

Chapter 17

My Friends and Family: Heroes and “Sheroes”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter documents an activity during a Family Literacy Night in Latino community of the Southwest. All of the families participating were of Spanish-speaking (i.e., México, El Salvador, Puerto Rico). From a socio-cultural perspective, three points became clear through the interaction: (1) as parents and children collaborated around short texts, they were able to share their individual schema as well as their social, cultural, and linguistic capitals in conversation and in writing Spanish and English; (2) parents naturally assumed the role of mentor throughout the writing sessions; (3) when afforded topic choice and scaffolding for cultural adhesion, students generate texts that reflect their personal perspectives and lived experiences. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that the ELL writers signaled their quotidian concerns and challenges as the reasons for wanting a s/hero. The results argue that, for increased writing in English, educators are well advised to frame school tasks within their students' cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the documented benefits of parent participation (Toldson & Lemmons, 2013), schools often look for ways to encourage parents to come to campus for school activities. Though some schools offer more authentic or meaningful modes of participation (“Cookie Night,” “Storytelling Night”), most school programs are often pedantic or highly prescriptive. Schools with high numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) often create activities that ignore the community cultural wealth (e.g., language) in favor of pre-packaged activities that privilege a mainstream perspective, devoid of cultural or experiential significance to the ELL families. Because they are typically Euro- or Ameri-centric, such activities fail to engage families to the extent possible. Culturally dissonant activities place both a cultural and a lin-

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My Friends and Family

guistic burden on the participant. This increases the likelihood of historical misinterpretations, academic disengagement, cultural distortion, and linguistic marginalization.

One way to accommodate community differences in culture, language, and experiences is to use culturally-framed narrative writing (Dworin, 2006; Iyengar, 2014). It contributes to the development of linguistic and literacy skills in any language. To capitalize on the socio-cultural nature of narrative writing, schools often create a “Family Literacy Night,” in which the official domain (i.e. school) makes connections or bridges with the unofficial domain (i.e. home and communities).

For the literacy activity in this study, we decided to engage participants in reflections and textual explorations on the theme of “S/heroes.” Our intent was to provide a literacy experience that would disrupt the “white-male-savior” notion of heroism and to recast the idea of protector, champion, and s/hero as existing within all cultures and genders. By framing heroism in this way, we anticipated that participants would experience deeper engagement, greater self and historic awareness, and take pride in their culture. We reasoned that the opportunity to explore one’s culture through discussion and writing would have an impact on their willingness to engage in future literacy activities. These events were intentionally designed to be culturally affirming and enjoyable.

BACKGROUND

The researchers were invited to collaborate with the families of a Title I elementary school in the Southwestern United States. According to school records at the time, there were 441 Latino; 5 Asian American; 110 African American; 5 Native American; 1 Hawaiian Pacific Islander; 82 white, 82; 14 two or more races; and 656 total enrolled at the school. The campus was situated on the outskirts of a major metropolitan city among a vast agricultural region. The setting was typical of public schools in the district including a high number of Latino faculty, a majority of blue-collar and farm labor families, as well as varying degrees of Spanish-English bilingualism throughout the school and community. Using a “Family Literacy Night” as the backdrop, we had planned various intergenerational literacy activities that privileged their personal schemata (e.g. knowledge of home languages, social norms, cultural traditions). For the first night, we had seven couples and ten single parents. On the next night, we had a total of 18 parents including 4 couples. There were eighteen children in the first session and thirty-two the second evening.

The first researcher is an African American academic who specializes in bilingualism and biliteracy in Latino communities. The second author is Asian Indian whose research agenda encompasses multiple literacies as well as special interest in the Asian Indic traditions. They have worked with other campuses in this school district on prior occasions. Like all of their research initiatives, publications (cf. Asian Indian American Children’s Creative Writing as a Tool for Cultural Preservation), and workshops, they strive to help teachers, students, and their families recognize and appreciate the community cultural wealth embedded within all campuses and the possibility of literacy as a culturally authentic and enjoyable experience.

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