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## No sabía que tenía valor”: Uncovering Latina Mothers’ Multiple Literacies

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“No sabía que tenía valor”: Uncovering Latina Mothers’ Multiple Literacies

*¡Hay, miren, yo no sabía que habían libros tales como estos de mi idioma y cultura! Yo soy de un pueblito cercano de este. Que recuerdos me da este librito. Que alegría, bueno, y también tristeza en mirar esto.*

Oh my, look, I didn’t know that there were books like these about my language and culture. I am from a little town near this one. What memories this book gives me. Such happiness, well, and also sadness to look at this [book].

I spend time weekly with a group of Latina mothers; we read and talk about books and also have discussions about issues of concern to them and their families. The quote above was shared by one of the mothers, Lily (all names of people and places are pseudonyms), during a discussion of the book *ABeCedarios: Mexican Folk Art ABCs in English and Spanish* (Weill, 2007), which is a bilingual alphabet book with hand-carved wooden animals representing each letter of the alphabet. The last page of the book contains a photograph and brief biography of the Jiménez family, the creators of the carvings. As Lily read about the family, she was overjoyed and amazed to learn that *libros tales como estos* “books like these” existed. When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that she meant books written in English and Spanish about her culture and people *que se parecen a uno* “who look like me.”

Data indicate that of the approximately 49.8 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide in the fall of 2014, one-fourth (or 12.8 million) were Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). If we consider Dewey’s (1997, p. 25) discussion of the “organic connection between education and personal experience” as a necessary component of schooling, then it would follow that a school curriculum needs to reflect the languages, cultures, and personal experiences of the children and families it serves. However, the reality is that “the life experiences of Latino children [and their families] are typically not made a part of school learning” (López-Robertson, 2010, p. 44), and as a result, children often “feel marginalized by school literacy” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 76) practices. Searching for a way to help Latina mothers feel a part of their school community and recognize that they positively contribute to their children’s learning, I sought to actively engage them with books in which they would encounter places, languages, and people *que se parecen a uno* “who look like me.”

The study investigated how to engage Latina mothers with Latino children's literature as a means to build links from personal experiences to school learning and to help them recognize that their ways of knowing and making meaning of the world – their multiple literacies – are tools from which their children will and do learn. This article shares some of the connections to literature and life experiences that the Latina mothers made during literature discussions intended to help them understand the complexity of the contributions they make to their children's learning. A community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework was employed to identify and make visible the significance of these rich contributions and strengths.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

My intent in this study was to help the mothers explore their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) as a means to help them recognize the unique contributions that they make to their children's literacy learning and development. In essence, the study was designed so that the mothers could see how their "multiple literacies" (Bloome & Paul, 2006) provided their children with unique ways of making sense of the world and tools to interpret, facilitate, explore, engage, and make meaning of the world around them.

This is in contrast to the prevalent view that many linguistically and socioeconomically diverse students come to school with deficits. Yosso (2005, p. 75) explains that "deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education." I focus my work with Latino families to dispel this often prevalent deficit view, and to help educators understand that Latino children enter school with a "repertoire of rich literacies" (Tierney, Bond, & Bresler, 2006, p. 364) and that their families are indeed interested in being active participants in their children's learning (Valdés, Capatelli, & Alvarez, 2011; Zentella, 2005).

In designing the study, I was careful not to follow the path of research that focuses on the belief that the school is the holder of all knowledge and that it must be transmitted to families. The ideas of many schools regarding "parental involvement" draw on the banking concept of education (Freire, 2000), in which the focus is on teaching the families and telling them what they need to do with their children rather than on learning from families or asking them about their needs and desires for

their children's education. In contrast, a multiple literacies perspective allows a range of voices and experiences to be shared because it is built on the foundation that literacy learning is social and situated within the context of its use (Street, 1995, 2003) and "tends to involve many literacies and modalities beyond print literacy and a heightened awareness of culture" (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006, p. 379).

Children and youth do not develop literacy in a vacuum; they are constantly interacting with the "multiple literacy practices of their own and others' communities at the same time that they participate in school-based literacy practices" (Larson, 2006, p. 322). As they move from and within these communities, they are "fundamentally altering the nature of the new spaces into which they move" (Orellana, 2007, p. 126). However, the students and families in this study are all specifically affected by language as they move from space to space. All of the mothers in the study are monolingual Spanish speakers trying to navigate their children through non-native linguistic spaces. This study attempts to help the mothers realize that their own linguistic spaces are just as valuable to their children's development as the linguistic spaces created in the community and the school.

These linguistic spaces and multiple literacies can be seen in the context of Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005, p. 77) explains that community cultural wealth is an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression." There are six forms of capital that create community cultural wealth: familial capital, aspirational capital, linguistic capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Yosso (2005, p. 77) further explains that "these forms of capital are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another."

Several studies show that there are actions and characteristics of schools that allow them to become a factor in a student's success rather than a factor that has to be overcome. Some of these factors are the following: acknowledging a student's and family's community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011); basing instruction on multiple literacies perspectives, which enable students to use and contribute to the "myriad of ways to communicate their realities" (Bloome & Paul, 2006, p. 294); and integrating the families and communities so that students are able to make "important connections between the literacies they do possess" (Voithofer & Winterwood, 2010, p. 705). The present study engaged Latina mothers in literature discussions as a means to help them recognize how their multiple literacies provide their

children with unique ways of making sense of the world and tools to interpret, facilitate, explore, engage, and make meaning of the world around them.

### Methodology

As educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that all of the children in our classrooms see themselves represented in the books we read and in our curricula. Short & Fox (2003, p. 21) believe that children “have the right to see themselves within a book, to find within a book the truth of their own experiences instead of stereotypes and misrepresentations.” I believe that this idea must be extended to include the children’s families, and for this study in particular, to include their mothers. Misrepresentations of Latina mothers are based on the premise that “because [Latina] women who are poor and uneducated are not often seen as resources within the household, schools do not often validate their life experiences or draw on their multiple funds of knowledge” (González, 2005, p. 71).

The present study involved Latina mothers participating in *pláticas literarias*/“literature discussions” with books in which they see themselves and their language, books that are about issues that relate to their lives, and books that invite them to draw on and share their multiple literacies. *Pláticas literarias* are small group discussions during which participants read, reflect on, and respond to a shared text. Inviting the Latina mothers to the *pláticas literarias* provided them the opportunity to engage in “explicit discussions about their experiences” (Bartolomé, 2003, p. 413), with the hope that they would recognize that they do have something to contribute to their children’s learning.

A survey of the literature found multiple studies that have been conducted with Latina mothers. For example, Villenas (2001) examined the counternarratives created by a group of Latina mothers as they challenged racism in a rural Southern community; Durand (2011) investigated the impact of Latina mothers’ cultural beliefs regarding the role they play in their children’s education; and Greenberg (2012) explored the educational engagement practices and beliefs of a group of Latina mothers in an urban area. However, there is a dearth of research focused solely on Latina mothers’ engagement with and response to Latino children’s literature as a means to explore the impact they have on their children’s learning and education.

The conceptual framework that guided my thinking was constructed by using Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework and a multiple literacies framework (Bloome & Paul, 2006). Community cultural

wealth is based upon the notion that “Communities of Color are places with multiple strengths” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). Rather than viewing as deficits the ways of knowing and making meaning that families share with their children in their homes and communities, a community cultural wealth framework requires an examination of these forms of knowledge through an assets-based lens. A multiple literacies framework allows an understanding of the varied ways in which people make meaning from and “communicate their realities” (Bloome & Paul, 2006, p. 294), and it seeks to make these ways of knowing and making meaning a part of teaching and learning. Joining community cultural wealth and multiple literacies provided a framework that viewed the home and the community as sites of wealth from which schools can draw and learn, then use for the benefit of all children and families.

This article shares some of the connections to literature and life experiences that the Latina mothers made during literature discussions intended to help them understand the complexity of the contributions they make to their children’s learning. The study was guided by the following questions:

- How do Latina mothers make connections to Latino children’s literature?
- What do these connections have to do with their children’s teaching and learning?

#### *Participants and Site*

Pine View Elementary is a public school located in a rural area serving 516 children from pre-kindergarten through grade five; 84% of the children are African-American, 12% are white, and 4% are “other.” Pine View is surrounded by farms and small subdivisions and is one of several school districts serving a midsized southern city. Because of concern that the Latino families at Pine View were feeling isolated, I was invited to work with them to engage them in the school and help build the necessary links between home and school. An invitation to attend an informational meeting was sent home with two families that had initially expressed interest in participating. These two families served, unofficially, as our liaisons and invited three other Latino families.

At our informational meeting, I explained that I had been invited to work with Latino families to engage them in the school. I answered their questions and also asked them if they would like to participate in a group in which they would read and talk about books. Although both mothers and fathers were invited to join the group, the eventual participants were

five Latina mothers and their children, thus supporting the research indicating that in families of Mexican origin, mothers traditionally “play key roles in children’s development, socialization, and earliest school experiences” (Durand, 2011, p. 258). All of the mothers were of Mexican origin and had been in the United States from three to nine years. They were homemakers, and three also had outside jobs cleaning homes. Three of the mothers – Marissa, Elvia, and Marta – each had one child, Luisa had two children, and Lily had four children, the eldest in middle school, two at Pine View, and a one-year-old. Lilia and Marta are sisters-in-law. The children ranged in age from five to eight years old and all were biliterate, reading, writing, and speaking both Spanish and English. All of the mothers expressed a desire to meet frequently; therefore, we met two to three times a month for two hours over a period of six months. The mothers were all at different levels of acquiring English and expressed a desire that our group would be conducted in Spanish. Because the books and topics we discussed were often about critical social issues (López-Robertson, 2011), it was imperative that I had the mothers trust, their *confianza* (González et al., 2005). Over the course of a school year, we came to know one another well; we often discussed our families and the issues impacting them and also shared joys and celebrations. The mothers expressed their sense of trust often and indicated that coming to our discussions gave them a sense of relief because they could honestly share their feelings; one of the mothers said, *Aquí me puedo desahogar* “here I can release my feelings.”

### *Data Collection*

Data collection was varied: audiotapes and transcripts of the *pláticas*; a journal that included field notes, anecdotal notes, and reflections on our weekly meetings and plans for future meetings; and photographs taken during our meetings. The data presented here are representative of the types of discussions in which we engaged. During our meetings, we read Latino children’s literature and had discussions during which we shared connections made to the books. The mothers also participated in engagements that helped them make the necessary links between lived and school experiences; one such engagement was creating a bilingual alphabet book containing objects found in the school. Their children joined us for the last thirty minutes of our time together. This paper focuses on the literature discussions with the mothers.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis focused on the transcripts of the literature discussions and field notes from my journal. I listened to and transcribed each of the *pláticas* and employed discourse analysis methods (Gee, 1999) to investigate how the mothers were making connections to the Latino children's literature. Furthermore, through discourse analysis, I identified and tracked emerging themes, patterns, and categories, which led to the subsequent coding of categories. Additionally, I consulted my anecdotal notes and reflections written during and after the *pláticas*. A subsequent round of coding led me to review and ultimately merge codes or create new codes. Constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allowed me to identify patterns and connections across the discussions and field notes, while a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) allowed findings to inform emerging theoretical ideas and helped me see relationships among the data. Using the themes and patterns that emerged from the data, I share the most prominent excerpts in the sections that follow. Data analysis was constant as the study progressed, and triangulation of data occurred through consistent transcript, audiotape, and field note reviews and conversations with the mothers. As I read and reviewed the analysis, the patterns and relationships within the data and the link to Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth and multiple literacies became evident.

### Findings

The study engaged Latina mothers in *pláticas literarias* as a means of helping them to recognize how their multiple literacies provided their children with unique ways of making sense of the world and tools to interpret, facilitate, explore, engage, and make meaning of the world around them. I discovered that the mothers drew from their community cultural wealth as they made connections between the literature and their lives. Below I provide excerpts from the *pláticas literarias* and discuss the connection to community cultural wealth and to their multiple literacies. In order to demonstrate respect for the Latina mothers, the Spanish spoken by the mothers is honored throughout the sections that follow and is followed by *sic*.

#### *Familial Capital*

Yosso (2005, p. 79) explains that familial capital “engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship.” Although only two (Lily and Marta) of the five mothers were actually related (they were sisters-in-law), all considered our group to be *la familia de la escuela* “the school family.”



We had just finished reading and discussing the book *The Best Part of Me: Children Talk About Their Bodies in Pictures and Words* (Ewald, 2002), and I asked each of them to think of her best “part.” Elvia shared that the little girl in the book who wrote “my hair” reminded her of Marta’s daughter and a recent incident that had taken place at a national retailer. Located in a highly populated shopping center, employees at this national chain were threatening the Latino shoppers with deportation. A lively discussion ensued during which the mothers talked about the fear many Latino families felt because of the constant threats. They also expressed sadness that the families who had been victims had not sought them [the mothers] out for help.

The mothers spoke about taking care of and appreciating each other and always *estar a tú espalda* “having your back.” Very prominent in the discussion were their ideas that we are all *hijos de Dios y así nos tenemos que tratar* “God’s children and must treat each other accordingly” – regardless of whether or not we are *familia en sangre* “family by blood.” The mothers shared their sorrow that these particular families had moved, and Marissa stated:

*Nos tenemos que cuidar aunque  
no seamos sangre.*

We must take care of each other  
even though we are not blood.

Building these ties, this familial capital is necessary to their survival – literally.

#### *Aspirational Capital*

Aspirational capital is “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). During a discussion of *Pepita Talks Twice* (Lachtman, 1995), a picture book about a little girl, Pepita, who wishes that she knew how to speak only English because she is tired of having to translate (talk twice) for her family, Elvia commented how she wanted her children to continue to work on their bilingualism because it would help them get into college and obtain good jobs and not have to ...

Elvia:

*limpiar casas de otra gente para  
poder darle cositas que necesita  
y también que quiere.*

clean other people’s homes to be  
able to give them [her children]  
things that they need and also  
things that they want.

Luisa added:

*Aunque son las cosas difíciles, hay que tratar de salir de esto para que ellos sean mejor que nosotros.*

Even though things are difficult, we must try to get out of this so that they [our kids] will be better than us.

Marta shared that she loved to study and learn but was limited now [in the United States] to what she could achieve professionally because of her emerging English and the responsibilities to provide a safe and healthy home for her family.

*En mi país, yo estude pero aquí, no lo aceptan y yo no puedo empezar de nuevo. Pues, ahora, tengo que cuidar a mi familia y salir adelante por ellos. Yo trabajo para ellos no tengan que hacer tanto. Estudien eso es lo que quiero.*

In my country, I studied but here [United States], my schooling is not accepted and I can't start all over again. Well, now I have to take care of my family and come out ahead for them. I work so that they won't have to do so much. Study, that's what I want [for them].

Elvia recognized that her children's bilingualism was a commodity that they could use in the future to obtain success, which for her was a college education and a good job. And she, in contrast to Pepita, the main character in the book, wanted her children to maintain their bilingualism. Despite the fact that the families lived the "real barriers" that confronted them on a daily basis – language, attitude, financial, and institutional barriers – they still had aspirations for their children to obtain an education and become "better" than their parents. Through their hopes for their children and support for their education, the mothers created "a history that would break the links between parents' current occupational status and their children's future academic attainment" (Gándara, 1995, p. 55).

### *Linguistic Capital*

Linguistic capital "includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). While discussing *Pepita Talks Twice* (the book named above), the mothers referred to the important job that their children had as translators for them and their community.

Marta:

*Les estamos quitando su niñez por tener que hacer este gran trabajo para nosotros. ¿Pero, si no nos ayudan, pues quién?*

We are taking away their childhood due to the fact that they must do this great job for us. But, if they don't help us, then who will?

Elvia:

*Todavía me llevo a la niña porque no entiendo muy bien y no quiero que haiga un malentendido. ¿Te recuerdas lo que pasó aquella vez en esa tienda, verdad? No quiero que vuelva a sucedir eso.*

I still have to take my daughter because I don't understand too well and I don't want a misunderstanding. You remember what happened at the store that other time, right? I don't want that to happen again.

Marissa:

*¡Pues como no me recuerdo! Yo tampoco quiero que eso suceda otra vez. Me quede con mal sabor como resultado de eso. A mí me da pena tener que pedirle al niño. Se enoja pero le explico que tiene que dar esta ayuda.*

How could I not remember! I also don't want that to ever happen again. That left me with a bad taste as a result of that. I am embarrassed to have to ask him [my son] for help. He becomes angry [when I ask him to accompany me] but I explain that he has to give me this help.

The children from a very young age serve as interpreters or language brokers (McQuillan & Tse, 1995) for their families and communities. Oftentimes, they are the only ones in constant contact with the world outside their homes and as such are their families' link to the United States. Language brokering is a complex job, particularly as one considers that they are children who themselves are learning the English language and American culture. Additionally, as language brokers, the children are frequently privy to information that may not be developmentally appropriate for them (i.e., financial or medical), and this may cause the children to feel a sense of anxiety (Morales & Hanson, 2005). However, studies also indicate the positive impact these communications on their families' behalf may have on language brokers' cognitive abilities (Morales & Hanson, 2005).

In addition to speaking to the role of their children as translators and interpreters, all of the mothers expressed a strong desire for their children to learn English and become successful in the United States, but not at the expense of their home language and culture. This was especially important for them because they wanted their children to be able to clearly communicate with grandparents and other family members *que siguen allá* “who are still over there” [México]. The mothers recognized the value of their own language as a means to maintain a connection with their home countries, culture, and families.

Furthermore, two very prominent ways in which the mothers showed or “showed off” their linguistic prowess was in their storytelling and in *tirando dichos* “throwing proverbs.” During our *pláticas*, the mothers would occasionally deliver *dichos* in response to the books and would also offer them as advice to one another and to me. We were talking about my having to rise very early the next morning to catch a flight that made it necessary for me to be at the airport at 4:45 a.m. when Lily looked at me and said, *El que madruga, coge la oruga* “The early bird catches the worm.” There was a momentary silence, and then laughter broke out. Immediately after that Elvia offered, *Dime con quien andas, y te dire quien eres* “You can judge a man by the company he keeps.” Marissa then said:

*La necesidad hace maestros.  
Tal como nosotras somos  
maestras de esta idioma y este  
país. ¡Día tras día andamos  
aprendiendo y enseñando!*

Necessity is the mother of invention. Just as we are teachers of this language and this country. Day after day we are learning and teaching!

Again, laughter broke out, this time accompanied by applause.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital includes the “networks of people and community resources ... that can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). The mothers made strong connections to “In Lak’ech,” a poem written by Luis Valdez (1994) as homage to Mayan culture and Mexican Americans in the United States. The poem’s message is one of humanity and love, and it resonated intensely with the mothers; they spoke of being away from family and having to start all over again in a foreign country that was not always kind to them and how they grew to depend on people who weren’t blood family but were the family they had created.

Marta:

*Pues, el poema éste lo dice todo muy bien. Yo vine aquí sola con mi esposo y no conocíamos a nadie. Tenía miedo porque ya sabe que unos no nos tratan bien y eso sin saber quiénes somos. Conocí a ésta chiquita, gracias a Dios, y somos como hermanas. Dependo mucho en ella y la quiero-tú, chiquita, eres mi otro yo y sin ti, no puedo estar feliz.*

Well, this poem said it all very well. I came here [to the United States] alone with my husband and I didn't know anyone. I was very afraid because you know that some of them [Americans] do not treat us well and that without knowing who we are. I met this girl [pointing to Marissa] and thank God, we are like sisters. I depend on her a lot and I love her – you, little girl, are my other me, and without you, I couldn't be happy.

Marissa:

*Hay, Marta, como empiezas. ¡Tú eres mi hermana, y sí por supuesto que eres me otro yo-así como lo leímos! Cuando me siento que ya no puedo más, hablo contigo y me haces sentir bien. No es fácil tenerlos todos allá y una aquí sin la sangre pero con gente como Marta, y todas ustedes no ayudamos, apoyamos y queremos.*

Oh, Marta, you are starting [crying]. You are my sister, and of course you are my other me – just as we read [in the poem]. When I feel that I just can't anymore, I talk with you and you make me feel better. It isn't easy having them over there [Mexico] and me here, without the blood [family], but with people like Marta, and all of you, we help, support and love each other.

Lily:

*Yo le digo siempre cuando hablo allá, que si no fuera por mis amigas-hermanas, me hubiera regresado hace tiempo. Yo pienso que todos deben pensar así como dice aquí, si nos respetamos todos no hay que pelear y ser tan feo con uno. Este*

*país es para todos. Ustedes me apoyan con mis locuras y me hacen pensar y me hacen sentir querida.*

I always tell them [family in Mexico] that if it wasn't for my

sister-friends, I would have gone back [to Mexico] a long time ago. I think that everyone should think like it says here [pointing to poem], if we respect each other there isn't a need to be so ugly to

one another. This country [United States] is for everyone. You all support me with my crazy ideas and make me think and you make me feel loved.

The bonds created by the mothers carry them through some difficult times in a country, as they mentioned, that is not always kind or welcoming. Being so far away from their families and everything that they know is not easy, but having each other to rely on makes it more bearable, and as Marta mentioned later in the discussion, *me hacen sentir parte de esto y que sí es para mí* "you make me feel a part of this [United States] and that yes, it is for me."

### *Navigational Capital*

Navigational capital "refers to the skills of maneuvering through social institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Referring to their children's placements in school, the discussion shifted toward not knowing American schools and how they function. The mothers spoke of their schooling in Mexico and the expectations and the access that some had and others were denied. They appreciated that all of their children attended *una escuela muy buena* "a very good school" but questioned why some information was out of reach for them.

Marissa:

*Pues aquí mismo, si no estaríamos aquí en nuestro grupito, ¿cómo supiera yo de esto de AP? Ustedes le explicaron a Lily y ella me dijo el otro día lo que era, si no por ella, el niño no estuviera en el programa. ¿No es cierto? ¡Por eso, tú eres mi otro yo!*

Well, right now, if we weren't in our little group, how would I have known about AP? You [Julia and Ms. Hall] told Lily and she told me the other day what it was, if it wasn't for her, my son would not be in that program, isn't that right? So, you are my other me! [This last sentence refers to the poem we read.]

Not being aware of school programs, policies, and procedures keeps many families in the dark, which results in their children missing out on opportunities. Although it is the schools' responsibility to provide information so that families understand it, this is not always the case. As

Marissa explained, had Lily not passed on information that we [Ms. Hall and I] had given her, Marissa's child would not be in Advanced Placement math. As may be the case in many schools across the United States, middle school math placement directly impacts high school placement, which eventually dictates whether or not one is "college bound" or "tech bound." Solorzano & Orlenas (2004, p. 24) conducted a study to analyze the availability and access of AP courses for Latino and African-American students in California and found that "they [Latino and African-American youth] continue to be underrepresented in AP courses," a situation that is likely repeated across too many schools nationwide.

### *Resistant Capital*

Resistant capital "refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). *Friends From the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1993) is a picture book about a young girl, Prietita, who befriends a young boy, Joaquin, who is in the United States without permission. Prietita defends Joaquin against her cousins [all boys], who were teasing him and throwing rocks at him. Our discussion centered around the notion of taking care of each other, which brought us back to the discussion of the poem "In Lak'ech."

Elvia:

*Miren, yo le digo siempre a Lani que se cuide a ella misma y a su prima. Que si alguien le hace daño a su prima y lo mismo que si le hicieran eso a ella. Es como el poema "tú eres mi otro yo," hay que defenderse uno al otro y eso es todo.*

Look, I always tell Lani that she must take care of herself and her cousin. If someone harms her cousin, it's the same as if they did it to her [Lani]. It's like the poem "you are my other me," we have to defend each other and that's it.

Lily:

*Sí, Elvia y miren esos chiquitos le iban a lanzar rocas al Joaquín, no hay que dejar que eso paze ni a un niño ni a un grande. Y no tienen que ser rocas, fíjense – allá en esa tienda que racistas son con nosotros. ¿Y qué se les ha hecho? Nada. No hay razón que nos traten así. Este país nos*

Yes, Elvia and look, these kids were going to throw stones at Joaquin, we cannot let this happen to a child or an adult. And they don't have to be rocks – look, there in that store they are so racist towards us.

promete cuidado [sic] y que, esa gente no debe hacer eso. Yo le trato de explicar a los chiquitos, lo que anda pasando para que sepan. Y que bueno que leemos los libros nosotras y hablamos y después con los chiquitos para que sepan y que también sepan que eso no se puede hacer.

And what have we done to them? Nothing. There is no reason that they treat us this way. This country promises protection, those people shouldn't do that. I try to explain these things to my children so that they know what is going on. And how great that we read these books and talk about them and then with the children so that they know and so that they also know that that cannot be done.

While Elvia connected to the notion of taking care of each other from the poem, Lily took the conversation further by talking about the issues with the employees at the national retailer that I mentioned earlier and the manner in which they [Latino immigrants] are treated. She said, *son racistas con nosotros*/"they are racist towards us." She spoke about the "oppressive structures" (Yosso, 2005, p. 81) and shared her view that it was not right to be treated in this manner. She also added the importance of discussing these books and issues with her children so that they are aware of what happens and so that they also know that *eso no se puede hacer*/"that cannot be done." To conclude, Elvia stated,

*No sabía que tenía valor hablar en español con mis niños y de estas cosas.*

I did not know that there was any value in speaking to my children in Spanish and about these things.

Because we had *confianza*, I was able to challenge and be challenged by the mothers often during our *pláticas*, as was the case in this particular discussion. Toward the beginning of the study, we had a serious discussion about the use of Spanish with the children. A couple of the mothers were confused about whether or not to speak Spanish to their children because their teachers had told them that it was harmful and would impede their acquisition of English. I offered that I hoped that the teachers were well meaning and also shared my own personal story about not learning English until I attended kindergarten. I wanted the mothers to know early on that it is possible to succeed in the United States and



maintain and further develop one's linguistic heritage. After a few minutes of pondering, Marta offered:

*Bueno, miren, ella es doctora, lo vivió y se sabe que es posible mantener el español y tener éxito en los estados unidos.*

Well, look, she [Julia] is a doctor, she lived it and we know that it is possible maintain the Spanish [language] and be successful in the United States.

The ability to be open and honest with the mothers throughout our discussions helped me counter the internalization of a deficit view of language that some were beginning to develop.

### Discussion

Family involvement in a child's education is viewed as a predictor of a child's academic success (Huber-Smith & Williford, 2014); however, the question of how to actively involve Latino families remains largely unanswered. With the continued growth of the Latino population in the United States and in our public schools, it becomes necessary to find effective ways to engage Latino families in schools. I suggest that one method is to engage families in reading and discussing relevant texts (i.e., literature, poetry, song) as a means to discover their untapped knowledge – the multiple literacies that they possess. This study focused on my work with a small group of Latina mothers in which my goal throughout the meetings was to help them recognize how their multiple literacies (Bloome & Paul, 2006) provided their children with unique ways of making sense of the world and tools to interpret, facilitate, explore, engage, and make meaning of the world around them. Furthermore, I wanted them to discover and realize that they indeed had much to offer their children in terms of being “successful” in U.S. schools and society.

The mothers engaged in discussions based on a variety of texts – Latino children's literature as well as other books and/or poems that represented their language and culture and also presented them with real life issues. Through *pláticas literarias*, the mothers shared personal anecdotes, made connections between the books and their lives, and discovered their community cultural wealth. Drawing on community cultural wealth helped me identify precise examples in the discussions that demonstrated some of the “rich repositories of knowledge” (González, 2005, p. 71) that the mothers possessed. For instance, in one of our *pláticas*, the mothers learned how middle school math placement impacts access and enrollment in AP classes in high school. Their social network

facilitated “community navigation” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) through the American public school system. Likewise, the analysis also demonstrated that “everyone engages in multiple literacy practices and those diverse practices reflect the complexity of their lives” (Bloome & Paul, 2006, p. 294). The mothers used their community cultural wealth to interpret, facilitate, explore, engage, and make meaning of the world around them.

Botelho & Rudman (2009, p. xv) write that “by uncovering systems of meaning that perpetuate social inequities, readers can reposition themselves in the world and envision new intellectual spaces.” Working with the Latina mothers in Spanish, “the only means through which they make sense of their own experience in the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 152), allowed them to draw connections among the various texts that we read and more importantly make connections to their life experiences, which repositioned them in the world as owners of knowledge. One very powerful example of this “repositioning” is the issue of speaking/not speaking Spanish to their children. As discussed above, at the onset of the study a couple of the mothers questioned the use of Spanish with their children because of recommendations made by their children’s teachers not to use Spanish. The mothers were told that the use of both languages would confuse the children and impede English acquisition. Over the course of time and after honest and thoughtful discussions, the mothers reconsidered what the teachers had suggested to them. Having the time to thoughtfully question and discuss the issue in a group where trust and respect were mutual helped create an understanding of the importance of maintaining Spanish. Moreover, it allowed the mothers to see potential sites of learning for their children and to reconsider their roles as their children’s first teachers.

Discussing the books in Spanish also provided them the opportunity to be in control of their contributions to the discussion and use their multiple literacies to make meaning from the books and discussions. Community cultural wealth can be used to “envision new intellectual spaces” for them and their children. Our discussions afforded the mothers the opportunity to bring their cultural resources to the surface and see them as a tool for their children’s learning.

### **Implications**

Learning in schools becomes a far richer and more powerful experience for students, their families, and educators when more of the entirety of students’ lives purposely finds its way into the lives of those in the classroom. In order for “schools to remain relevant in contemporary society” (Larson, 2006, p. 319), they need to draw from students’

community cultural wealth and multiple literacies and apply them in the curriculum and instruction. Rather than present children and their families with a “curriculum and other material conditions in schools that negate their histories, cultures, and day-to-day experiences” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 121), schools need to create a curriculum that is based on the lives of the students, families, and communities that they serve. Basing the *pláticas* on texts that interested and were relevant to the mothers and providing them a safe space in which to engage with and discuss the texts allowed them to determine that they indeed had positive contributions to make to their children’s learning. The mothers’ engagement in the *pláticas* led them to discover that they had quite a lot to offer their children in terms of learning. As the study demonstrated, all families have something to offer schools. Finding meaningful ways to engage families in their children’s learning can take many forms. First and foremost, schools need to create an environment in which all families feel welcome and respected.

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