

Balanced Literacy in a Spanish-English Kindergarten

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1. Review of literature

An important educational goal is to strengthen the literacy skills of children from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Since children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are vulnerable to reading problems, they should be provided with effective early literacy instruction. In creating literacy programs, educators should systematically teach skills and ensure that activities and texts are motivating and personally relevant.

1.1 Meeting the needs of Spanish-speaking children

Recent reports indicate that many children from Hispanic backgrounds read below basic levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). To counteract this trend, there is a need to engage children from minority language backgrounds in positive literacy experiences (Nord, Lennon, Liu, Westat, & Chandler, 1999; Serpell, 2001). Effective instructional practices implemented early on can lay the foundation for solid educational attainments (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000).

An important component to literacy instruction is to teach reading in a child's native language before emphasizing reading and writing in English (Denton, Hasbrouck, Weaver, & Riccio, 2000; Genesee, 2002). The National Research Council's report on prevention of reading problems states that literacy instruction should not be introduced in any language before reasonable oral proficiency in that language has been achieved (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Strong literacy skills acquired in the first language will transfer to the second language (Genesee, 2002).

In addition to teaching reading in Spanish, researchers indicate that success in reading is influenced by systematically teaching skills *and* motivating children's interest in reading (Adams, 1990; Lyon, 1999; National Institutes of Health, 2000; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Systematic instruction ensures that children acquire necessary skills in an appropriate order (Adams, 1990) while meaning-based instruction ensures that children have the desire to engage in literacy tasks and gain positive attitudes about reading and writing (Gutierrez-Clellan, 1999).

1.2 Making instruction meaningful through the use of engaging activities

Educators are interested in determining the best ways to balance meaning-based with skill-based instruction. Some early childhood educators are concerned about the extent to which direct phonics practices are implemented in classrooms with young children and with children from different cultural backgrounds (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Too much direct focus on skills may result in loss of interest in reading (Freeman and Freeman 1996). While young children from different backgrounds need to be engaged in literacy activities (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Pappas & Zecker, 2001), many traditional Spanish-language reading approaches place heavy emphasis on drill-type phonics activities that do not relate to children's experiences (Freeman & Freeman, 1996; Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2001).

Instead of using teacher-directed practices, teachers can highlight skills in meaningful activities (McFadden, 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 2001). Educators with a focus on integrating meaning and skills weave skills into interactive, engaging contexts (Brock & McVee, 1998; DeTemple & Snow, 2001; Gee, 2001; Gutierrez-Clellan, 1999; Pellegrini, 2001; Verhoeven, 2001; Pappas, Hart, Escobar, Jones, & O'Malley, 2001; Pellegrini, 2001; Ruben, Liao, & Collier, 2001). Literacy skills can be taught by

situating systematic encounters with target patterns in social genres (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogran, 1999). Interactive instructional contexts engage children in reading and provide increased opportunities to practice skills (Lyon, 1999). It is important to provide children with motivating and socially interactive opportunities to read and write (Verhoeven, 2001).

To improve skills, children need to be provided with varied activities that provide them with opportunities to recognize letter-sound patterns (Brock & McVee, 1998; Gee, 2001). Variety is particularly important when teaching literacy skills to children at-risk (Gutierrez-Clellen, 1999; Leseman & deJong, 2001; Phillips, 1972; Leseman & deJong, 2001; Pellegrini, 2001). Children at risk for literacy problems need supplemental high quality instruction to accelerate their skill development. The additional opportunities to practice skills should not be presented as isolated skill practice but, instead, should be provided in engaging, interactive reading and writing contexts (Verhoeven, 2001).

1.3 Creating, personalizing, and computerizing texts

In order to provide children with varied and appropriate encounters with target literacy patterns, teachers can create their own phonetically-controlled texts in Spanish. Tailor-made materials can be designed to fit children's reading levels, interests, and backgrounds (Walker, Rattanavich, & Oller, 1992). Personalized books and computer programs can capitalize on meaning since they represent events the children have experienced and shared. Teacher-made materials can also be written to highlight target patterns (words with 'ca', 'ma', 'pa', or 'sa' syllables, for example) and personalized with photos of the children. Connecting texts to prior knowledge is particularly important for teaching reading to children from different cultural backgrounds (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Gutierrez-Clellen, 1999).

Tailor made materials, including computerized ones, can provide variety in instruction and reinforce skills. Connecting computerized texts to class activities permits children to have follow-up practice decoding particular letter-sound patterns. In addition to increasing opportunities to practice, computerized texts can maintain children's interest, because of their capacity for interactivity (Whitehurst & Fischel, 2001). Teachers can create computerized activities in HTML (hypertext markup language) format that can permit linking from page to page. Since these HTML links can take into consideration a child's input, children have some choice in how they navigate through the materials. Students who are given some choice and control over the learning experience are more receptive to the material being taught (Wong, 1996).

This study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated literacy instruction that used engaging and personalized activities and texts to teach early reading skills. Using children's native language for instruction, the teacher was able to create appropriate materials and implement flexible procedures for customizing the reading process to children's interests (Gallago & Hollingsworth, 2000). The project created an array of personalized decodable texts and computerized materials that related to their own experiences and highlighted patterns in socially interactive contexts.

2. Method

2.1 Setting and participants

This project was conducted in a half-day Spanish/English dual language kindergarten classroom in Provo, Utah. The bilingual program followed a developmental model, with the goal of providing 90% of instruction in Spanish and then increasing the amount of instruction in English as the children progress through the grades. While the goal was to present 90% of the instruction in Spanish, interactions with an English-speaking teacher's assistant and participation in non-academic classes (computer lab, physical education, music), limited the children's exposure to Spanish to 70%. All literacy instruction, however, was conducted in Spanish.

Twenty-two children, ranging from five years to six years, attended the classroom. The children came from mostly low socioeconomic backgrounds. Four of the children had identified learning

deficits. All of the children were of Hispanic descent and half were recent immigrants from Latin American countries. Spanish was the predominant language spoken in all of the children's homes.

Prior to beginning the study, in January, the children were presented with measures of early reading skills in Spanish. The skills assessed were letter names, letter-sound correspondences, blending of syllables into words, and reading and writing of cv syllables and cvcv words with the vowels /a/, /e/, and /o/. The measures used to assess these skills were the State of Utah Pre-kindergarten Assessment, Instrumento de Observacion (Clay, 1996), and assessment units from syllabic reading series. Informal teacher-created probes were also used to obtain information about the children's skills. Just prior to the end of the semester, the children were assessed on reading and writing of a set of cvcv words and then were re-assessed after intervals of two and four weeks of instruction.

2.2 Instruction

2.2.1 Overview of the project

The classroom teacher conducted the reading instruction four days a week with assistance from college students and parent volunteers. The project began at the beginning of January and continued until the end of the school year in May. The goals were for children to blend syllables and sounds into words and to read and write cv and cvcv words with the /a/, /e/, and /o/ vowels. In addition, strategies were implemented to solidify children's ability to name letters and provide letter-sound correspondences. In the instruction, children were exposed to frequent examples of target literacy patterns within meaningful texts and activities in large group, small group, and one-on-one contexts.

In two 15-minute whole group sessions a week, the teacher introduced themes, told stories dramatically, and engaged the children in shared or guided reading of previously introduced texts. In these large group gatherings, the computerized books were sometimes displayed on the wall with a computer projector.

The children also experienced four small group sessions each week, two with a focus on drill-type phonics tasks and two with a focus on interactive reading and writing in play and story enactment activities. In the more interactive sessions, conducted by undergraduate instructors, the children read simple decodable texts to take turns, make choices, direct characters' actions, obtain needed materials, follow and give directions, send and receive social notes, and entertain their peers. The children also wrote words to dictation within the scripted story or play contexts and filled in missing words in simplified story frames to create their own copy of a story.

In one-on-one sessions, children read computerized books and activities housed at the computer station. Parents and instructors manned the computer stations on occasions during free play and group rotation times. Parents were given one training session in which they were shown how to assist the children in locating and navigating through the programs and in reading and writing key words and phrases.

2.2.2 Texts and activities

A variety of print and computerized books were written or adapted to illustrate cv syllables or cvcv words with /a/, /e/, and /o/ vowels. Phonetically-controlled texts were created by selecting a theme, identifying a core of relevant target words, and connecting events to make a unified play and story experience. For example, in order to highlight the syllable 'pa' in a restaurant theme, for example, a Papá (father) would pay (paga) for French fries (papas) or raisins (pasas) and pass (pasa) them to (para) the children (pasa la papa para Celia). The Papá and children also used shovels (pala), paper scoops (papel), and Styrofoam paws (pata) to pass the food. Out of context, or in print only, phrases such as 'pasa la papa' 'pasa la papa con la pala' may sound artificial or confusing. However, as children in this study experienced the different texts, meanings signaled in regular patterned words were supplemented with information presented in oral language, interactions, and context.

In addition to creating texts from scratch, children's trade books were read, enacted, and written at simple decodable levels. For example, *La casa adormecida* (the Spanish version of *In a Napping*

House) (Wood, 1984) was made accessible to the children by writing it in a simpler form and reading it before, during, and after the enactment. As the children enacted the story, they read about the events at their reading level (Hay una cama. Hay una mamá. Hay una niña. Hay una perra. Hay una gata. Hay una rata. Hay una araña. La araña pica la rata. Y la rata toca la gata. Y la gata toca la perra. Y la perra toca a la niña. Y la niña toca a la mamá. La cama se quebra. [There is a bed. There is a mom. There is a girl. There is a dog. There is a cat. There is a rat. There is a spider. And, the spider bites the rat. And the rat touches the cat, etc.]). In the reading and enactment, meaning was signaled in the cvcv words, the repetitive structure, sight words (hay una), and actions upon props.

The reading and writing of texts was also incorporated into hands-on play activities. For example, in one replica play activity, designed to highlight cvcv words with the /a/ vowel, the children read notes that told them which animals and people they could play with (mamá, papa, rana, gata, vaca), what the characters would get to do [swim (nada) or wash (lava), dig (cava)] and where they could play (caja [box], lata [can], tapa [lid]). The teacher also incorporated printed social texts into shared class experiences. Signs, recipes, posters, menus, bulletin boards, and poems were used to highlight skills. In one of the social texts, ‘¿Que hay en su cubby?’ (‘What is in Your Cubby?’), the teacher placed a sign on the classroom door to tell the children to look in their cubbies for an object or note to read.

After stories were tied to children’s experiences, the teacher would have the children re-read the texts and write about their experiences. The children made their own simplified stories by writing words from dictation to complete a story frame. Computerized books and activities were also made to go with the story or scripted play experiences. These personalized digital materials, created in GoLive or PowerPoint, were illustrated with photos of the children taken during the activities. In a computerized simulation of the “¿Qué hay en su cubby?” the children were shown a picture of the their cubbies and were able to click on the different cubbies to read about the objects inside [e.g., pasa (raisin), vaca (cow), mano (hand), etc.]. Both ‘read’ and ‘write’ versions of stories were created. The ‘read’ versions were computerized books based on the paper texts created and the ‘write’ versions were story frames with key words eliminated and a space provided for the children to type in the missing words. In both ‘read’ and ‘write’ versions, the authors added simple transition and animation effects to increase novelty and incorporated interactivity by using hyperlinks that allowed the children to link one page to another.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The effectiveness of the instruction was determined by monitoring children’s skill attainments, comparing children’s performance on trained versus un-trained sets of targets, interviewing the children and their parents, and observing and analyzing children’s engagement in the instructional activities.

2.3.1 Monitoring and comparing trained with untrained targets

Children’s progress was evaluated by periodically probing their reading and writing of words that exemplified target literacy patterns. Notes on performance were taken during instructional sessions and writing samples were also collected as indices of performance.

A pilot crossover study was conducted during the last several weeks of the school year to compare trained with untrained targets. In the crossover design, pre and posttest comparisons were made between sets of targets trained at different times. Prior to initiating this study, comparable sets (A and B) of cvcv words with a, e, o, and i vowels were baselined for reading (word recognition) and spelling (writing to dictation). The Set A reading words were: mano, pone, mira, caja, come, mesa, capa, jala, lana, rojo, and baja. The Set B reading words were: cama, cola, lado, dejó, beso, malo, mata, saco, para, mapa, and cayó. Set A words for spelling were: come, caja, and capa. Set B words for spelling were: beso, lado, and para.

To assess word recognition, the children were asked to read a list of ten words with the Set A and B targets intermixed. In scoring children’s responses, full credit (1 point) was given for correctly

reading the word and partial credit (1/2 point) was given for correctly reading one of the syllables. To assess spelling, the children were given a model of how to write a word from dictation. Then three words were repeated slowly several times as the children attempted to write them. Children were given .25 credit for each correct sound written in a cvcv word. Developmental spelling errors (b/v, s/z) were counted as correct.

Upon completion of the pre-testing, children were exposed to Set A target words in instruction within theme-based activities, while Set B targets served as un-trained comparisons. After two weeks of instruction, a post-test was conducted on recognition and spelling of both sets of targets. A second phase of instruction was then initiated, in which children received instruction on Set B targets within story and play contexts for another two weeks. At the end of that second two-week period of instruction, a second post-testing was conducted.

2.3.2 Observations and analyses of videotapes

Information about children's affective engagement in the activities was obtained through direct observation and analysis of videotapes. The classroom teacher and university instructors served as participant and bystander observers, noting children's actions and expressions of emotion. The observers compared and contrasted participation across different types of literacy activities. Videotaped samples of children participating in the activities were collected during the last four weeks of instruction. The investigators reviewed the videotapes and analyzed the interactions on a turn-by-turn conversational basis. Children's participation in the enactments and their reading and writing of target words during the taped activities were analyzed.

2.3.3 Interviews with parents and children

Interviews were conducted with parents and children to examine their impressions of the literacy activities. The interviews were conducted in Spanish with fourteen of the children and six of the mothers. The mothers were asked the following questions:

Did you see a change in your child's interest in reading and writing during the project? Did you see a change in your child's reading? Were you pleased with the progress your child made? Did your child talk about the reading and writing activities? What did she or he say? What did you think about the activities? What did you think about use of the computer?

The children were asked the following questions:

What did you think about what we did together (the literacy activities)? What did you think about using the computer? What did you think about ... (the various book and activity themes)? What books, activities do you remember? The children were also shown the computerized books and were asked what they remembered about the activities they were based on.

3. Results

3.1 Changes in children's performance

The children made considerable progress over the course of the semester. When the project began in January, most children knew most of the letter names and sounds but did not blend syllables into words, read cv or cvcv syllables or words, write letters for sounds, identify sounds for letters, or write words from dictation. By the end of May, fifteen of the children could read cvcv words at 70% accuracy or better and thirteen could write cvcv words from dictation for the vowels a, e, and o (toca, beso, para, etc.) at or above 70% accuracy. Their spelling of words included invented spelling errors (b/v and s/z substitutions, for example), which indicated that they were writing words from knowledge of sound-letter associations.

Improvement was also illustrated with results from the crossover design that compared sets (A and B) of target words for reading and spelling. Upon completion of the pre-testing, children were exposed to Set A target words in instructional activities. After two weeks of instruction, Post-test1 was conducted on reading and spelling of both sets of targets and Phase II of instruction was then

initiated. Posttest2 was conducted on reading and spelling of both sets of targets at the end of Phase II of instruction. Mean percent accuracy and standard deviations for pre and posttesting appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Pre-test Posttest Tasks

	Pretest	Posttest One	Posttest Two
Set A words - read	52.53 n = 20 (33.07)	63.1 n = 23 (27.36)	73.77 n = 22 (29.04)
Set B words - read	49.27 n = 20 (31.26)	61.37 n = 23 (26.87)	75.73 n = 22 (26.45)
Set A words - write	65.2 n = 20 (29.16)	73.12 n = 23 (27.36)	80.69 n = 22 (25.64)
Set B words - write	56.68 n = 20 (35.07)	73.1 n = 23 (26.87)	82.12 n = 22 (21.83)

SD is noted in parenthesis and italics

Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted with time of testing (Pretest, Posttest1, Posttest2) and set (A, B) as the independent variables and performance on reading and spelling single words as the dependent variables. There were no overall set differences or time by set interactions. There were main time effects for reading ($F = 16.33$; $p < .001$) and spelling ($F = 8.35$; $p < .001$). The group made gains over time but did not perform significantly better on the trained versus untrained words. Failure to attain a time-by-set interaction was most likely due to many children acquiring some generalized understanding of sound-symbol associations prior to or over the course of the study. There was also considerable variability in the group's performance, with three children performing at 100% accuracy and three children performing at or below 15% accuracy on word recognition at the first pre-test.

3.2 Children's engagement and affective involvement

In the course of the instruction, the children conveyed great interest in the activities and materials. They exhibited excitement when gathering to enact a story and rarely lost focus or interest in the activities. When asked if they wanted to take on a character role during one of the story enactments, the most common response was, "¡Yo quiero, yo quiero!" [I want to! I want to!]. When given opportunities to use the computer, the children would vie for a turn and would elect to use the computer during free play. The children also displayed confidence in their reading and writing abilities. After writing words to dictation, they would proudly hold up their work for the instructors to see.

The children and instructors participated in jointly representing the stories during the enactment activities. A transcribed excerpt of a small group enactment of *Charlie Needs a Cape* [Charlie necesita una capa nueva] (dePaolo, 1973), displayed in Table 2 and translated into English, illustrates the topically related turn taking that occurred during the story co-construction. In the story, a shepherd makes a cape from his sheep's wool while the sheep keeps trying to take back its wool. In small group enactments the children engaged in catching the sheep, cutting its wool (cotton balls glued to a sheet), washing [lava] and pulling the fleece [jala]; and dying [seca], weaving [teje], and sewing [cose] the yarn into cloth. In the session, two university instructors, Candy and Krista, reviewed the story, guided the children's actions, and involved the children in reading cue cards to describe the events. Pseudonyms are used in the transcript instead of children's real names.

Table 2: Transcript from *Charlie Necesita Una Capa Nueva*

Candy: Let's read again (pointing to poster board Krista is holding)
Krista: C1, can you see? (the poster board)
Krista and Cs: CHARLIE BAJA LA (read together with Krista pointing to each syllable)
Children: LA NA (children read lana by themselves)
Candy: Charlie dips the yarn (in the can with red dye). Very nice. Charlie puts the wool in the berries. Dip the wool to make the wool red.
C: pull out red yarn.
Candy: Look. There it is! (The wool is red!). Let's read here again.
Krista: HAY... (reads 'there is'..)
Cs: LANA ROJA (children finish reading 'red wool')
Candy: Now Charlie can make a new cape. Right?
Cs: Yes! (said in unison)
Candy: Charlie... because he has red wool. Charlie weaves the wool. Weave.
Krista: Let's weave.
Candy: and Charlie cuts the wool. Cuts the wool. He's cutting. Cuts the wool. (children pretend to weave and cut)
Krista: Let's read here (holds up the placard).
Krista and C: CHARLIE HACE UNA... (read together, Charlie makes a...)
Cs read: ... LANA (they mis-read, they read 'lana' but the word is capa)
Krista: Wha is the letter? (point to the first letter 'c' in the word capa)
Children and Krista read: CA..
Cs: PA
Krista and cs: CA PA
Krista: CAPA
Candy: Charlie makes a cape. He makes a cape. Make a cape, Charlie. Come here. Make a cape. And Charlie sews. Sew, sew Charlie. Sew, sew, sew. Sew a cape. Sew, sew. And now everyone look. Charlie has a new red cape. (trades old cape for the new one). Wooo, Charlie, I like it. What does the sheep do? The sheep eats the cape. Oh no! Sheep. He eats the cape. Come here in order to show (directs the children to get in the line of the camera). He eats the cape. The sheep is eating. He is eating.
Krista: Do you want your hair again? (talking to the sheep).
Candy: Why is he eating his cloth (hair)?
Cs: It is yours (to the sheep).
Candy: Why is he eating his hair?
C3: It is his (hair).
C: He already has his hair back. (commenting on oveja eating the capa)
Candy: C3. Why is he eating the cape?
C3: He wants his hair (fleece).
Candy: Charlie says, No, it is mine. It is mine. (pulling cape back and forth). Don't eat the cape.
C3: He's eating like he did the other time (will do again another day) (like he did the other times)
Candy: Again. Again (he is trying to get his hair back again). Don't eat. Don't eat the cape. Because the cape (pointing to the old one) is old. And Charlie needs a new cape. Thank you, Charlie. Thank you, sheep.

C3: I want to. I want to (raises hand to play one of the parts).	
Key	
CAPS	Actual reading of a text
C1, C2, C3	Individual children
C	Child's voice can't be identified
Cs	Children respond simultaneously
< >	Uncertain words
:	Utterance is lengthened (sound is stretched)
<i>Italic</i>	Emphasis
()	Description of what is being referred to; gestures, actions, context
[]	Points of utterance overlap
...	Small pause
... ..	Longer pause within the unit

As Table 2 demonstrates, a unified story was created through the printed text, oral comments, and participants' actions. The instructors and children together contributed to the unfolding dramatization of the story. The transcript shows high levels of participation and a rhythmic flow to the enactment. The interactants were able to predict their turns and participated in reciprocal, topically related turn taking.

3.3 Child satisfaction

There were many indications of the children's satisfaction and involvement in the activities. The children would often cheer or clap when it was their turn to participate in the small group enactment sessions. The teacher frequently commented on how much the children loved the story and play-based activities and on how he needed to make sure that all of the children got their turn to participate in the sessions. When the interviewer asked the children if they remembered what they did together (in the reading activities), several children referred to "playing with the teacher" ["jugamos con la maestra"]. The children called out the names of the stories and enactment activities and commented on things they did in each. The children tended to comment more frequently on the stories in which the teachers had utilized highly participatory roles, engaging actions, and intriguing props, such as the Spanish adaptations of *Mouse Mess* (Riley, 1997), and *Charlie Needs a Cloak* (dePaola, 1973).

From analyzing the recordings of the enactment and interview sessions, it was also evident that the children greatly enjoyed the hands-on activities and computerized materials. During the interview session, the children were excited to see the computerized books. They quickly gathered around the computer and asked if they could see particular books and activities. The children's interest was indicated by positive non-linguistic behaviors such as focused attention, positive facial expressions, and vocalizations such as "Wow!," "Yeah!" and by verbalizations such as "¡Mira!" [Look!], "Vamos a ver el cuento de los dinosaurios" ["Let's see the dinosaur story"]; "A mí me gusta el cuento La Llama con Pijamas" ["I like the Llama in Pajamas story"]. They recalled the names of the stories, offered information about them (e.g., "The rat made the food, mmm."), and made comments about themselves and the other children ("There's Marta being the dog"). In each of the interview groups, the children responded, in unison, with an emphatic, "¡Sí!", if asked if they wanted to see the computer stories or if they liked using the computer.

In addition to producing positive comments about the books and activities, the children displayed confidence in their ability to read the customized texts during the interview sessions. They asked if they could read the computerized stories ("¿Puedo leer?" ["Can I read?"]), commented on their ability to read ("¡Lo puedo leer!" ["I can read it!"]), spontaneously read the texts, and navigated through the pages on their own. Many of the children spontaneously read at least some parts of the stories. In one group, one child began to read and then the other children joined in until the whole group was reading

simultaneously. The children also occasionally supported each other by reading a word if another child paused or by reading a word correctly if it was misread.

3.4 Interactions at the manned computer stations

Children were observed while using the computers manned by parents and instructors. In general, the children were more interested in the computer activities when supported by one of the instructors than when supported by the parents. This may have been due to the fact that the three parents who were observed provided little support as the children used the computerized books. The parents did not make comments about the content, point to or comment on the pictures, or ask questions about the stories or activities. Instead, they engaged the children in decoding the words. While the highest readers read the texts fairly fluently, the lowest readers participated in a slow, laborious reading process or made guesses. When children needed support, the parents pointed to the letters and waited for the child to produce the corresponding sounds, resulting in sound-by-sound processing. If a child failed to produce a sound, the parents would name the letter or ask what sound the letter made. Parents were not observed to give a letter's sound, read the word, point to a larger syllable unit, or assist the child in re-blending sounds or syllables into words. While the parents had been provided with one training session, it was decided that training was not sufficient and the parent involvement was discontinued (since parental involvement began late in the school year, it was not possible to schedule additional trainings).

3.5 Parent satisfaction

In the parent interviews, all parents indicated that they were pleased that computers were included in the literacy program. Several parents requested copies of the computerized materials and wanted to know where they could obtain other computer programs for teaching reading. Several parents volunteered to assist the children in using the computer materials. All the parents interviewed said that their children enjoyed being able to use the computers.

Parents also made suggestions about how to improve the activities. Their contributions consisted mostly of making changes in the language used (e.g. commenting that the verb 'vestirse' [to dress oneself] is more correct than 'en' [in] for the phrase 'en la bata' [in the robe]).

All parents said that their children told them about the things they did in the reading program. They said things like, "Daniela was always telling me about what she did in class" or "Carolina told me the things she did." One parent said, "every day she tells me, 'we did this or we did that'" ["Todos los días me dice, hicimos esto, esto y el otro"].

All of the parents commented on their children's satisfaction with the activities ("Le gustaba mucho [a mi hijo] cuando sean actividades... siempre llegaba y quería poner todo en la pared en la casa." [my son likes it when there are activities... He always wants to put everything on the wall when he comes home]). Carlos's mother said: "A mi hijo le gusta mucho. Él quiere venir el sábado al kinder también todos los días. [My son likes it very much. He wants to come to come to kindergarten Saturdays and everyday.] Juan's mom said that her son tells her everything that was done during the reading activities. Many of the children told their parents about particular experiences and the parents related the names of the stories and commented on the activities the children told them about. One parent told how much her son liked playing and reading the dinosaur story (¿Como dan las buenas noches los dinosaurios?) (Yolen & Teagure, 2001). She said that he liked playing the dinosaur activities and books in school and then started to like them more and recognize them in the movies and books they had at home. ("A mí, me contó de que 'vieramos dinosaurios', que 'nos contaron un cuento' y como yo en la casa yo tengo también libros de los dinosaurios, también le gusta mucho... entonces cuando ya lo vió aquí, le gustó más. Él lo expresó pues, así." [He told me what "we saw dinosaurs" that "they told a story" and how I at home have dinosaur books, he likes it a lot... then when he saw it here, he liked it more. That's how he explained it to me.]

Although all parents were pleased that their children were using the computer in the classroom, two parents felt strongly that the main approach to teaching reading should be the traditional 'syllabic'

workbook approach, which they experienced in Mexico. One mother felt that the inclusion of some difficult words in the digital books frustrated her son. She used as an example the word ‘ciudad’ [city] that appeared in a book based on the children’s enactment of “Hay una Ciudad” [There’s a City] (Herman, 2001) a predictable, repetitive story. She continued to explain, in Spanish, how reading should be taught by first teaching the vowels, then adding all the vowels to an easy consonant like “m,” then doing the same with “s”, and so on. She also felt that her son was frustrated because of other children’s abilities; “Other children could read [the hard words], he can’t, so it makes him not want to read”. She felt that the book Libro Mágico [Magic Book] (Alvarez, 1996), a syllabic workbook method, should be the approach used to teach children to read.

All parents, except for the mother of a child with significant delays, expressed pleasure in the progress their children had made (“Yo creo que lo están haciendo está muy bien. Yo estoy contenta, muy contenta que está aquí en la escuela. La miro que está aprendiendo.” [“I believe that what you are doing is going very well. I am pleased, very pleased that she is in this school. I see that she is learning.]) When one parent was asked if she had seen changes in her son’s ability to read, she said, “Yes, yes. The year before he learned to read in English and Spanish but did not learn to read. He was in Head Start and learned letters, syllables and to write his name. But, in kindergarten, he learned to read in English and Spanish. He learned to read very well.” [“Sí, sí. El año pasado aprendió a leer en inglés y en español. Él no sabía [antes]. Estuvo en Head Start y aprendió letras, silibas, y escribir su nombre. Pero en kindergarten, él aprendió a leer en inglés y español. Aprendió leer muy bien.”]

4. Discussion

This literacy project illustrates the benefits of using personalized activities and texts to teach early literacy skills in Spanish. Meaningful activities motivated the children to attend to sound-letter patterns. It is important to consider the value that engagement has in meeting the needs of children from different cultural backgrounds and to explore the role that culture plays in balanced literacy practices.

4.1 Role of engaging texts and activities

The selection and creation of engaging texts and activities was an important part of this literacy instruction. Associating texts with experiences can increase their relevance and add meaning to instruction. Reading and writing about first-hand experiences activates prior knowledge and personal meaning construction (DeTemple & Snow, 2001; Watson, 2001; Walker, 1992; Langer, 2001). In addition to relating texts to experiences, a balanced literacy program should stimulate children’s own voices (Ada, 1988; Baker, 2001; Langer, 2001; Merritt, Barton, & Culatta, 1998). By evoking personal views and responses, teachers can fit texts to children’s interests and backgrounds (Gee, 2001; Phillips, 1972; Watson, 2001). Since the teaching of reading in Spanish has tended to be highly structured, teachers may need to place more emphasis on the meaning side of the meaning-to-skills continuum. Balanced literacy programs should infuse meaningful engagement into the teaching of phonic skills.

Placing texts within scaffolded social contexts, such as story enactments and scripted play, was also a positive aspect of the project. Reading and writing in interactive genre can support skills and activate interest in the literacy process (DeTemple & Snow, 2001; Watson, 2001). As teachers strive for the right skills-to-meaning balance, they should explore ways to increase the communicative nature of reading and writing in their classrooms (Brock, McVee, Shojgreen-Downer, & Duenas, 1998). Embedding skill practice within social reasons to read and write can empower children as readers and increase their investment in the literacy process (Gee, 2001; Guthrie & Knowles, 2001; McKenna, 2001; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). While the children in this project were engaged in social literacy practices, and made significant progress, a group comparison study is needed to determine if children in highly engaging programs perform better than children in phonics-based program in terms of skill development, attitude, and motivation.

4.2 Cultural perspectives

When it comes to creating literacy programs, teachers need to address the extent to which cultural differences influence programming decisions and, ultimately, children's performance. Two important considerations are selection of text content and parental involvement.

4.2.1 Selection of text content

Cultural considerations naturally arise when selecting materials within dual language classrooms. In customizing literacy materials, teachers need to question the extent to which the content selected reflects the children's cultural backgrounds. In this study, the cultural relevance of texts was addressed by tying stories to hands-on experiences, incorporating personalized photos, and relying on universal themes. While it is fairly easy to tie texts to hands-on experiences, effort could have been made to directly address Hispanic and mainstream cultural themes in this kindergarten program. Discussing differences in experiences can validate both minority and majority students (Cummins, 1986; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). Simply selecting or creating texts based on experiences and universal themes may not be a sufficient way to address cultural differences. One simple addition to the program could be to provide students with opportunities to reflect on the emotional and experiential perspectives of story characters and to relate characters' responses to their own and others' backgrounds. Validating different perspectives can activate meaning construction *and* increase appreciation for cultural differences (Barton, 1996).

4.2.2 Parental involvement

It is important to understand and address differences that may exist between parents' and teacher's views of literacy in order to effectively involve parents in the instructional process. These differences most likely are influenced by cultural and family practices (Serpell, 2001). To fully take advantage of parental participation, it would be important to understand their views of literacy and to attempt to bring school and home practices into alignment.

While the parents in this study appreciated their children's interest in the activities, 33% of the ones interviewed did not understand the purpose of presenting motivating, interactive instruction. The fact that some parents believed that only drill-type workbooks were needed to teach reading indicates that it is important to find out more about how parents feel about the role of engagement in instruction. Parents who recently immigrated from Hispanic backgrounds most likely received very structured, teacher-directed instruction themselves. In addition, parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to view literacy as skill acquisition rather than a source of social engagement or entertainment (Serpell, 2001). Children are likely to benefit from having their parents view literacy activities as enjoyable social exchanges. It may be important to determine if direct instruction versus ongoing dialogue on these issues with parents would be beneficial.

It would also be important to know how parents support their children's literacy skills in joint book reading encounters. If parents freely support the reading process with shared or simultaneous reading strategies, children may experience a greater sense of satisfaction and faster, less laborious reading. Parents who see the benefit of making instruction engaging may be more likely to provide multiple sources of support, aimed at having children gain fast access to meaning. Parents who view reading as decoding may be more inclined to value children's performance when they read independently and less inclined to provide linguistic and contextual supports. The degree to which parents support decoding and comment on meaning in interactive book reading may be a reflection of larger cultural differences in the way literacy is viewed. Future studies should explore the value of involving Hispanic parents in meaning-based instruction. Keeping children feeling successful and enjoying literacy activities is a worthwhile goal regardless of cultural differences in the way literacy is treated. There should be great advantages to parents and teachers striving together to capitalize on children's engagement as a means to enhance skill acquisition.

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