



Co-constructing beliefs about parental involvement: Rehearsals and reflections in a family literacy program



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which participants in a six-week family literacy program—graduate students, immigrant parents, and their children—co-constructed a set of norms for appropriate parental involvement during a role-play activity in which they rehearsed placing and receiving phone calls between parents and school staff. The findings highlight an important tension: on the one hand, the graduate students' actions and stances during the role-plays reveal a set of normative beliefs about what constitutes competent parental behavior in schooling contexts; on the other hand, the graduate students' participation in the program was formative in challenging and extending (not simply reproducing) those beliefs. The authors suggest that graduate students' initial stances, and their shifting beliefs, can be situated along a continuum of understanding—viewing teachers' beliefs along such a continuum can help teacher educators to support them in developing more culturally-sustaining modes of teaching when working alongside immigrant families.

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Introduction

This article examines the ways in which participants in a six-week family literacy program—graduate students, immigrant parents, and their children—co-constructed a set of norms for appropriate parental involvement in U.S. public institutions. We explore face-to-face interactions during a role-play activity in which the participants rehearsed one form of exchange familiar in U.S. public schools and medical clinics: placing and receiving phone calls between parents and teachers or doctors. The interactions that we analyze formed part of a six-week family literacy program integrated into a teacher education course designed and taught by the first author during the spring of 2011. The course was based upon a “funds of knowledge” approach to teacher education (González, Wyman, & O'Connor, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and informed by a language socialization approach to the study of interaction (Baquedano-López, Solís, & Arredondo, 2010).

Through a close analysis of selected role-plays, we seek to answer the following questions: What roles do participants assume as they socialize one another to local norms for parental involvement? How do participants challenge or reproduce broader discourses of parental involvement as they participate in the phone call rehearsals and discussions about those rehearsals? Our analysis provides insight into two key issues prevalent in the literature on parental involvement and relevant to the field of educational anthropology: first, the ways that parents and school employees negotiate role-taking and power

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relations *vis-à-vis* one another; and second, the values that individuals express when socializing one another to appropriate behavior in school settings. We begin by reviewing the relevant literature on immigrant parents' involvement in U.S. schools and situating our theoretical framework within Hymes' conceptualization of communicative competence. We also briefly review anthropological perspectives on the significance of rehearsals and performance in social life. In this study, we turn to a description of our study and presentation of our analysis. The article closes with a discussion of the findings and the implications for researchers, teacher educators, and teachers.

Literature review

There is an extensive body of critical literature examining mainstream beliefs that shape approaches to parental involvement in the U.S. (see reviews by Auerbach, 1989; Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Delgado Gaitan, 2012; Erickson, 1984; Rodríguez-Brown, 2009; Valencia, 2002). Much of this work focuses on describing alignments and misalignments between home and school literacy practices and showing how school-based programs attempt to remedy existing differences by imposing a normative framework for parental participation. This normative framework, based upon white American middle class and monolingual practices, often leads to the classification of behavior in diverse racial, national, and socio-economic communities as deviant and deficient (Baquedano-López et al., 2013) or idealized and unrealistic (Qin, 2008). Over the last two decades, a “funds of knowledge” approach has offered theoretical and methodological guidance for researchers and educators to learn about the culturally specific ways in which immigrant parents impart cultural knowledge to their children outside of school (Moll et al., 1992; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). A common, though often unstated, theme in the parental involvement and funds of knowledge literature is *competence*—on the one hand, there is a tendency to generalize about immigrant parents' abilities to participate effectively in their children's schooling; on the other, there is an attempt to counter those generalizations by documenting cultural strengths that shape immigrant parents' ways of teaching and socializing.

Parental involvement: immigrant parents' competence

In her 1996 study of Mexican parents' beliefs about and participation in their children's schooling in the southwestern U.S., Valdés traces various arguments leveraged in public discourse and policymaking regarding parental participation in schooling. She notes that the cultural argument, now widely known as “deficit thinking” (Valencia, 2002, p. 81), was used to explain the educational failure of European immigrants in the twentieth century and continues to be used to account for the perceived low achievement of African-Americans and Latinos. Policymakers and educational leaders tend to blame immigrant and historically marginalized families for national “literacy crises” (Auerbach, 1989, p. 167), “achievement gaps” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 3) and, more recently, “language gaps” (Blum, 2014) measured by indicators such as standardized test scores. The cultural argument states that parents' inability to participate adequately in their children's education stems from a lack of “life experiences or cultural values that would have allowed or encouraged them to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them by American educational institutions” (Valdés, 1996, p. 22).

Valdés warns that, by defining immigrant parents as deviant, schools tend to prescribe a set of decontextualized language and literacy practices that parents should adopt (see also Auerbach, 1989). According to Moll and Ruiz (2002), deficit model perspectives that identify language use as a liability contribute to “the great illusion of American education: that to learn English (and have academic success), it is necessary to shed Spanish and the intimate social relations created through that language” (365). This focus on parental deficiency and remediation obscures the linguistic and cultural resources that immigrant families employ on a daily basis as well as broader questions about systematic inequities (such as poverty) that may hinder parents' abilities to engage in those practices valued in schools (such as reading children a bedtime story when parents' conditions of employment require them to work nights) (Zentella, 1997).

While the deficit model is used to explain the low achievement of African-American and Latino students, the cultural argument of the “model minority” presents an image of highly competent Asian-American children who obtain high test scores and maintain low drop-out rates (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998). According to the model minority myth, Asian-American students are high achieving because they inherit cultural values from their parents, who are portrayed as better educated and more economically advantaged than their immigrant counterparts (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Ji and Koblinsky (2009) warn that the myth of hyper competence obscures the incredible diversity of Asian-American immigrants, ignoring the realities of Southeast Asian and recent immigrant groups who are often socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically isolated (see also Kao & Thompson, 2003). The myth blames other immigrant parents for not “keeping up” with Asian Americans, overlooking structural inequities that impact non-dominant families of various ethnicities in schools (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Another perspective: funds of knowledge

The “funds of knowledge” approach to research and teaching (Moll et al., 1992) has become one of the most widely-known models for debunking deficit perspectives and gaining an understanding of the linguistic and cultural resources that immigrant parents and children bring to bear on schooling (Paris, 2012). These resources are developed within vast social networks and “multi-stranded” relationships between children and adults that are often overlooked by educators in traditional settings (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). The approach advocates a fundamental shift in educators' perspectives on

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