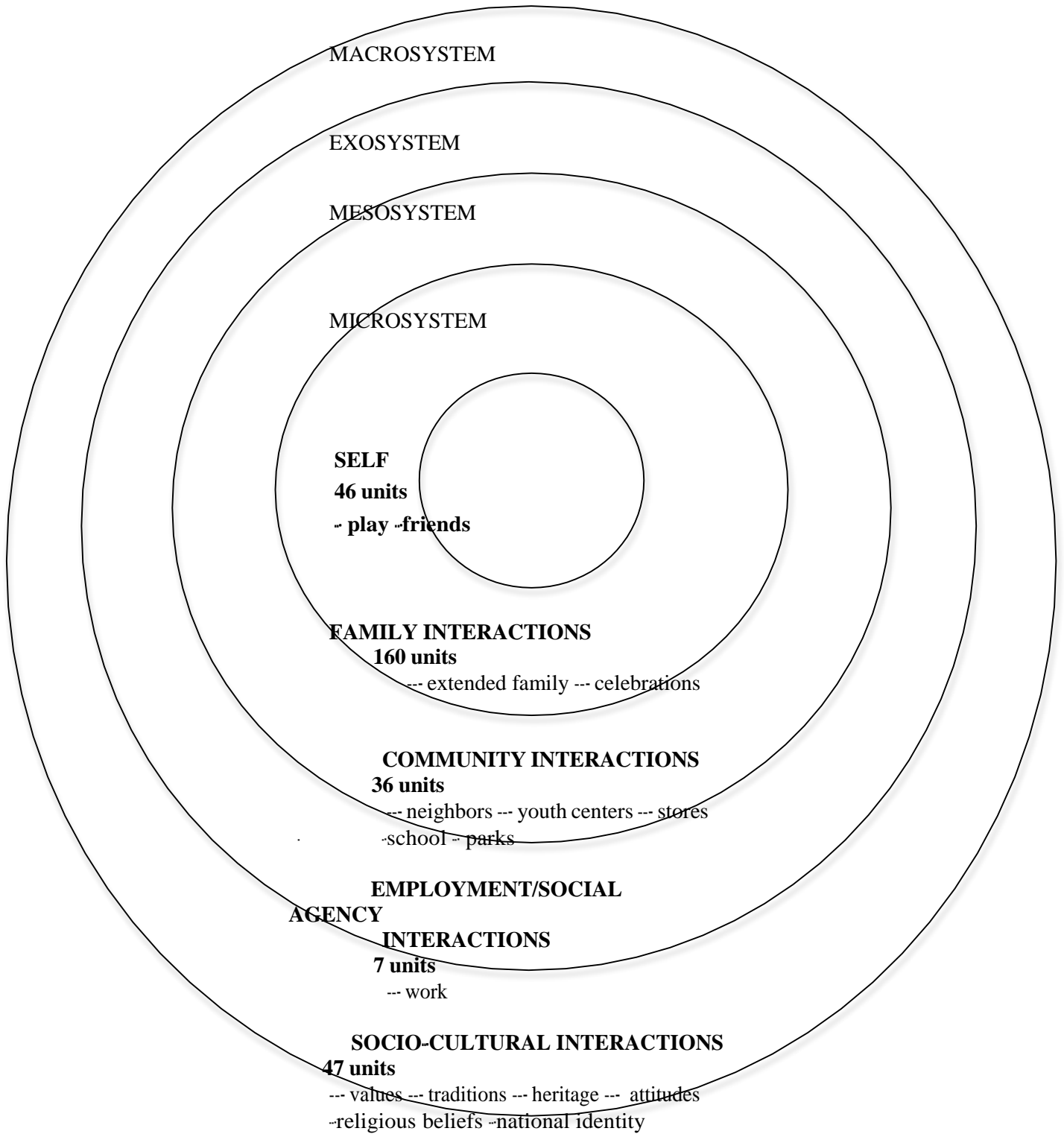
How do low income, Mexican immigrant families situate themselves within a middle class, Anglo community? After examining the entire corpus of family ABC books, the researcher searched for common topic related themes present across the texts. She then coded 296 topically related speech units into 5 levels of the social ecosystem (see Figure 3).

The topics presented in the family ABC books were indicative of interactions present in every level of Bronfenbrenner's model. Not surprisingly, the majority of topics mentioned could be identified with interactions found in the microsystem (N=160).

Topical speech units included descriptions of family outings to the park, holiday celebrations, birthday parties, significant extended family members, births and deaths. All family relationships were portrayed as healthy and supportive of the child.

The researcher found the fewest number of topics associated with interactions in the exosystem (N=7). Most families indicated a high regard for work. Both parents were equally perceived as providers for the family. If fathers could not find employment, mothers found jobs outside the home to support the family financially. None of the families portrayed themselves as poor or needy. All of the families wrote about how fortunate they were to live in the United States and how thankful they were to be with their families here.

Figure 3. *Topically Related Speech Units Identified in Family ABC Books*



Forum on Public Policy

Research Question #3

What language functions found in Mexican immigrant ABC books can be used to build an effective community based, after-school literacy program? In order to determine the functional language patterns present within each family, the researcher and her assistant searched for emerging language functions within each family's ABC book.

The results demonstrated significant variability across the language function domains. Only 2% of the responses were associated with the heuristic, regulatory and instrumental language functions. Approximately 93% of the responses were associated with the imaginative, informative, and personal language functions.

An example of figurative language using the imaginative language function come from an 18 year old girl who recently came to the United States with her 16 year old brother. The two crossed the border with false papers to live with their mother, stepfather, brother and sister. Her translated page for the letter V read, "V is for vida (life) because each person has a different life that they travel. Sometimes that life is very ugly, but then becomes beautiful. We must enjoy life, not in a crazy why. But little by little, with limits, not rushing it."

An example of the informative language function came from a 12-year-old boy who was born in the United States. His family decided to write their book bilingually, "Q is for queso Mexicana (Mexican cheese) because it is a very good cheese. My grandmother brings Mexican cheese from Guadalajara, Mexico. People make this cheese by hand on the ranch in lots of places. My grandmother said that to make the cheese you have to get milk. Then you break the *cuajada* (curds and whey), and after you break it you mold it with your hands and put it on a plate."

A third example exemplifying the personal language function comes from an 8- year-old boy who crossed the border as an 18-month-old dressed as a girl pretending to be the coyote's daughter. His translated page read, "L is for Lobito because it is a dog that I had. I loved him my whole life, then he died. He was a dog that was very brave and we loved him."

Discussion

Social semiotics is the study of the social dimensions of language. Michael Holliday (1978) introduced the term to create a "semiotic" approach to language that views language as a social process of meaning making within a community. This study incorporates many aspects of social semiotics because it examines the social language patterns specific to a Mexican minority culture living in an Anglo majority community.

Language ability directly affects the social development of a child. Reciprocally, good social skills require good communication skills. Children use language to communicate personal needs, represent ideas about the world, and connect their ideas and interactions into meaningful texts that are relevant to their environment (Halliday 1978). It is a symbiotic relationship that grows within a social ecological web of interactions between key people in the life of the young child.

The Community Language Functions model developed for this study maps key language functions necessary to develop a child's social network within a community. It can be used to break the cycle of isolation that exists among low-income Mexican immigrant parents and increase the social capital essential for their child's educational achievement. It is a tool that communities can use to develop the social language functions of all children in the community as future citizens of an interdependent society.

Forum on Public Policy

Mexican immigrant families have rich funds of knowledge and strong culturally values that are often ignored in a predominately Anglo community (Gándara and Contreras 2009; Ream 2005). As indicated by the data collected for this study, Mexican immigrant families have the interest and desire to interact in all levels of the community ecosystem. Figure #3 shows that socio-cultural and community related topics were second only to topics associated with the family. The exosystem had the fewest speech unit references in the ABC books. Perhaps this is because the parents had low job status within the community. Only 35% of the families had health insurance for their children and most of the parents were undocumented working in the service industry or self-employed as day laborers.

All of the topically related speech units analyzed for this study characterized the families as community minded, consumers who were interested in balancing hard work with recreation, and who valued life, liberty and the democratic ideal in the United States. One migrant family of six living on \$18,200 per year wrote,

L is for libertad (freedom, liberty). It is very important to be on time for work otherwise you will loose your liberty. That is why work is very important for my family. If we are not responsible with our time, our liberty will be taken away. Another family of five wrote, “N is for neighbors because our neighbors are a great help when we need them. They always are looking out for us and are kind.” A third family of four living on \$18,400 per year wrote, “E is for escuela (school) because we rely on the school to provide education for our whole family.” It was clear that the families participating in this research study envisioned themselves as a vital part of the community. They clearly situated themselves within the mainstream culture of the community. Community support for these families was minimal however, and still remains the object of a future study.

The researcher and her assistant analyzed the language functions within and across the family ABC books to explore functional language patterns present in immigrant Mexican family discourse. The researcher wanted to know which language functions were predominant in order to design a relevant after-school literacy program that sufficiently integrated the child’s internal language models (Halliday 2002). The data analysis revealed that 93% of the families’ responses were associated with the imaginative, informational and personal language functions.

Mapping the responses onto The Community Language Functions Model, the researcher found that the family language functions persisted across all levels of interaction within the community ecosystem. The families displayed approximately 40% of the language functions needed to be socially integrated into the community. However, a barrier emerged in the form of language status. Although these families represented sufficient language functional patterns in Spanish, they did not demonstrate the same levels in English. Approximately 55% of the parents were non-English speakers, 35% were limited English speakers and only 10% were proficient. Among the children, 92% were limited English speakers and 7% were non-English speakers. No children reported proficient English status.

These data suggest that the families in this study would find themselves socially integrated into the community, if the community provided bilingual support in interactions with teachers, coaches, tutors, neighborhood and school administrators, after- school programs, community youth programs, schools, health and social service agencies.

Forum on Public Policy

An effective community-based after-school literacy program would need to adopt a multicultural perspective that views literacy metaphorically as a *mirror* to validate the realities of Mexican immigrant families, as a *window* to understand those realities, and as a *bridge* to find similarities in diverse life experiences. Valuing multicultural literacy practices within a minority language community must include the ability to understand oneself and one's relationship to the world (Willis and Harris 1997).

Additionally, the after-school literacy program must address literacy as a social practice. This would require a conceptual shift in the purpose of after-school literacy development that would include parents as well as children. It would incorporate literacy practices that transform the individual, empowering them to become social agents of change within the community. Such literacy practices would include free ESL classes for parents, bilingual literacy development, connection to family services such as bilingual family counseling, parenting classes and legal advice. These social literacy connections would increase the family's social capital. The parents would develop a sense of importance and confidence that would prepare them for community leadership roles.

At the macrosystem level, the tutors and directors of partnering nonprofit agencies involved in the after-school literacy program could become advocates for the participating families. The local high school, community college and universities could offer service-learning credits for students to tutor in the program. The local bookstore could offer discounted books and local businesses could provide much needed employment for the parents. The family literacy program would no longer be viewed as an educational intervention. It would be perceived as a successful community-based program that promotes interdependence between its members for the common good.

Conclusion

This study began as an investigation analyzing the stories told by eleven Mexican immigrant families and evolved into a blue print for a successful after-school literacy program that incorporates authentic literacy practices into a vital, connected community. The Los Libros Abecedario family literacy project provided a pathway for the development of a broader family education program that views literacy from a social ecological stance. Learning from the inside out provided the researcher an opportunity to investigate language as a resource for building sustainable, community-based literacy practices that embrace diversity, and a sense of connectedness to the human spirit.

One can refer to the *mirrors*, *windows*, and *bridges* metaphor as we listen to another's story. When we share personal stories with each other it is a special gift. Some stories may be familiar and can act as a *mirror* – we see ourselves reflected in their image. Other stories may not be familiar, but as we listen to them they act as *windows* – giving us a glimpse into another's life. Finally, stories can serve as a *bridge* – portals that open up a new way of thinking. Bridge stories represent a transformation in the learner's understanding, interpreting, or viewing.

The stories expressed in the Los Libros Abecedario family literacy project served as a bridging agent between the family, school, and community. The data obtained through the project spawned the development of a successful after-school literacy program, called The Bridge Project in 2008, that continues to empower parents and encourage children to use literacy to critically act on the world, thus becoming agents of change within their community (McElvain, 2015).

Forum on Public Policy

References

- Au, Kathryn H. *Literacy Instruction in Multicultural Settings*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1993.
- Auerbach, Elsa Roberts. Which Way for Family Literacy: Intervention or Empowerment?
In *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities*, edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow, 11–28. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1995.
- Ada, Alma Flor. *Gathering the Sun: An Alphabet Book in Spanish and English*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.
- Bronfenbrenner, Urie. *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005.
- _____. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Cairney, Trevor H. “Home Literacy Practices and Mainstream Schooling.” In *Multicultural Families, Home Literacies, and Mainstream Schooling*, edited by Guofang Li, 3–29. NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009.
- _____. “Bridging Home and School Literacy: In Search of Transformative Approaches to Curriculum.” *Early Child Development and Care* 172, no. 2 (2002):153-172.
- Carrington, Victoria and Allan Luke. “Reading, Homes, and Families: From Postmodern to Modern?” In *On Reading Books to Children: Parents and Teachers*, edited by Anne van Kleeck, Steven A. Stahl and Eurydice Bouchereau Bauer, 221–241. NJ: Erlbaum, 2003.
- Clarkson, Lesa M. “Demographic Data and Immigrant Student Achievement.” *Theory Into Practice* 47(2008):20-26.
- Compton-Lilly, Catherine, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Lewis. “Analyzing Epistemological Considerations Related to Diversity: An Integrative Critical Literature Review of Family Literacy Scholarship.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2012):33-60.
- Connard, Christie and Rebecca Novick. *The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Service Delivery*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1996.
- Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Melbourne:Macmillan, 2000.
- Faltis, Christian J. *Teaching English Language Learners in Elementary School Communities: A Joinfostering Approach* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2006.

Forum on Public Policy

Friere, Paulo. "The Importance of the Act of Reading." *Journal of Education* 165, no. 1 (Winter, 1983): 5-11. <http://sadzaban.com/files/WEEK%209%20Freire.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2012).

_____. "The Adult Literacy Process As Cultural Action For Freedom." *Harvard Educational Review* 40, no. 2 (1970):363-381.

Gándara, Patricia and Frances Contreras. *The Latino Education Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Gee, James P. "Identity As An Analytic Lens for Research in Education." *Review of Research in Education* 25 (2001): 99-125.

Gillborn, David. "Education Policy As An Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race theory, and Education Reform," *Journal of Education Policy*, 20 (2005):485-505. doi:10.1080/02680930500132346.

González, Norma, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti. *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood. "Relevant Models of Language." In *Language Development: A Reader for Teachers*, edited by Brenda Miller Power and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard, 49-53. Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002.

_____. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. Maryland: University Park Press, 1978.

_____. *Learning How To Mean: Explorations in the Development of Language*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1975.

_____. "The Functional Basis of Language." In *Class, Codes and Control, Volume 2: Applied Studies Toward a Sociology of Language*, edited by Basil Bernstein, 343-366. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

Haney, Walt, Mike Russell, Cengiz Gulek, and Edward Garcia Fierros. "Drawing on Education: Using Student Drawings to Promote Middle School Improvement." *Schools in the Middle*, (January/February 1998):38- 43.

Jiménez, Francisco. *The Circuit*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1997.

Johnson, Michelle A. "The Social Ecology of Acculturation: Implications for Child Welfare Services to Children of Immigrants." *Children and Youth Services Review* 29 (2007):1426-1438.

Koelsch, Nanette. *Improving Literacy Outcomes for English Language Learners in High School: Considerations for States and Districts in Developing a Coherent Policy Framework*. Research Brief, National High School Center, American Institute of Research, Washington DC, November, 2006, http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/NHSC_ImprovingLiteracy_010907.pdf (accessed February 25, 2015).

Forum on Public Policy

- Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1980.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Liberatory Consequences of Literacy: A Case of Culturally Relevant Instruction for African American Students." *The Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3 (1992):378-390.
- _____. "Racialized Discourses and Ethnic Epistemologies." In *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues, 2nd ed.*, edited by Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, 398–432. CA: Sage, 2003.
- Laureau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Luke, Allan. "Getting Our Hands Dirty: Provisional Politics in Postmodern Conditions." In *After Postmodernism: Education, Politics and Identity*, edited by Ronald Patrick Smith & P. Wexler, 83–97. London: Falmer, 1995.
- Martin, Michael E. *Residential Segregation Patterns of Latinos in the United States, 1990-2000: Testing the Ethnic Enclave and Inequalities theories*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- McElvain, Cheryl "The Bridge Project: Connecting Home, School, and Community for Mexican Immigrant Youth." *The Journal of Latinos and Education* 14, no. 3 (2015).
- Michaels, Sarah and Jenny Cook-Gumperz. *A Study of Sharing Time With First Grade Students: Discourse Narratives in the Classroom*. In Fifth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (pp. 647–660). Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistics Society.
- Mills, Charles Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956. Moje, Elizabeth R. "Critical Issues: Circles of Kinship, Friendship, Position, and Power: Examining the Community in Community – Based Literacy Research." *Journal of Literacy Research* 32, no. 1 (2000):77–112.
- Moll, Luis. "Community-Mediated Educational Practices." Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, April 15, 1993.
- Moore, Karen. "Chronic, Life-Course and Intergenerational Poverty, and South-East Asian Youth. " Paper presented to *UN Workshop on Youth in Poverty in South- East Asia*, Yogyakarta, 2004. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/workshops/moore.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2012).
- Orfield, Gary and Nancy McArdle. *The Vicious Cycle: Segregated Housing, Schools, and Intergenerational Inequality*. Cambridge: Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University, 2006.
- Patrikakou, Evanthia N., Roger P. Weissberg, Sam Redding, and Herbert J. Walberg (eds.). *School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005.
- Pérez, Irma. *My Diary From Here to There*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 2009.

Forum on Public Policy

- Pinnell, Gay Su. "Ways To Look At the Functions of Children's Language." In *Language Development: A Reader For Teachers, 2nd Edition* edited by Brenda Miller Power and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard, 110-117. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Ramirez, Fred, A.Y. "Dismay and Disappointment: Parental Involvement of Latino Immigrant Parents." *The Urban Review* 35 no. 2(230):93-109.
- Schleppegrell, Mary. *The Language of Schooling: A Functional, Linguistics Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.
- Steinberg, Laurence. *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Strug, David and Susan Mason. "Social Service Needs of Hispanic Immigrants: An Exploratory Study of the Washington Heights Community." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 10 no. 3 (2007):69-88.
- Telles, Edward E. and Vilma Ortiz. *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2008.
- U.S. Census Bureau. *Poverty Thresholds By Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years: 2010*. (POV35). U.S. Census Bureau, Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division, Washington, DC, 2011, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032011/pov/new35_000.htm (access February 27, 2012).
- Weber, Robert Philip. *Basic Content Analysis, 2nd ed.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990.
- Willis, Arlette Ingram and Violet J. Harris. "Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach Multicultural Literature." In *The Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts*, edited by J. Flood, S. B. Heath, and D. Lapp, 460-469. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997.
- Zhou, Min. "Growing Up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrants." *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997):63-95.
- Zubizarreta, Rosalma, Harriet Rohmer, and David Schecter. *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 1991.