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# THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM:

# EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINO FAMILIES

**BY**

**ROSEMARY KUBIAK FESSINGER**

B.U.S. University of New Mexico, 1978
M.A. Elementary Education, University of New Mexico, 1991

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**
**Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2009**

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My greatest thanks must go to my husband and children. I know how blessed I am to have them in my life.

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## ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of a fifteen-month research project conducted with a group of Latina (Mexicana) immigrant mothers who took part in an after-school family literacy program that was grounded in a participatory approach to education. This family literacy program emphasized a *strengths* perspective by acknowledging the rich resources that all families bring to their children's school experiences. The research explores the experiences of the families, mostly mothers, who participated in this family literacy program and examined how their participation impacted their personal literacy development, their children's academic experiences, and their involvement in the school and broader community. During family literacy meetings, mothers participated in a variety of socially-constructed, culturally relevant activities that revolved around whole-group discussions, children's multicultural (bilingual) literature, guest speakers, and the construction of Heritage Albums. These activities engaged mothers as they developed

essential skills that supported them as they became more active in their children's education.

Data collected included semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and examination of a variety of documents that included homework and in-class writing samples as well as the mothers' Heritage Albums. Findings revealed that these mothers create and participate in social networks that operate on a variety of levels from an informal social gathering to a rich arena for the exchange of ideas as they relate to the education of their children. The concept of agentive behavior, the act of exerting power over personal circumstances, was also explored.

Implications of this study acknowledge the many benefits of family literacy programs that are firmly grounded in a social-constructivist, participatory approach to education. Additionally, the substantial amount of effort and planning that these programs require are acknowledged and suggestions are offered to educators who are interested in designing and implementing programs that honor families' personal style of literacy.

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# CHAPTER 1:

# INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

> It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon and though I'm on time, activities are in full swing when I walk into the school library. There are five large tables in the room and between the mothers, toddlers, and strollers, it's difficult to find a place to sit. I stuff my coat in a bookcase and ease into the back of the crowded room and lean against a bookshelf. The leader is standing in the center of the library; she is busy dividing the mothers into groups and they begin heading to different areas of the library; they are moving towards the story pit, to a back table, and to a large table set in the center of the room. When they arrive at their destination, a teacher is waiting for them, ready to share stories and discuss *Día de los Muertos* (Observation notes, 11/02/06).

These observation notes describe a meeting of the College of Education Family Literacy Program, an intergenerational family literacy program sponsored by the state university's College of Education in conjunction with support from a variety of corporate sponsors. The Family Literacy Program was launched as a pilot program in the fall of 2005 at a community center in the south valley of a large city in the southwestern part of the United States. During the 2005-2006 school year, approximately fifty families took advantage of the weekly program. The families who participated represented the demographics of the elementary school and surrounding community; 99% of the families were Hispanic, 90% were Spanish-speakers, and almost all of the families lived below the poverty line. In entrance interviews, mothers reported that their husbands worked at least two jobs in an effort to support their family. From its inception, the Family Literacy Program has had three focuses: developing parents' oral language skills, supporting reading and writing, and fostering parental involvement (Flores-Dueñas & Torres, 2006). Though children were not explicitly addressed, there was common agreement that as parents developed literacy skills, their children's literacy skills would be positively

affected. In order to design activities that would help to develop parents' skills, mothers were interviewed and writing samples were collected in an effort to better understand their specific needs. Teachers then collaborated to design activities that would build and reinforce parents' existing literacy skills while concurrently introducing new concepts and skills.

In the early days of the program, the structure of the two-hour block was predictable; parents arrived at the after-school program, signed in, sat in a large group setting, moved into small groups to work at a variety of literacy-based tasks, then reconvened as a large group to talk about the afternoon's activities. At the end of the session, parents moved to the gymnasium to watch their children perform traditional folk dances. As an incentive to participate, parents who arrived on time and who stayed for the entire two hours received a bilingual children's book and a bag of groceries on their way out (Flores-Dueñas & Torres, 2006).

Preliminary findings were encouraging. Parents reported that they were sharing books with their children and they were helping them complete their homework. Parents were learning about developmental levels which aided their understanding about what academic tasks their children could and could not accomplish. More importantly, parents were learning to recognize and articulate the value of literacy skills that they already used in their homes. They were talking to their children; they were joking, singing *corridos*, reading the bible, and playing music. Parents were becoming aware of their conversations and the rich vocabulary that was being shared in their homes. Finally, parents who were participating in the Family Literacy Program had important opportunities to model literacy practices for their children and to contribute to and build vital family traditions

(Flores-Dueñas & Torres, 2006). These preliminary findings were profound but much still remains to be learned from these families. Parents are often characterized as their children's first teachers (Morrow, 1995), and therefore it seems appropriate to suggest that learning about parents' attitudes towards literacy and their goals for their children's literacy development has the potential to extend children's literacy experiences at home as well as in the classroom.

## Background

Researchers have long suggested that there is a strong relationship between early literacy experiences, the development of cognitive and linguistic skills, and success in school (DeTemple & Beals, 1991; Edwards, 1995; Goldenbert, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Saracho, 1997; Saracho, 2002). Children often have opportunities to participate in a variety of formal literacy experiences prior to entering school. They may participate in preschool programs and the long-terms positive effects of these programs are well-documented. For example, proponents suggest that children who attend Head Start, an early intervention program, are significantly more likely to attend high school and college and have the potential to earn higher salaries in their twenties (Garces, Thomas, & Curie, 2002). Yet, even when they participate in early intervention programs, many children continue to struggle in school. Their home literacy experiences simply do not align with those experiences that are honored in the classroom and current classroom practices rarely adjust to meet the unique needs of diverse learners (Au & Raphael, 2000; Erickson, 1987; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982).

Participation in Head Start or not, it is also well documented that children who enjoy early reading experiences possess a tremendous amount of general knowledge,

vocabulary development, and book-handling skills that support them in the classroom (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). All children bring a wide variety of home literacy experiences into the classroom; excellent teachers have always understood the importance of relating these experiences to daily classroom routines. Difficulties result, however, when there is a mismatch (Au & Raphael, 2000; Erickson, 1987; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982) between home and school literacy experiences, when home literacy experiences are not understood or honored by the school (Moll, 1992). Without an understanding of a family's home literacy practices as well as parents' goals for their children, teachers have tremendous difficulty offering *culturally relevant curriculum* (Auerbach, 1989), curriculum that will capture and sustain their students. Students become marginalized and come to believe that school has nothing to offer them (Moll, 1992). In an effort to lessen the gap between home and school practices, educational policies have advocated for family literacy programs in schools and community-based organizations for over twenty years (Caspe, 2003; Paratore, 2001). The main goal of these programs is to support families as they develop literacy skills that are needed for their children to succeed in the classroom. Concurrently, research that attempts to uncover home literacy habits and practices has helped to broaden our understanding of what it means to be literate.

## Statement of the Research Question

I will bring a unique perspective to this study. As a veteran teacher, I have taught at several schools in the district. The majority of these schools were located in stable, middle-class neighborhoods. Children attended preschool and enjoyed a variety of home literacy experiences that closely aligned with classroom practices. I have also taught at an

elementary school in the city's south valley. The majority of students at this school were second-language learners (Spanish was their first language) and almost all came from families who struggled economically (the school was *universal free-lunch*). These students faced an assortment of obstacles (e.g., language, poverty, stressful home situations, absenteeism, poor health care) but in many ways, they were no different than students everywhere; they were eager to attend school and had expectations of learning. Yet, the students at this elementary school consistently failed to make expected academic progress; year after year, their scores on district-mandated and high-stakes standardized tests were much lower than their middle-class peers.

Teachers at this school were well-aware of the challenges that the families in the community faced and were proactive in planning and implementing programs and activities that would support students in the classroom. There was a reading incentive program supported primarily by Title I funds as well as an after-school tutoring program for students deemed most at-risk for academic failure. Supporting parents, however, proved to be more complex. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 contains strict guidelines for schools that receive Title I funds including the development of a school improvement plan. Title I school improvement plans must include a variety of components ranging from implementation of a scientifically-based reading program to development of strategies that encourage parental involvement (Public Law 107-110).

To meet tough NCLB and Title I requirements, the teachers at this elementary school developed a community action plan based on Epstein's model of community involvement (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Hollifield, 1996). Influenced by Epstein's theory

of overlapping spheres of influence[1], parents were included in the writing of the Title I proposal and held membership on several committees. Their attendance at meetings, however, was sporadic and little by little, their participation would diminish until they were no longer involved in the school decision-making process. Epstein suggests that despite the efforts of the school, these parents simply had not acquired the skills necessary to act as parent leaders; they had little knowledge of expressing their own opinions as well as the opinions of the other families and therefore, were unable to participate at the school in a meaningful way (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). The staff believed that they had created sound, multi-faceted opportunities for parental involvement and therefore, did not alter their practices and continued to implement the same framework for parental involvement. In fact, some teachers demonstrated their confusion by suggesting that parents were absent from the school landscape because they simply did not care about their children or their children's education.

It is not surprising that in this atmosphere, meaningful parental involvement continued to be rare. In some ways, it is understandable that parents failed to make long-term commitments to participate in leadership roles. Nationally, parent-teacher association meetings are rarely well-attended. It is interesting to note, however, that not only were parents missing from regularly scheduled meetings, they also were not volunteering in their children's classrooms. They routinely dropped their children off at school but did not venture inside.

[1] Epstein and Sanders (2000) write that established sociological theories state that social organizations operate most effectively when separated by unique missions and goals. In education, however, families, schools, and communities who operated the most effectively shared common missions and goals, at least in terms of children's development and learning. This external model is described as *overlapping spheres of influence* and are specifically, "home, school, and community" (p. 287).

The failed attempts to nurture and support meaningful parental involvement is not unique to this school. And the reasons go far beyond inexperienced parents in leadership positions. Despite the fact that the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110) contains language that requires schools to develop ways to involve parents, parents often feel barred from participating in their children's education. Appleseed of New Mexico, a public interest law center that works to identify and address issues involving chronic injustices, conducted research (focus groups comprised of parents and community members) seeking to uncover reasons why parents typically resisted participating in their children's education. Explanations for lack of parental involvement ranged from parents' failure to receive timely information concerning their children's progress, poverty, limited English proficiency, differing cultural expectations, to not being truly perceived as a valuable resource by school leaders (New Mexico Appleseed, n.d.). Their findings, though not unique to New Mexico, do help to advance the concept that a one-size-fits-all model of parental involvement does not meet the needs of the diverse populations that attend schools in the United States. Specifically, the organization challenges schools to maximize the ways in which they communicate with parents and suggests that newsletters are not enough. Parents must be reached through the media as well as through community partners embedded in the community; and most importantly, schools must find ways to demonstrate that parents are welcome at school. The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education Update (NCPIE) suggests,

> Holding meetings and having office hours at convenient times for parents to meet with teachers or principals…Making available services that draw parents in—nutrition or adult literacy classes…and allowing community organizations to use school facilities will help make schools feel more open to parents. (2006, p. 3)

The ultimate goal is to demonstrate to parents through the actions of the teacher, administration, and community, that parents are a part of the school.

Though Appleseed's recommendations are certainly vital to the development of a successful model of parental involvement, there is one area in which the organization falls short. The recommendations of the organization do not seek to understand nor honor parents' existing behaviors or personal literacies but rather seeks to replace them with the literacies of the dominant culture. Appleseed recommends reaching out to parents but fails to suggest ways to understand or honor parents' existing using of literacy. It is this gap that I am interested in investigating and to that end will be researching the questions**,** *What is the College of Education Family Literacy Program? What are the experiences of the families in the Family Literacy Program? And, what meaning do they make of these experiences?* Within this sphere, I will also seek to uncover the various ways that participating parents support their children's academic achievement, and gain an understanding of how participation in the Family Literacy Program impacts the parents' literacy and identity development as well as their involvement in the larger school community.

## Significance of the Study

There is controversy involving the impact of parents on their children's learning and success in school. Though all content areas of the curriculum are fodder for controversy, it is the area of literacy instruction that draws the most scrutiny. *How do children learn to read* and *what is the best method to teach reading* are questions that are often voiced. Mix in the needs of second language learners and the topic of literacy becomes even more challenging. Regardless of their position, theorists agree that reading is a complicated process and that the objective of reading goes far beyond decoding, the

ability to read unknown words by using knowledge of letters, sounds, and patterns; comprehension is the ultimate goal (Gibbons, 1991, 2001). The significance of parental involvement in the learning process has never been in question. Parents are often described as their children's first teachers (Morrow, 1995) and children whose parents possess critical literacy skills and experiences that align with the classroom enter school with a distinct advantage (Lareau, 2000). It is those children who come from non-mainstream families, families who struggle with poverty and language, who often fail to find relevancy in school and who are at risk for failure. In her influential study of the impact of minority parents on their children's education, Delgado-Gaitan (1990) writes,

> The challenge for educators to prepare minority students for successful participation in the school system is dependent upon the ability of the schools to incorporate the parents and the culture of the home as an integral part of the school institution. (p. 1)

For this reason, it is crucial to deepen our understanding of a family's literacy experiences while exploring how participating in an intergenerational family literacy program assists parents to develop skills and strategies that not only support their children's academic achievement but also influences their involvement in their children's school community.

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Literacy Instruction: Shifting Perspectives

Over the past several decades, the definition of literacy and reading instruction as it relates to school has changed and evolved. In the 1950s and 60s, controlled-vocabulary basal series grounded in behaviorist, teacher-centered theories dominated the reading instruction landscape. Teachers provided direct instruction and administered tests to motivate and measure students' learning. In the 1970s, literacy was defined by students' ability to complete word and sentence-level recognition tasks (Au & Raphael, 2000) and the emphasis was on skills mastery (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2000; Au & Raphael, 2000). There was no emphasis on comprehension or interpretation, the assumption was comprehension and interpretation would follow accurate decoding and social context need not be considered. By the 1990s, literacy was redefined as an interactive process with a shift towards implementing literature-based instruction and process writing; the importance of comprehension skills was recognized and was stressed (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2000; Au & Raphael, 2000). Students took an interactive role in the classroom and created meaning as they participated in literacy activities (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995). Basal series continued to be in demand but had become one part, not the sum total of a reading program (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2000). As we enter the twenty-first century, it seems prudent to once again examine literacy demands and recognize the changing face of the classroom in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, and ideology (Au & Raphael, 2000; Street, 1995) and admit that it is no longer enough to have the ability to read, write, and comprehend in a single context such as to succeed

academically or gain employment; rather, students must be taught critical literacies that they will use to decode, assess, interrogate, and manipulate a wide variety of communication media (Allington, 2000; Cunningham, Many, Carver, Gunderson, & Mosenthal, 2000; Gee, 2007). Au and Raphael (2000) quote Freire and Macedo when they suggest that literacy processes are shaped by the social and political world of learners and that learners interpret text based on their background, personal beliefs, and languages. Given these circumstances, it seems even more important to accept no excuses and support learners to develop the skills needed to engage fully in a wide variety of literacy activities (Gee, 1989, 2007).

## The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The face of reading instruction met wide-sweeping changes in January 2002 with the signing of legislation that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; this act is commonly cited as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law, 107-110). NCLB seeks to improve elementary and secondary schools while ensuring that children do not become trapped in low-performing schools that are mired in failure. To that end, the intent of NCLB is to "improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged" (Public Law 107-110, Title I, Section 101, p. 15). The Statement of Purpose reads, "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (p. 15). NCLB proposes to meet these goals by:

1) Ensuring that teacher-preparation programs, curriculum, instructional materials, and assessments are aligned to rigorous State standards;

2) Meeting the needs of low-achieving children (limited English proficient, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected children, and children in need of reading assistance);
3) Closing the achievement gap between children who traditionally perform at high and low levels;
4) Holding local and State governments accountable for identifying and improving low-performing schools;
5) Distributing resources to schools most in need;
6) Using State assessments to ensure that students are meeting tough State standards;
7) Providing teachers and schools with flexibility in order to make sound educational decisions for students;
8) Providing children with additional services to increase and improve instructional time;
9) Ensuring that children have access to rigorous academic content delivered by highly-qualified teachers who use scientifically-based instructional strategies;
10) Providing professional development to improve teachers' instructional practices;
11) Organizing these various components (instruction, teacher-training, materials, assessment) to maximize the intent of reform;
12) Finding ways to allow parents to have access to and participate in the decision-making process involved in their children's education. (Public Law 107-110).

Conceived in good intentions and funding and accountability issues notwithstanding, the law has received some positive feedback. Implicit in its language is the notion that all children must be supported in the area of literacy development. This is accomplished through the implementation of instruction and curriculum that is grounded in scientific research. Additionally, the law includes language that holds children who are traditionally low-performers to the same standards as high-performing children. Finally, the law specifically calls for creating ways to encourage, promote, and support parental involvement. The criticisms, however, are extensive. First and foremost, though there is language and funding in the act that guarantees that the needs of limited English-proficient children are met, bilingual programs are not addressed. The outcome, if not the intent of the law, limits children's access to their first language and thus restricts them from transferring skills to their second language (Cummins, 1994; Forrest, 2004). Of equal importance is NCLB's Reading First program and the promotion of phonics taught systematically (i.e., in a specific sequential order) within the structure of a scientifically-based reading program. In fact, Reading First views these scripted programs geared toward whole-class instruction more favorably than non-scripted phonics programs coupled with the use of high-quality children's literature (Cummins, 2007). Cummins (2007) cites McCarty & Romero-Little when he writes that the end result is that students attending NCLB's Reading First schools spend more time in skills-related activities and are less likely to read widely or to be engaged in inquiry-based learning. The results are disastrous. Students become disenchanted and fail to acquire academic vocabulary or develop comprehension strategies that support higher-level thinking (Cummins, 2007).

Of equal importance are criticisms in the arena of parental involvement. There are provisions in the law that award parents substantial control over their children's educational choices. These include transferring from low-performing to high-performing schools. In truth, however, it can be difficult to gain access to out-of-district schools and parents would be less likely to seek other school choices if greater opportunities for parental involvement existed at their children's neighborhood school. It stands to reason that parents who have a consequential voice in the design of curriculum and school programs feel connected and empowered; they become stakeholders and are therefore more likely to remain at low-performing neighborhood schools (Forrest, 2004).

*NCLB and Reading Instruction*

When President Bush signed the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (NCLB), he suggested that through the implementation of scientifically-based, verified methods of reading instruction, all children would be reading by the third grade. Though admirable, there is disapproval surrounding this goal in that the President proposes reading instruction that is grounded in "stepwise, direct, explicit, and systematic skills-emphasis teaching that proceeds from sounds, to letter-sound relationships (i.e. phonics), to word identification, to reading fluency—moving skill-by-skill steadily toward comprehension and eventually (so the model asserts) reaching it" (Coles, 2003, p. 2). Textbook companies have heeded the call and have developed systematic, scientifically-based reading programs. In this arena, teachers are not seen as professionals; rather they are middle-managers. Their task is not to assess the needs of their students but to follow a teacher's manual and deliver preplanned lessons intended to layer skill upon skill (Coles, 2003). Add in the unrealistic demands made upon students

with disabilities and second language learners and it is clear to see that NCLB falls short of ensuring success for the needs of vulnerable students. And ultimately, it seems clear that these reading programs that are firmly entrenched in a skill-perspective will find the goal of comprehension to be elusive.

## The Significance of Reading

Strong reading abilities are crucial for academic success. Children who are exposed to print at a young age develop the cognitive processes and knowledge of language structures that aid reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Goodman, 1986) and children who are strong readers acquire significantly more general knowledge and have a much larger vocabulary than struggling readers (Allington, 2000; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Sénéchal, et al., 1998). Vocabulary development is a crucial component of reading engagement; vocabulary development aids comprehension and increased comprehension allows children to make meaningful connections to text that will lead them to develop a lifelong habit of reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). In fact, children who enjoy early success with reading and include reading in their daily activities come in contact with an astonishing number of words by the time they reach mid-school. It is estimated that these enthusiastic readers have been exposed to over ten million words; struggling mid-schoolers may have only been exposed to one tenth of that amount (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Stanovich, 1986). The ramifications for these struggling readers are dismal; they acquire negative attitudes about reading and fall into an academic gridlock and are not likely to catch up to their more literate peers (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Stanovich (1986) coined the term, *Matthew effect*, to describe readers whose early achievements pave the way for future success. Stanovich writes,

> ...children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better. Children with inadequate vocabularies—who read slowly and without enjoyment—read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability. (p. 381)

The Matthew effect is grounded in the concept that children who have successful early educational experiences continue to develop literacy skills that are recognized and honored in the classroom. In fact, in addition to avid reading, these children may also structure their environment to ensure success. For example, they may choose friends who are also good readers, skip video games, and ask for books as gifts (Stanovich, 1986). Furthermore, they may have parents who are in synch with their interests and who interact with them around reading activities; the positive recognition that these children receive is a powerful motivator which in turn fuels further skill development. Children who struggle with reading will structure a different personal environment; they will avoid what they perceive to be an uncomfortable task and will receive less positive recognition; they are not likely to choose reading as a leisure activity (Stanovich, 1986).

It is interesting to note that the majority of children learn to read without difficulty but there is a relationship between the attitudes and skills that children bring to school and their future academic performance (Allington, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Lareau, 2000; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). Children who have not developed the skills, knowledge, and attitudes early on will undoubtedly fail to catch up to their more experienced peers and may require remediation to combat inadequate development of reading skills (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2000). It is important to remember, however,

that while there is no clear boundary between pre-reading and reading or emergent literacy and literacy, it is agreed that the contemporary viewpoint of literacy acquisition begins in early childhood, much sooner than when children first enter the classroom and that home literacy environment plays a crucial role (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995).

## Family Literacy

The term, *family literacy*, was virtually unknown until a variety of programs appeared in the 1960s and 1970s that projected children's literacy skills against the backdrop of their home environment. In these last forty years, programs have appeared whose framers proclaim that the outcomes of these programs center on the improvement of children's literacy learning through the fostering of literacy skills in their parents and caregivers (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998). The majority of these intergenerational programs were grounded in the concept that parents' literacy levels were deficient and that these parents, without educational interventions, were not capable of preparing their children for rigorous employment demands as well as participating fully in political and civic affairs (Ponzetti & Bodine, 1993). Ponzetti and Bodine write, "The relationship between parents' literacy level and their children's emergent literacy is fundamental to family literacy because illiterate parents are limited in their ability to encourage and assist their children with activities requiring basic skills, (i.e., reading)" (p. 107). To that end, these programs that are grounded in the deficit view of parents' literacy practices traditionally share components comprised of adult education, early childhood education, and parent education. All three components are vital to the success of the program; without them the family unit would not be served nor would literacy activities be

applicable to parents' and children's lives (Ponzetti & Bodine, 1993). Though these programs continue to exist in design (Head Start and Even Start are representative models), there is overwhelming agreement that the voices of the participants must be present to assure the overall success of the program (Neuman et al., 1998) and these discussions have resulted in a broader definition of family literacy.

## Project Head Start

Project Head Start is one of the oldest programs that have its roots in the early concept of family literacy. In the early 1960s, the Federal Government convened a team of child development experts (early childhood education was a relatively new field) and directed them to draft a plan to help communities "meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., ¶1). The panel's recommendations became the design for Project Head Start, an early intervention program intended to improve the cognitive and social skills and the health of disadvantaged children by providing them with preschool experiences, health care, and nutritious meals (Aughinbaugh, 2001); the initial program was launched in the summer of 1965 and provided several hours of services to approximately 500,000 children (Kassebaum, 1994). The program's goals was to "address physical health, developmental, social, educational, and emotional needs of low-income children and to increase the capacity of the families to care for their children, through empowerment and supportive services" (Kassebaum, 1994, p. 123). From its inception over forty years ago, Project Head Start, perhaps the largest of family literacy programs, has served over 13,000,000 children and has grown into a well-established program that serves all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Territories; participants in the program

continue to be low-income families, migrant families, and American Indians (Kassebaum, 1994). The program, though supported by the Federal Government, is locally controlled and its comprehensive services are child-centered and family-focused. Because Head Start is administered by community-based non-profit organizations and school systems, the program has the potential to meet and exceed its goals and there are strict performance and accountability measures to ensure compliance (Kassebaum, 1994). Those programs that are deemed ineffective by rigorous audits do not continue to receive Head Start funds from the federal government.

Most Head Start programs are judged to be effective and proponents argue that the goals of the program are as timely in the 21st century as they were in the 1960s. In fact, it can be argued that social and economic conditions have worsened since the program's inception. The American economy has changed and the gap between rich and poor is wider than ever before in the history of the United States (Takanishi & DeLeon, 1994). There are critics, however, who argue that the evidence supporting Head Start is not clear (Aughinbaugh, 2001) and that the programs do little to prepare children and families for the rigors of school. Moreover, critics argue that any gains children do make quickly fade away as they progress through the grades and enter adolescence, an especially difficult time for all children (Aughinbaugh, 2001; Zigler & Styfco, 1994). It seems important to suggest, however, that in spite of criticisms, Head Start was influential in shifting the focus from the individual child to the family unit. Moreover, the program paved the way for the inception of a variety of family literacy programs, some of which would respond to the unique needs of the participants and the communities in which they live.

## Even Start Family Literacy Program

As with Project Head Start, the Even Start Family Literacy Program is a federally-funded program that is based on the assertion that as parents' literacy skills increase, literacy skills will transfer to their children. Even Start programs are required to provide three foundational services to families: Adult education, early childhood education, and parenting education (Tadros, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Nationally, Even Start parents participate on the average of forty-nine hours and it can be difficult to understand changes that are of a result of such short-lived interventions. Tadros notes, however, that many parents who participate in the Even Start program have had negative educational experiences, therefore, even limited participation in the program often results in measurable changes in the quality of families' literacy lives and that these changes go far in supporting the literacy development of children.

## College of Education Family Literacy Program

Project Head Start and the Even Start Family Literacy Programs are firmly grounded in the deficit perspective in that both programs conceptualize parents in terms of skills that they are not imparting to their children. There are programs, however, that view parents as capable, recognize that all parents want their children to do well in school, and posit that all families possess abilities and skills to reach that goal. The College of Education Family Literacy Program is one such program. Grounded in sociocultural theory and with an understanding of the community which it serves, the Family Literacy Program views families as active participants, capable of shaping content through engagement and resistance. In fact, this position is not new. Beginning in the

1980s, there were researchers that used the term, *family literacy*, to examine the rich and varied uses of literacy within home and community (Taylor, 1983).

## Family Literacy Defined

Denny Taylor coined the term *family literacy* to refer to the rich and varied uses of literacy within home and communities (Hutchinson, 2000). Currently, family literacy is a broad term that encompasses three different perspectives (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Nistler & Maiers, 1999). In the first sense, family literacy is a term that is used to describe a set of programs designed to strengthen the literacy skills of parents and their children (e.g., Even Start). The term is also used to describe a set of interventions, such as library-sponsored reading programs, associated with literacy development in young children. And finally, the third usage of family literacy refers to a family's personal style of literacy, a usage that has gained importance in light of ethnographic studies that have illuminated socially appropriate literacy practices among different communities (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). These ethnographic studies have offered compelling evidence that literacy involves so much more than the ability to read and write (Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdés, 1996).

## Family Literacy Programs

Researchers have suggested that there is a relationship between children's poor performance in school and parental ethnicity, income, and education. Paratore (2001) writes that minority children who participate in the National School Lunch Program and who do not discuss their schoolwork with their parents tend to perform lower on academic assessments than their middle-class, mainstream peers. The relationship between ethnicity, low socio-economic status, and performance in school has caused

researchers to look to literacy programs as a way to support adults and their children as they develop literacy skills. By supporting the development of adult literacy and early childhood literacy and fostering parenting skills, family literacy programs strive to break the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy and "create educational and economic opportunity for the most at-risk children and parents" (National Center for Family Literacy, n.d., ¶ 1). Duch (2005) writes that program components typically center on early childhood education (intervention through preschool programs) and adult literacy education (welfare-to-work programs). Though the specific goals of family literacy programs vary, all programs focus on developing parents' literacy skills while helping parents to increase their involvement in their children's educational experiences (NW Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.). Regardless of the focus, the ultimate goal of family literacy programs is to foster positive parent-child interactions that will ultimately prepare children for social and academic success in school (Caspe, 2003; Morrow & Paratore, 1993).

There are family literacy programs that share common goals but reach those goals through decidedly unique methods; these programs typically look beyond the child and address the entire family unit but they are different in that they are situated within the context of the community (Paratore, 2001). These programs, often termed *two-generation programs*, are structured to foster the development of children's early literacy while intentionally avoiding the deficit model or notions of *semilingualism*[2]; they specifically build on the strengths that parents bring to the program and they intentionally resist replacing existing family's literacies with literacies of the dominant culture. The goals of

[2] *Semilingualism* is a term that describes children whose first language acquisition is interrupted; since second language acquisition relies heavily on the structures of the first language, these children do not achieve fluency in either language. The idea of semilingualism has been harshly criticized in that it adds to the deficit view of minority children (MacSwan, 2000).

two-generation family literacy programs are to support parents as they build literacy skills and to promote literacy development and academic success in their children (Paratore, 2001). Representative examples (there are many) of two-generation family literacy program are the Intergenerational Literacy Project and Parents as Teachers.

## The Intergenerational Literacy Project

The Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP) is a family literacy program that avoids the deficit model and is grounded in a sociocultural perspective. ILP was founded in 1989 in Boston, Massachusetts on the premise "that as parents improve their own literacy, the skills and knowledge they acquire will promote literacy learning among their children" (Paratore, 2001, p.19). The ILP hoped to achieve three goals, 1) to improve parents' English literacy, 2) to support the literacy development and academic success of their children, and 3) to add to the body of knowledge on the effectiveness of the intergenerational approach to literacy (Paratore, 2001). The program was influenced by the work of Luis Moll, his peers and the concept of *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and serves mostly immigrant families who are trying to improve their English literacy skills and are interested in supporting their children in school (Paratore, 2001). In short, ILP has designed a family literacy program that builds on parents' experiences and skills and seeks to teach academic literacy that is grounded in families' home literacy experiences.

ILP's literacy program is available to parents of preschool and school-aged children. It is unique in that no direct instruction is provided to children; rather, the project is based on the principle that as parents develop their own literacy through authentic activities, the skills and knowledge they gain will promote literacy learning

among their children (Paratore, 1995, 2001). Within this framework, parents spend about half of their time talking about “materials and strategies for supporting their children’s literacy learning” (Paratore, 2001, p. 46) and the other half improving their own skills. Parents improve their personal literacy skills through a variety of activities; they read and respond to an assortment of materials of their own choosing (via literacy logs) and they read children’s books in English as well as other languages and learn strategies for using these stories with their own children. They also spend time in small groups talking about ways they use literacy in their own lives. Finally, parents share their children’s artwork and writing; they discuss these artifacts as literacy events and contemplate the importance of these artifacts in the lives of their children (Paratore, 1995, 2001).

While parents are attending literacy classes, their children are provided child-care (Paratore, 2001). The child-care center is stocked with early childhood learning materials including “big books and companion little books, cloth and cardboard books for toddlers, writing materials and utensils, manipulative letters and story cards and educational games” (Paratore, 2001, p. 49). The environment is organized in learning centers and children have the freedom to explore; they do, however, come together daily for read-alouds and reader-response activities. Activities are purposefully flexible to allow for a range of interests and ages (Paratore, 2001).

Program results reported on ILP’s website are impressive. The ILP website reports that the attrition rate for the Intergenerational Literacy Project was 13% during 2005-06 as compared to the national average of 60% for typical adult education classes. Moreover, 72% of families regularly participated in the program, which is substantially higher than the 50% attendance rate for adult education programs (Intergenerational

Literacy Program, n.d.). It is reasonable to suggest that high attendance and low attrition rates translates to parents spending more high-quality time developing their personal literacy and ultimately supporting literacy development in their children. The Intergenerational Literacy Project has been deemed successful because the components of the program were "responsive to the diverse and often complex needs of parents and other caregivers, children, and schools…and provided a context where all community members can learn from one another" (Paratore, 1995, p. 52). The ILP has been in existence for almost twenty years; the project has endured because the goals of the program are embedded in an arena of ongoing discourse that is "honest and responsive to the needs of all participants" (Paratore, 2001, p. 112).

## Parents as Teachers

Parents as Teachers (PAT), a family literacy program, began in the 1970s in Missouri as a way to promote learning-readiness in kindergarten children. The program "is based on beliefs that infants are born to learn and the parents play a critical role from the beginning of a child's life" (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herman, 2001, p. 444). The early-childhood program helps parents to understand their role in their children's academic development and was built on the premise that "family involvement in children's learning is a critical link in the child's development of academic skills, including reading and writing" (Parents as Teachers, n.d., ¶1). PAT volunteers conduct home visits and offer parent group-meetings, developmental screenings, and referrals to a variety of agencies. Moreover, PAT strives to offer services that recognize that all families have a culture that directs their behavior. Parents are recruited from hospitals, social service organizations, mental health programs, other early childhood programs, and faith-based organizations.

Once participating, parents are interviewed and surveyed regularly to assess their level of satisfaction. Since its inception, PAT has thrived and has subsequently expanded to all fifty states. The program rarely exists in isolation and is most frequently embedded into a pre-existing structure such as Title I or Head Start (Parents as Teachers, n.d.). It is interesting to note, however, that in program evaluations, small positive effects were noted in parent knowledge and attitudes and no effect was noted in child health or development (Wasik, et al., 2001).

## Family Literacy Interventions

Family literacy interventions do not have the wide scope of services offered by large, well-funded programs; they are generally managed by libraries and businesses in the community. An example of a family literacy intervention program is Reach Out and Read (ROR). ROR is a non-profit literacy organization that encourages early literacy by bringing books and children together in the pediatrician's waiting and exam rooms (Reach Out and Read, n.d.). The rationale behind the program is that mothers and young children spend considerable time waiting to see the pediatrician and is based on research "that shows a connection between the frequency of sharing books with babies, toddlers, and young children and enhanced language development" (Reach Out and Read, n.d., ¶ 2). Since ROR's inception in 1989, pediatricians in 2500 health care facilities have distributed books to parents and children living in poverty.

The American Library Association (ALA) coordinates possibly the best known family literacy intervention program. The American Library Association has helped hundred of libraries all over the United States get books into the hands of parents and their children. Through school incentives and summer reading programs, the ALA offers

books and tutors to help parents build their reading skills while they learn how to make reading an enjoyable family activity (American Library Association, n.d.).

## Criticisms of Family Literacy Programs

Despite the best of intentions, several points have been identified that suggest that family literacy programs and interventions are unintentionally damaging the very families they attempt to help (Valdés, 1996). Critics argue that family literacy programs, despite their claims of cultural relevancy, often adopt the stance that minority and low-income families are deficient in knowledge and literacy practices and therefore do not possess the required skills to be good parents (Auerbach, 1989, 2003). This position is grounded in the deficit model and is the veiled, underlying theme of many family literacy programs. For example, the stated objective of the National Center for Family Literacy is to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and illiteracy through a variety of parent and child interventions (National Center for Family Literacy, n.d.). Their assumption is that some families are imperfect and are in need of fixing (Burke & Burke, 2005; Caspe, 2003; Valdés, 1996). Family literacy programs attempt to introduce literacy practices (e.g., journaling or story-book reading) into the home, regardless of the family's current literacy practices or cultural relevancy (Moll, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Regardless of programs' best of intentions, the thrust is towards conformity and is reflective of the dominant or mainstream culture. Instead of focusing on a family's strengths, family literacy programs often begin with a deficit stance; they make the assumption that poor literacy achievement is due to deficiencies in the home environment. Family literacy programs that take this position strive to change or improve rather than nourish a family's literacy practices (Caspe, 2003).

The status of women is another issue that is discussed by critics of family literacy programs. Family literacy programs often make the assumption that fathers are absent and that mothers are hampered by the role they play in child-rearing and are ultimately cautious to question authority. Hutchinson (2000) examines this position of mothers in family literacy programs and writes,

> Family literacy programs, when primarily designed to train parents as teacher aids and support and enhance child literacy…can be viewed as programs of domestication, in their confinement of participants to a sphere where labor is voluntary, autonomy is minimal and rewards are…located in the altruistic domain of good mothering. (p. 3)

It follows, therefore, that family literacy programs should seek to empower mothers to question the role of authority and recognize that personal family literacy experiences are a powerful constructor of knowledge in the lives of their children.

Another important issue that critics raise is that family literacy programs often lack a social constructivist perspective, that the idea that family and literacy are separated from their social and political contexts (Caspe, 2003). Paulo Freire illustrated that literacy is more than a set of neutral objectives and skills and should not be aimed at acquiring the dominant language. Freire and Macedo (1987) suggest that for literacy to become meaningful it must be situated in the lives of people and in the way they make sense of the world. Freire and co-author Macedo (1987) write,

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world…this movement from the word to the world is always present, even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world…we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing or rewriting it…of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. (p. 35)

The word in this case includes dialogue as part of the pedagogical process and developing program content that centers on as well as honors participants' lived experiences.

Researchers who are firmly planted in a sociocultural perspective have raised their voices in concern over family literacy programs. For example, Guadalupe Valdés (1996) examines family literacy programs and the role of empowerment from a Freirian perspective. She posits that if family literacy programs were truly interested in empowering parents, these programs would "…bring to participants' awareness the realities of the structural inequalities in the society in which they live…involve them in a dialogue that would result in their becoming conscious of themselves as members of an oppressed class" (Valdés, 1996, p. 194). Though she believes these programs to be well-intentioned, Valdés suggests that encouraging parents to become involved in their children's education will do little to disrupt the cycle of poverty and low academic achievement; schools do not have the all-encompassing power to right social inequities nor are they the only institution that affects educational outcomes.

Like Valdés, Denny Taylor (1997) also cautions that education and literacy skills are not the panacea against poverty. Taylor writes,

> The premise that a lack of facility with literacy is causally related not only to poverty, but also to underemployment, low educational achievement, crime, the breakdown of the family, and the decline of moral standards is the result of faulty reasoning that enables us to abdicate responsibility and blame the family for these societal problems. (p. 3)

Simply put, Taylor's (1997) position is that it is a lack of support, politically and economically, that puts children at risk, not their parents seemingly disinterest in their literacy development. Despite these criticisms, however, family literacy programs

continue to be seen as powerful devices for developing literacy while moving families towards self-sufficiency.

## Family Contributions to Literacy Acquisition

Family literacy programs often adopt the pejorative stance that minority students exist in literacy-impoverished homes where education is neither honored nor understood. The programs often suggest that low-income homes are devoid of reading materials and since parents do not read to their children, they are disinterested and therefore fail to provide satisfactory literacy models (Auerbach, 1995). Researchers who examine literacy embedded in home contexts, however, have found this perception to be far from the truth (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Handel, 1999; Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdés, 1996).

### Heath's Contributions

Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) contribution to the concept of literacy development within dissimilar cultural groups is profound. Her seminal study, one of the earliest works that researched how reading and writing are used, examined the rich literacy practices of three groups of children who lived in different circumstances. Two groups of children lived within a few miles of one another and their literacy practices were juxtaposed against the literacy practices of children who lived in the neighboring town. Though the literacy practices of the children in the two communities were decidedly different, there was an underlying current of similarity. Children from neither community engaged in literacy experiences that aligned with the classroom (Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Heath, 1983). After initial success, children from both communities spiraled towards failure and over time, settled back into their respective communities.

The school experiences of the children from these two communities stand in stark comparison to the experiences of the children from the neighboring town. Heath (1983) writes that the town's parents read to their children and provided them with an abundance of educational toys. But, Heath writes that townspeople also immersed their children in an atmosphere of repetitive, redundant, and internally consistent running narratives on items and events; they talked to their children and shared information on a variety of topics. Moreover, they connected items in one setting to items in another and once children entered school, they continued to place a high value on individual achievement. Most importantly, parents from the town understood that home and school were inextricably connected and they supported the connection by staying involved in their children's school experiences (Heath, 1983).

Over the course of the study, Heath notes that despite the fact that the children from Roadville and Trackton had numerous rich early literacy experiences, they often failed in school. Heath (1983) writes,

> Roadville and Trackton residents have a variety of literate traditions, and in each community these are interwoven in different ways with oral uses of language, ways of negotiating meaning, deciding on action, and achieving status…Neither community's ways with the written word prepared it for the school's ways. (pp. 234-5)

Heath suggests that children's failure in school was due to a disconnect or mismatch between home and school literacy practices, that the literacy habits of the children of Roadville and Trackton, their ways with words, did not fit the conventional idea of the school and the children, therefore, were doomed to fail (Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Heath, 1983).

## Taylor, Literacy, and Inner-City Families

Denny Taylor (1983) writes that she was profoundly interested in researching home reading and writing activities so that she could learn about "the many ways children growing up in a variety of settings initiate, absorb, and synthesize the cultural complexities of learning to read and write" (Preface, n.p.). Her inference in this statement is that families are inherently different and therefore use literacy in diverse ways. Taylor's beliefs that homes are rich literacy environments became the thrust behind her early study of how families use and make sense of literacy in their lives. Taylor (1983) began her influential study by locating six families; in each family, the parents reported that they had at least one child who was successfully learning to read and write. Taylor spent time with these families and observed the ways that literacy was constructed in their lives. She discovered that each family had unique literacy traditions and rituals that evolved over time and that these literacy traditions and rituals were visible in the daily routines of each family member (Taylor, 1983). The literacy traditions, however, were embedded in meaningful contexts (e.g., jotting notes on calendars, keeping lists, filing forms). It was this wide variety of literacy-embedded activities that produced successful readers. In fact, parents reported that they intentionally avoided practicing school-like literacy activities with their children; for these parents, school was an uncomfortable place and they had no desire to resurrect uncomfortable memories. Their children, however, were able to successfully bridge home and school literacy routines. They were able to construct meaningful experiences from the decontextualized rigors of the elementary classroom (Taylor 1981; 1983). Taylor notes, however, that while the

children in this study were successful in the classroom, many children struggle with less positive educational outcomes.

Taylor conducted an additional study with a colleague that confirmed the findings of this earlier study (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Once again, they studied children growing up in families whose literacy experiences did not align with schools, in this case, "Black children living in urban poverty who are perceived by their parents to be successfully learning to read and write" (p. xvii). The researchers employed a comparative framework inspired by Heath (1983) and collected data through observations that indicated that the adults in the families used literacy in a variety of ways; literacy was used to maintain social relationships, gain information, fill out forms required by subsistence, to further their education, and some adults even had time to read for personal enjoyment (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). What once again were lacking were literacy routines that reflected classroom practices. Their findings, however, suggest that it is a wide-variety of literacy practices, "the complex and involved societal contexts in which print gets written and read" rather than a narrow school-like sampling that supports literacy development (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988, p. 199).

## The Families of Las Fuentas

Heath, Taylor, and Dorsey-Gaines raised awareness and subsequent interest in the study of family's personal styles of literacy and paved the way for other ethnographic studies. Valdés' (1996) study of ten Mexican-origin families and their children described the experiences of immigrants against the backdrop of school failure. Valdés examined a variety of theories (language factors, cultural deficit/difference paradigm, theories of

reproduction, etc.) and noted that the issue of the students' failure was too complex to attribute to one single explanation. Valdés (1996), however, writes that

> In spite of the complexity of the problem of school failure for non-mainstream children, those concerned about its remediation have focused on attempting to change particular aspects of the institutional and instructional contexts in the hope that such changes will bring about increased school success. (p. 29)

Rather than explain school failure, those interested in changing institutional/instructional contexts tend to be practitioners and policymakers and are most often couched in the deficit-difference paradigm (Valdés, 1996) and have led to the implementation "of programs that offer narrow solutions to far broader problems (e.g., bilingual education programs, desegregation programs, Head Start) and that have been marginally successful" (p. 29-30). She stresses, however, that regardless of the assistance these programs offer, the assumption is made that the students and their families are somehow lacking and their deficits must be addressed in order for them to succeed in school (Valdés, 1996). And as the concept of parental involvement gains attention, it is yet another "attempt to find small solutions to what are extremely complex problems" (p. 31).

Valdés (1996) finds the concept of *parental involvement* to be concerning in that recommendations are often grounded in mainstream, middle-class family values and activities. To those researchers who posit that parents are their children's first teachers, Valdés suggests that story-book reading, playing games, and sharing hobbies are activities in which many immigrant parents simply do not participate. It has little to do with not wanting academic success for their children; rather, parents do not participate in these activities for a variety of reasons that run the gamut from not being able to provide

books to not knowing how to read to working late. Moreover, Valdés (1996) suggests that "most have little understanding about school deadlines or now to monitor their children's homework" (p. 33). To imply that these parents are uncaring or lacking ambition can be considered to be damaging to the very families that are being helped. To that end, Valdés (1996) takes the stance that, while parental involvement programs are constructed in concern, they are not "based on sound knowledge about the characteristics of the families with which it is concerned—will fail to take into account the impact of such programs on the families themselves" (p. 31). To fully illustrate her position, Valdés (1996) introduced ten families and through description and interpretation, suggested that intervention programs, regardless of how well-meaning their intent, would only serve to disrupt "stable, successful, and functioning households" (p. 40).

Valdés' ethnographic study is important because it serves as a reminder that it can be difficult for educators to understand that well-meaning interventions directed at culturally and linguistically-different parents and children are not enough to ensure academic success. And it is important to note that Valdés (1996) certainly does not suggest that interventions are unnecessary; she simply contends that the concept of success is relative and that solutions lay in a variety of resources, including allowing Mexican-origin populations "to become American at their own pace and in their own way" (p. 205).

## Issues of Parental Involvement

Though empirical data is marginally supportive, qualitative studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between parental involvement and children's academic achievement (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; Epstein & Saunders,

2000; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Lareau, 2000). In order to thoroughly understand how parents can impact their children's academic achievement, it seems sensible to try and define what is meant by *parental involvement*. Parental involvement, as a term, is steeped in imagery that revolves around homework help and story book reading. In fact, parental involvement, as a term to be defined, is too messy and complex to be relegated to one specific practice. Rather it is a social construct that includes a variety of parenting practices, attitudes, and behaviors that run the gamut from informal conversations between parents and their children about the school day (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992), parent attendance and involvement at school activities (Stevenson & Baker, 1987), to Epstein's (2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence and six types of parental involvement opportunities.

## Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Epstein (2001) developed the theory of overlapping spheres of influences to explain "the effects of families, schools, and communities on students' learning and development" (p. 74). While early sociocultural theories suggested that organizations operate most efficiently when they remain independent of each other, educators are more effective when they work in partnership with families and communities. Areas of overlap constitute fluid boundaries between home, school, and community and place the child at the center of these intersections. The extent of the overlap, whether the spheres are pulled together or nudged apart, is influenced by culture, background, knowledge, and experiences of families as well as educators and community members. It is interesting to note that when educators (and school administrators) thoroughly understand how these spheres overlap, care is taken to construct more "family-like schools" (p. 80). These

schools recognize children as individuals and reinforce activities that build students' self-confidence and "feelings of success" (p. 80). They embrace all children, not just those whose experiences mirror the culture of the school. Conversely, a school-like family recognizes children's dual identity (child and student), reinforces the importance of education, and monitors homework and other school-related activities (Epstein, 2001). School-like families seek out information; they understand the crucial role that they play in supporting their children's education. Problems can occur, however, when teachers and parents do not have a clear understanding of each other's culture or worse yet, when entities feel like they must give something up in order to fully participate.

In practice, therefore, schools unwittingly build barriers and some families are unable to fully participate in their children's education. Since socioeconomic status and lack of parental involvement often goes hand-in-hand, Title I schools are required to implement a parental involvement framework. This framework, grounded in Epstein's theory, outlines six types of involvement. The framework is not meant to be static; rather, schools are encouraged to use the framework as a guide to develop practices that meet the unique needs of its students and families (Epstein, 2001).

## Epstein's Framework for Parental Involvement

Epstein (2001) has identified six major types of parental involvement that range from effective communication to community collaboration. The framework is intended to guide educators in the design of individual family/school partnership programs while providing a method for evaluation. The framework describes programs as well as sample practices, potential challenges, and subsequent redefinitions. For example, the first type of parental involvement "helps all families establish home environment to support

children as students" (p. 409). This might be achieved by offering home visits, parenting workshops, or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) classes. Anticipated challenges are how to provide the information to all families (not just families who can attend information meetings), how to ground the information in culturally relevant practices, and how to make sure the information is clearly linked to children's success in school. Redefinitions examine and expand commonly used educational jargon to best fit the needs of the community. Attending a *workshop* may feel intimidating unless parents understand that this is simply a way to make information on a specific topic available (Epstein, 2001). The strength of Epstein's typology is that educators have the ability to constantly reflect and adjust their practices accordingly. This, however, implies that educator's hold the underlying philosophical stance that the inclusion of families is beneficial; poorly designed involvement opportunities will continue to construct barriers and exclude families.

*Successful parental involvement programs*

Epstein (2001) has developed criteria to help educators evaluate the successfulness of their parental involvement program. Criteria centers on incremental progress (parental involvement should increase from year to year), curricular and instructional reform, and redefining staff development to include "working together with parents to develop, implement, evaluate, and continue to improve practices of partnership" (p. 421). The underlying thread that binds these criteria together is an atmosphere of caring for children and teaching with their best interests in mind. Epstein, though certainly the most well-known, is not the only architect of frameworks that address parental involvement.

## Involvement and Efficacy

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) introduced a framework that addresses the issue from the parents' point of view. Their position is that it is a commonly held belief that parents become involved in their children's education because involvement positively influences children's learning. There are children, however, who succeed in school even when parental/family involvement is absent. Therefore, their framework does not address whether or not parental involvement is beneficial (they posit that it is); rather, the framework addresses why parents choose to become involved, how involvement opportunities are chosen, and why involvement positively impacts student achievement. Primarily, these researchers posit that parents become involved in their children's education because "they have a sense of personal efficacy for helping their children succeed in school" (p. 313). This personal sense of efficacy, parents' belief that they have the necessary skills and knowledge is profound because "it enables the parent to act in relation to his or her child's schooling and to persist in the face of difficulties that may emerge…" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, p. 314).

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) specifically address Epstein and the six types of parental involvement when they seek to answer how parents choose involvement opportunities. Epstein's (2001) framework suggests that if parental involvement opportunities are constructed, parents will participate. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, however, suggest that involvement activities are influenced by "parents' self-perceived skill and knowledge; the mix of employment and other family demands experienced by the parent; and specific invitations, demands, and opportunities presented by the child and the child's school" (p. 317). To that end, parents will assist when they believe they

can be successful and these feelings of success will fuel parents as they seek to find time in their schedules. Finally, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) suggest that children themselves heavily influence parents' level of involvement. Children who request homework help or recruit their parents for a school activity are more apt to have parents who participate in the wider school community.

The third point that Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) address is exactly why parental involvement has a positive effect on children's education. They write that the primary mechanisms are modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction. Parents, when they help their children, relay the important message that school-related behaviors and activities are meaningful and worthwhile. As with modeling, reinforcement positively affects children's education; reinforcements "help elicit and maintain child behaviors central to school success" (p. 320) and help to ensure that students will behave appropriately (i.e., demonstrate school-like behaviors). Finally, children whose parents engage in direct instruction activities are more likely to make acceptable progress in school. Though direct instruction can take two forms, close-ended or open-ended, either form enhances cognitive growth. It is interesting to note, however, that instruction on its own does little to effect educational outcomes; parental instruction is only effective when combined with modeling and reinforcement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). And more importantly, the authors write that there are tempering variables. For example, activities and strategies are more likely to be effective if they are developmentally appropriate and in alignment with the school's expectations.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) model and Epstein's (2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence help to illustrate the chaotic and jumbled view of

parental involvement. In truth, schools and parents must have a shared view, a meeting of the minds, for involvement activities to be effective and both hold responsibilities for the academic success of children. Both models are workable in that they suggest specific points of entry into the process of parental involvement and the work of advocating for parents as well as schools.

## Parental Involvement, Advocacy, and Minority Parents

Issues of advocacy in education have tended to revolve around topics involving special education (Cortiella, 2004; Gavin-Evans, Munn, Malone, & Ervin, 2003; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; LaRocco & Bruns, 2005). There is, however, a growing body of school and community-based research that seeks to empower minority parents, parents who are traditionally under-represented in their school's decision-making process, by increasing their knowledge of school culture with the intent of supporting their full participation in their child's education (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Valdés, 1996). In order to structure activities that invite participation, however, it is necessary to understand the values and goals that parents hold for their children (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). When questioned, minority parents without fail expressed the highest of hopes for their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Taylor, 1997; Valdés, 1996). They want their children to attend school and are highly interested in collaborating with schools to ensure the academic and social success of their children. Minority parents, however, often have limited experience with school culture; to minority parents, collaboration implies laying a strong foundation at home and assuming that the school will do the rest (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Valdés, 1996). The resulting disconnect, the non-participatory assumption made by classroom teachers, ensures that minority

parents remain marginalized and without intervention, will surely remain on the fringes of their children's school experiences.

*Issues of cultural capital*

Though Bourdieu (1977) does not explicitly address the notion of parental involvement, he does suggest that schools, by virtue of their design, draw on cultural resources traditionally shared by students of higher socioeconomic levels. Children from middle class families enter school with a distinct advantage. Bourdieu (1977) writes,

> The educational system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes…in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture and that the mode of inculcation to which it has recourse is less removed from the mode of inculcation practiced by the family. (p. 493)

Simply stated, children from middle class families, what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the *dominant culture*, are already familiar with school curriculum, linguistic practices, and authority patterns before they set foot in the classroom. Conversely, students from lower socioeconomic levels (i.e., lower social class) enter school without the necessary cultural capital and have parents who traditionally lack the skills and confidence necessary to assist their children in school. Without systemic intervention, Bourdieu suggests that these parents essentially turn over the education of their children to an educational system charged with maintaining "power relationships…between the classes" (p. 487).

*Cultural brokers*

Challenging these power relationships becomes a crucial component of educational success. To that end, Delgado-Gaitan (2001) writes that language and social movement "often necessitates a mediator between the familiar and the new" (p. 16). In schools, these mediators or cultural brokers are staff members who are committed to

building strong ties with parents. They provide translation services, oversee bilingual programs, and construct opportunities for minority parents to learn “how to work with the schools in an informed way and help their children in their schooling” (p. 21). These opportunities as described by Delgado-Gaitan (2001) take the form of parental involvement groups but they operate differently from commonly known parent-teacher/parental involvement organizations. These parental involvement groups are grounded in advocacy. Parents learn about relationships and the power of collective voices. They learn about the attributes of leadership and how to challenge existing school culture. Minority parents learn a secondary discourse (Gee, 1989) that supports them as they construct a social network that aids their ability to be a “recognized presence” (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, p. 51) in the school and larger community. The implication is that all families have strengths and can tap social networks (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) to secure positions of power in the school and larger community. The answer for how to best advocate for minority parents lies is an anecdote.

Delgado-Gaitan (2001) writes that early in her career, she had an opportunity to hear Paulo Freire speak. In an informal setting, he fielded questions and the entire room hung on his every word. One guest, however, was frustrated with Freire’s carefully worded answers. The guest shared that the people he worked with were poor, uneducated, and angry. He wondered how Freire’s notion of change would help them. Freire replied that they must put aside their anger, begin where they are, and operate from a position of hope rather than despair. Advocacy then is a tool of hope. Advocacy leads to empowerment, not through resistance but through “sharing, reflecting on, and learning from our stories” (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, p. 175). To that end, family literacy programs,

grounded in a critical and sociocultural perspective and responsive to the needs of an ever-changing community, have the potential to move families toward empowerment and ensure the academic success of their children. Simply put, family literacy programs that build on families' strengths have the enormous potential to create meaningful linkages (Lareau, 2000), linkages that have the potential to solidify worthwhile exchanges between schools and families.

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## Rationale for Case Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the literacy experiences of the Latino families who participated in the College of Education Family Literacy Program, learn about the strategies they used to develop their personal literacy skills, and to understand how participation in the Family Literacy Program impacted parents' involvement in the larger school community. I was interested in studying this family literacy program specifically because it was not connected with a school district; rather, it was a community-based program that was designed by literacy professors at the state's flagship university. Since there was no connection to the school district (i.e., not under the auspices of Title I or Even Start), the framers of the program had considerable latitude in constructing a program that would best fit the needs of the participants.

In order to collect data and answer the research questions, I employed case study methodology, an appropriate research design in that I was interested in process and in examining a problem, context, issues, and lessons learned within a bounded system (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) writes, "A qualitative case

study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). It is a research design that is used to deeply understand "the situation of meaning for those involved" (p. 19) and is used specifically when the researcher is interested in the process as well as the outcome. Merriam writes that a case study is intended to provide an intensive description of a single unit or bounded system. The case then, is a group of families who were participating in an after-school, intergenerational family literacy program. Though these families were part of a larger community, families whose children attend a single elementary school, I only examined the literacy experiences of the families who attended the after-school program. This examination resulted in "rich, thick description" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29) of the literacy experiences of the Latino families who participated in the Family Literacy Program.

## Context of Study

I conducted this case study with parents and children who lived in an historic neighborhood in a large urban city in the southwestern part of the United States. The Barelas neighborhood was established in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1600s. Originally consisting of swamplands near the river, the area was home to a large *estancia* (ranch) and eventually became an important crossroads for *El Camino Real*, the trade route that connected Santa Fé with Mexico City. The arrival of the railroad in the 1800s stimulated urban development and by the 1900s, Barelas had grown from a small settlement to a booming economic community. By the mid-1900s, however, the railroad industry was declining and economic development was moving further north up the river. Because of disappearing job opportunities, Barelas was becoming an inner-city neighborhood

plagued by crime and violence. In the late 1980s, the Barelas neighborhood enjoyed a renewed sense of community with the building of the National Hispanic Cultural Center. The National Hispanic Cultural Center, home to the city's Hispano Chamber of Commerce, encouraged neighborhood restoration projects that have helped the Barelas neighborhood to again become a thriving community (New Mexico History Resource Framework, n.d.)

*River View Elementary School*

In the heart of the neighborhood is River View Elementary School. River View is a dual language, Title I school that serves approximately 450 students in grades K through 5. The school has been a cornerstone of the community since it was built in the mid 1900s and during the course of the study, the school's students reflected the ethnicity of the surrounding community; 95% of the students were Hispanic (of Mexican descent) and the remaining 5% were a combination of Anglo, African American, Native American, and Asian students. Almost without exception, the parents at River View struggled economically; 98.9% of the students were enrolled in the National School Lunch Program. In spite of economic hardships, parents were considered to be an important part of the River View school community and to ensure that their needs were being met, the staff regularly surveyed parents and developed programs to meet their unique needs. There was a parent-teacher organization as well as a full-time parent coordinator who organized General Equivalency Diploma (GED) classes, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) classes, nutrition classes, and a variety of job-training classes. These classes were well-attended and were

offered at no charge to the parent community (Principal, personal conversation, March 21, 2007).

The staff at River View worked equally hard to support their students. Instruction within the classroom was rigorous and relevant and the students developed skills and learned content that supported them as they participated in high-stakes standardized testing. Though students struggled with a variety of issues such as poverty and absenteeism, they performed well on some forms of district-mandated testing. Students took part up to four times a year in Assess to Learn (A2L) and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and they participated in the state's Standards-Based Assessment (SBA) every spring. Though not always proficient in the A2L or DRA, the school has consistently met adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the SBA (Principal, personal conversation, March 21, 2007).

## Positionality

My love affair with literacy began long before 1990 when I officially became a classroom teacher. The youngest child of four, I had seen the inside of a classroom many times before I took my seat in first grade. My early literacy experiences, reading with my mother and frequent trips to the public library, lay the foundation for a literate identity (Gee, 2001) and helped to ensure that I would thrive in school. These early literacy experiences constituted life as I knew it, and therefore, I never stopped to consider that I entered school with a sophisticated support system (Bruner, 1986) that assured my success in school. Since I replicated my early literacy experiences with my own two children, it should come as no surprise that I failed to predict that I might be teaching children whose literacy experiences were substantially different than my own.

Eager to work, I accepted the first position that I was offered; I was a third-grade teacher at an elementary school that served a diverse but predominantly middle-class student population. The school's proximity to the university and a major thoroughfare assured an abundance of professors' children as well as pockets of children who lived in low-cost housing (e.g., apartments, motels, and shelters). These students, regardless of their families and home literacy experiences, were my students; it was my responsibility as a teacher to find a way to meet their academic needs. I spent eleven years as a classroom teacher, slowing coming to the realization that I was inadequately prepared to deal with the diversity (culturally and linguistically) that I encountered with my students. Eventually, I returned to the college classroom and enrolled in courses that had a profound influence on the way I viewed my students and how I came to understand learning and literacy.

It is important to note that my ethnicity fits the profile of most classroom teachers; I am of European heritage, Anglo of non-Hispanic descent, and English is the only language that I speak with facility. Therefore, when addressing minority populations, I am considered to be a cultural outsider, unacquainted with the struggles of those who have historically been denied high-quality educational experiences. I do not, however, ascribe to the notion that my position as a cultural outsider negates my ability to practice empathetic behavior or prevents me from furthering the notion that "no language or set of life experiences is inherently superior" (Trueba, 1999, p. 57). Rather, my membership in the mainstream culture has eased my investigation of issues pertaining to social justice and supported me as I developed an appreciation for the many assets that minority students bring to the learning environment.

*Vygotsky and Sociocultural Theory*

Vygotsky and sociocultural theory provide the foundation for my understanding of learning and cognitive development. Vygotsky, a contemporary of Piaget, was interested in how humans develop higher psychological processes (Driscoll, 1994). He suggested that children's learning could be understood in terms of structures rather than endpoints. These structures include language and abstract thinking and are the thrust behind the transitions from one age level to the next (Mahn, 2003). Basic to sociocultural theory is the notion that human thought and development are mediated activities (Lantolf, 2000; Wertsch, 1998) and that semiotic[3] mediation is essential to all aspects of knowledge construction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Mediation is important in that it implies that children do not develop in isolation, rather, they are heavily influenced through participation in cooperative activities with adults and peers. Vygotsky's ideas of play, assisted performance, and language acquisition through socialization helped me to understand the importance of family and parent-child interactions. Additionally, I began to consider the theory of cultural discontinuity (Erickson, 1987) and how the mismatch between the culture of the home and the culture of the school results in "misunderstandings between teachers and students in the classroom" (Au, 1993, p. 8). To that end, I actively began to seek ways to illuminate the barriers that were preventing my students from achieving and design curriculum and implement instructional strategies that were culturally responsive (Au, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995). And, over time, I

[3] Merriam-Webster defines *semiotics* as a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Vygotsky used the term to describe the production and exchange of information and meaning by the use of signs and symbols.

came to realize that a crucial component, the student's family and an understanding of family literacy practices, was imperative to ensuring student success.

## Participants

Participants were purposively selected (Patton, 2002) from families who were regularly attending the family literacy meetings. Though there were approximately thirty families who have attended meetings, eleven families consistently attended. These eleven families represented varying levels of English language proficiency ranging from near exclusive use of Spanish to fluency in both Spanish and English. All eleven families were fluent Spanish-speakers but not all were fluent speakers of English. Of the eleven families, I identified two families who spoke fluent or near-fluent English. I also identified two additional families who, though the mothers (focal participants) were monolingual Spanish speakers, possessed qualities that I felt were representative of many of the families who were participating in the program (i.e., they were long-standing participants in the Family Literacy Program and had expressed a willingness to become involved in their children's education). I approached each of these four mothers and asked if I could talk to them about my research. Sometimes using a translator, I explained that I was a student at the university and was interested in learning more about them, why they attended the Family Literacy Program, how they used reading and writing in their lives, and how they involved themselves in their children's education. I also asked for a commitment of one semester; all four mothers agreed and seemed excited to be a part of my study. Focal participants are described briefly in the following section.

*Elisa Castro*[4]

Elisa is forty-six years old and has attended the Family Literacy Program for two years. A monolingual Spanish-speaker and a native of Chihuahua, Elisa has lived in the United States for over ten years. She is married and has three children. Her oldest son is a student at a state university, her middle son is in high-school, and her daughter, Silvia, is a first grader at River View Elementary School.

*Leandra Lopez*

Leandra is a monolingual Spanish-speaker who is in her late thirties. She is a native of Oaxaca and immigrated to the United States with her husband as a newly-wed. She has five children who range in age from seventeen to six. Additionally, she has an infant granddaughter that was born during the course of this study. Leandra is a long-standing member of the Family Literacy Program and has taken advantage of the educational opportunities offered at River View.

*Sofia Ortega*

Sofia is the youngest focal participant. At twenty-four years old, she has attended the family literacy for three years. She is married and has four children. Juanita is a first grader at River View, Inez is three years old. Joel is two and she has an infant, Ivan, who was born in August, 2008. Sofia immigrated to the United States with her family when she was nine years old. She is fully bilingual.

*Anna León*

Anna is thirty years old, married, and the mother of two young daughters. She is on active duty with the United States Army and was stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base

[4] All identifying names are pseudonyms.

after returning from Iraq. Her husband was a long-term substitute teacher at River View and he convinced her to attend the Family Literacy Program. Though at first resistant, Anna attended faithfully until she was reassigned and left the program in April 2008.

In addition to the four focal participants who participated in the Family Literacy Program, there were two directors who regularly interacted with the mothers. Lena Duran was a faculty member at the state's flagship university. A literacy professor and a fluent Spanish-speaker, Lena had considerable experience working with immigrant mothers. She was active in the Latino community and taught a variety of literacy classes at the university in the areas of literacy, family literacy, and social justice.

Nelda Chavez, a doctoral candidate and later a lecturer at the university, also was experienced at working with immigrant mothers. Also a fluent Spanish-speaker, Nelda had worked for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and had formed solid relationships with several of the participating mothers prior to her involvement in the Family Literacy Program.

## Data Collection

In order to collect data that was meaningful and would specifically answer the research questions, I conducted interviews with the program's directors and focal participant mothers and observed them while they led and/or participated in family literacy meetings. I observed during twenty family literacy meetings. Finally, I examined documents from a variety of sources including but not limited to surveys that parents completed at meetings, schedules, lesson plans, parents' homework assignments, and writing samples that were produced at family literacy meetings. An additional source of data was my researcher's reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with the directors of the Family Literacy Program, the children's dance instructor, the elementary school's parent coordinator, focal participant mothers who were participating in the program, and their children. I conducted two 90-120 minute interviews with each of the directors, two 120 minute interview with three of the focal mothers, one 120 minute interview with one focal mother, one 90 minute interview with the dance instructor, one 30 minute interview with two children whose mothers were participating in the program, and one 120 minute interview with the River View parent coordinator. The interview questions were semi-structured (Merriam, 1998); semi-structured questions seek to uncover specific information but are "flexibly worded…allowing the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). During the interviews with the directors, I asked questions concerning the structure of the program, the program's theoretical framework, the pilot year, and how activities supporting parents' literacy development are designed. I also took this opportunity to discuss my observations and insights; their opinions and viewpoints proved to be profoundly beneficial and had a direct impact on my findings.

Interviews with mothers were also semi-structured and questions revolved around their personal backgrounds, reasons and goals for participating in the program, how they feel they have benefited from participating in the program, and how participating in the program has impacted their children's literacy development. Two of the interviews were conducted exclusively in English and two of the interviews were conducted with the aid of a Spanish translator. When using the translator, I asked the questions in English, the

translator asked the question in Spanish and the translator supplied the mother's response in English. The translators were carefully chosen and trusted to deliver unbiased translations. Each mother was asked this core group of questions; the answers to these questions led to a variety of different conversations.

1) How long have you been attending the Family Literacy Program?

2) What are your reasons/goals for attending the program?

3) How do you feel you have changed or benefited from the program? How do you know?

4) What kinds of reading and writing activities do you do with your children?

5) Describe how you use the books that you receive from the program.

6) Has your involvement in the school community changed since you began attending the program?

7) What are your future goals? For your children? What are your plans for achieving these goals?

Though parent interviews were crucial to answering the research questions, it was also necessary to include the voices of the children who were impacted by their mother's participation in the Family Literacy Program. To that end, I conducted two semi-structured (Merriam, 1998), thirty minute interviews with a third grade girl and fifth grade girl whose mothers were long-standing participants in the program. I asked them about their experiences in the program (literacy and dance activities), what kinds of literacy experiences they engaged in at home, how their mothers were involved (homework, read alouds, etc.), and how the books that their mothers received from the program were used in their homes. I had hoped to include the voices of four to six

children but the majority of the children who participated in the program were second grade and younger. Though I interviewed only two children, I did have opportunities to observe all of the participants' children, both at the program and in their homes. These additional opportunities helped me to construct a reliable view of how participating in the program has supported literacy practices in the children's homes.

As planned, I interviewed the dance instructor who planned and carried out activities (literacy and dance) for the children while their parents were working in literacy-focused activities. Gaining the perspective of this instructor was important; she to the exclusion of all others met consistently with the children and helped me to understand how the children's literacy skills were developing over time.

Finally, I interviewed the teacher who was responsible for coordinating parent activities at River View Elementary School. As I was conducting observations and interviews, I realized early on that this staff member and the role which she filled were crucial to the success of the Family Literacy Program. I conducted one 120 minute interview with her. We talked about her position, how activities were coordinated at the school, and we also talked about her insights concerning the parents who were participating in the Family Literacy Program. This interview combined with subsequent follow-up questions provided important member-checking as well as an additional avenue for triangulation.

All of the interviews with adults (mothers, directors, instructor, children, and parent-coordinator) were digitally recorded and transcribed within forty-eight hours of the interview. Recording and transcribing the interviews allowed me to design pertinent follow-up questions as well as identify where researcher language support was needed.

From these various interviews, I learned about the families' literacy experiences, how the family literacy mothers supported their children's academic achievement, and how participating in the Family Literacy Program impacted the mothers' involvement in the larger school community.

*Observations*

While interviews were essential in providing data, observations were essential to truly understand the phenomenon that was being researched. The observations that I conducted took place in the natural setting and observational data provided a first-hand description of the phenomenon being studied instead of a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview (Merriam, 1998). I began attending family literacy meetings in October of 2006 and began formally collecting data from September 2007 through December 2008. I remained active in the program through May 2009. This prolonged engagement meant that I formed relationships, not only with focal participants but also with other mothers who were participating as well as the program's directors and instructors.

Observations were generally two hours in length. I conducted seven observations during the Fall 2007 semester, seven observations during the Spring 2008 semester, and six observations during the Fall 2008 semester. During the observations, I observed the mothers as they participated in large and small group activities. I also observed their interactions with other mothers as well as with the family literacy directors and instructors. I specifically looked for existing literacy strategies as well as strategies they might be learning as a result of participating in the Family Literacy Program. During these observations, it was also possible to engage in brief, informal interviews with focal

participants. These informal interviews were unstructured (Merriam, 1998) and though they were not a major source of data collection, were particularly useful during the early stages of the study "when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions" (p. 75). Some of these conversations were vitally important in that they helped to formulate interview questions; for example, one of the focal mothers shared that she had recently earned her General Equivalency Diploma. The knowledge of her accomplishment pushed me to include an interview question that revolved around the mothers' personal educational goals.

In addition to the twenty observations that I conducted with the mothers at family literacy meetings, I also conducted two, 2-hour observations of the children whose mothers were participating in the Family Literacy Program. While mothers worked with the directors, the children worked with the dance instructors in the school's gymnasium. They participated in read-alouds, literacy activities, and folk-dancing. The purpose of the observations was to gain a first-hand account of the children's activities; I listened to their conversations and observed them working and dancing. Observational data was compared and contrasted with observational data from the larger meetings and helped me to verify how participating mothers' literacy experiences were impacting their children.

*Examination of documents*

Finally, a third method of collecting data was to collect and examine documents generated by parents as well as family literacy directors and instructors. Documents included surveys/questionnaires designed to gather information from participants, schedules of activities, lesson-plans, class-generated writing samples, and Heritage Albums. The purpose of collecting and examining these pre-existing family literacy

documents (surveys, questionnaires, schedules, and lesson plans) was to gain an understanding of the structure of the program, the opinions and attitudes of the mothers, and how they intersected to guide the directors and instructors in designing literacy-based activities that enabled mothers to support their children's academic achievement. Additionally, examination of these documents helped me to understand as well as to verify information that I collected from other data sources (interviews and observations). Examining mothers' and children's writing samples and the Heritage Albums helped me to understand levels of participation and commitment to the Family Literacy Program as well as gain an understanding of how feedback in the form of homework helped to influence and shape family literacy meetings.

In order to make sense of these three data sources (interviews, observations, and examination of related documents) and in an effort to guard against investigator bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I kept a reflexive journal. Lincoln & Guba (1985) write that a reflexive journal is one of the ways that researchers can guard against a loss of objectivity as well as an introspective way to record "mind processes, philosophical position, and bases of decisions about the inquiry" (p. 109). It is, in fact, a data source that includes

> (1) *the daily schedule and logistics* of the study; (2) a *personal diary* that provides the opportunity for catharsis, for reflection upon what is happening in terms of one's own values and interests, and for speculation about growing insights; and (3) a *methodological log* in which methodological decisions and accompanying rationales are recorded. (p. 327)

In a qualitative study such as the one described here, a reflexive journal was crucial in that it provided a safety-net for handling the vast amount of data; the reflexive journal also provided a much-needed forum for working out decisions that related to the inquiry. In hindsight, the reflexive journal was the tool that enabled me to keep track of the study;

not only did I record insights as they related to observations and interviews, I also used the reflexive journal to think through and work out a variety of issues that threatened to overtake my hectic, compartmentalized life! To that end, these three techniques of data collection (interviews, observations, and examination of related documents including the researcher's reflexive journal) provided substantial information necessary for answering the proposed questions in this study.

Overview of Data-Collection

| Interviews |
| --- |
| Mothers: Two individual semi-structured, 2-hour interviews with three of the focal mothers and one individual semi-structured, 2-hour interview with the fourth focal mother. The first interview took place during the Fall 2007 semester and the second interview took place during the Spring 2008 semester. Questions were designed to uncover information concerning reasons and goals for attending the program, ways in which mothers felt they had benefited from the program, how they used the books that they received from the program, and the kinds of reading and writing activities that they engaged in with their children. |
| Directors: Two individual 90-120 minute semi-structured interviews with each director. Questions were designed to uncover information concerning the design of the program (including the program's theoretical framework), the early days of the program, and how the directors approached supporting mothers' literacy development. |
| Instructors: One individual 90-minute semi-structured interview with the literacy/dance instructor who was responsible for planning activities with the children whose mothers are participating in the Family Literacy Program. Questions were designed to uncover information concerning how literacy and folk-dance activities were planned. This instructor also offered valuable insights as they related to the children's literacy development. |
| Children (3rd-5th grade): One individual 30 minute semi-structured interview with two children whose mothers were participating in the Family Literacy Program. Questions revolved around activities they participated in, how the books that the mothers received were used in the home, and how their mothers engaged them in literacy activities. |
| School Parent Coordinator: One individual 2-hour semi-structured interview with the parent coordinator at River View. I asked her about her position at the school, how she coordinated parent activities, what structures were in place that supported parents, and information concerning mothers who were participating in the Family Literacy Program. |

| Observations |
| --- |
| Adult meetings: Between the months of September 2007 and December 2008, I conducted twenty, two-hour observations at the Family Literacy Program. During these observations, I observed the mothers as they participated in large and small group activities. I also observed their interactions with other mothers as well as with the family literacy directors, instructors, and guest presenters. |
| Children's meetings: I conducted two, 2-hour observations of the children whose mothers were participating in the Family Literacy Program. I observed as the children participated in read-alouds and literacy-based activities. I also observed as they learned traditional folk dances. The purpose of these observations was to gain a first-hand account of the children's activities; I listened to their conversations and observed them working and dancing. Observational data was compared and contrasted with observational data from the larger meetings and helped me to verify how participating mothers' literacy experiences were impacting their children. |

| Examination of Documents |
| --- |
| Documents in this study consisted of surveys, questionnaires, schedules, lesson plans, homework, class-generated individual writing samples, and Heritage Albums. Surveys and questionnaires created and collected by the directors and instructors in the Family Literacy Program provided insights into mothers' attitudes and needs concerning program structure and activities. Schedules and lesson-plans (created by the directors and instructors) provided an educative view of the objectives of the program; finally, writing samples, homework, and the Heritage Albums provided insight into parents' progress and level of commitment and participation. |
| Researcher's reflexive journal: The purpose of a reflexive journal was to guard against loss of objectivity as well as to provide a daily schedule and a forum in which to detail methodological decisions. My reflexive journal served as a personal diary where issues, frustrations, observations, etc. that affected the inquiry process was worked out. |

## Method of Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1989) write,

> Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. (p. 112)

I initiated this study with a pre-determined design, a proposal that outlined the key elements of the study. Qualitative research, however, by its very nature is fluid and ever-changing. Though I had a select group of participants, it was difficult to determine the exact nature of the interview questions. I was certainly interested in each participant's background, including their reasons for attending the Family Literacy Program. Additionally, I was interested in each participant's literacy development and ways in which each was impacting the children's literacy development. How this information was uncovered, however, was different for each participant. The strength of semi-structured interview questions is that questions are open-ended, thereby allowing individual participants to "define the world in unique ways" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). To that end,

interviews tended to be lengthy, circuitous, and yielded a tremendous amount of data through which to be sifted. Merriam writes that data analysis in qualitative research is highly intuitive though far from haphazard. To manage and interpret data, I looked to Merriam as well as the work of LeCompte and Schensul (1999).

*Data management*

As expected, I collected a significant amount of data (interview and observation transcripts, field notes, homework and writing samples, lesson plans, schedules, surveys, Heritage Albums, etc.) over the course of this fifteen month study. As per LeCompte and Schensul (1999), it was necessary to create a systematic process for organizing, retrieving, and reviewing data. I began by creating an index log that detailed names, dates, and a brief summary of each observation and interview. This index log proved to be invaluable as I sifted through mountains of data. I also kept separate genre files (observations, interviews, and documents). Copies were made of all data with the exceptions of children's art work which was often bulky and sometimes three-dimensional. Finally, data (and copies) were stored at different, secure locations.

*Data analysis*

Data analysis in qualitative research is highly intuitive (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and best not left to the end. As data was collected, I began preliminary analysis. In the early days of the study, I simply read and reread data with the intent of "capturing…reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue…" (Merriam, 1998, p. 161). This preliminary analysis, which often took place in my reflexive journal, began to inform subsequent observations and interviews and laid the groundwork for the construction of categories and themes. Merriam writes, "category

construction *is* data analysis" (p. 180); the process begins early on and proceeds throughout and after the phase of data collection has ended. As detailed in Merriam, I began data analysis concurrent with data collection. I read and reread the data, made copious notes, experimented with themes, and developed questions that guided subsequent interviews and observations. I coded the data with the goal of constructing categories that ultimately resulted in the findings of the study with an eye towards writing "an intensive, holistic description" (p. 193) of the literacy experiences of the mothers who participated in the Family Literacy Program.

## Limitations

This study, though carefully crafted and executed, contained limitations. First and foremost, I studied a small number of participants (four mothers) in a narrowly bounded system (an intergenerational family literacy program that served a neighborhood elementary school). Though the number of participants was relatively small, I collected a sizeable amount of data through interviews, observations, and document analysis that merged to answer the research questions. An additional limitation is that my understanding of the literacy experiences of the mothers will be based only on the data I collect through interviews and my regular attendance at the Family Literacy Program. Though this is a limitation, I believe that I spent a substantial amount of time at family literacy meetings; I came to know the mothers and have an intimate knowledge of their literacy experiences over the course of this fifteen month study. Significantly longer than the proposed study, fifteen months met the criteria for prolonged engagement and generated a considerable amount of data.

A final limitation concerns my personal language capabilities. I am a native English speaker and possess a minimum of Spanish-language skills. Though my comprehension skills have certainly increased over the last fifteen months, to imply that I have more than a surface understanding of the language is optimistic at best. I consider this to be a clear and concerning limitation. I do, however, have considerable language support at the Family Literacy Program. Primarily, both of the directors (one who is on my dissertation committee) and some of the mothers are fluent English-speakers. Because I am a frequent visitor at family literacy meetings and have gained the trust of the participants, many have come to understand that I need language support. After observations, I asked follow-up questions and had a bilingual speaker accompany me during interviews with two monolingual Spanish-speaking mothers. I am confident that these support systems intersected to bridge gaps in my comprehension. Some of the data I collected, however, was in Spanish. When this was the case, I contracted a native Spanish speaker (a graduate student in my department) to translate blocks of text into English. I am indebted to this graduate student and feel that her translations preserved the intent of the original Spanish text.

*Access*

Access was crucial to the success of this research study. As an experienced teacher, I have considerable knowledge of content and children's literature and am familiar with many of the books that were chosen by the family literacy directors. Since writing topics often centered on concepts that were presented in the stories and because I have the support of the directors and mothers, I had little difficulty understanding the essence of the conversations that took place. When comprehension problems arose, I

asked a mother or Lena or Nelda and they readily complied by supplying me with the information that I was missing. Finally, because I digitally recorded interviews and had bilinguals accompany me when needed, I created opportunities for language support that ensured my comprehension and constructed opportunities for frequent member-checking. With prolonged engagement and these high levels of support, I am confident that access to meaning was not limited nor hampered because of my language capabilities.

It is interesting to note, however, that my prolonged presence in the Family Literacy Program has only enriched my understanding of the link between culture and language. Initially, my outsider status was magnified because of my inability to understand and to therefore participate in casual conversations; not speaking Spanish excluded me from meetings even though week after week, I was physically present. In fact, several months passed before I was able to establish relationships with potential participants. Baez (2002) writes that language is "a regulatory mechanism for establishing permitted and prohibited spaces" (p. 132). In most cases, it is the pervasive use of English that defines these spaces. To that end, though I will never truly understand the experiences of the participating families, particularly as they intersect with language, I am better able to empathize and advocate for families who have traditionally interacted with these spaces as defined by their home language.

## Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that there are four essential criteria that must be met before trustworthiness of findings can be determined. These four criteria are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. These are terms that are intimately

linked to quantitative research; comparable terms in naturalistic inquiry are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

This study ensured credibility through prolonged engagement (fifteen months), persistent observation (twenty-two observations, each two hours in length), one to two interviews with the Family Literacy Program's directors, instructors, and participants (each 90 to 120 minutes in length), and examination of participant-created documents and a researcher-generated reflexive journal. Lincoln and Guba (1985) address transferability by writing that it is not the task of the researcher to establish transferability. Rather, the researcher uses data analysis to offer thick description; this thick description is presented to the reader who owns the responsibility of making judgments regarding transferability.

## Significance

Unlike quantitative research, the inherent design of qualitative research suggests that no defined test for significance exists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once again, it is the duty of the researcher to offer thick description; likewise, it is the responsibility of the reader to judge usefulness and transferability. I believe this study has generated significant results, results that are not available through quantitative sampling techniques. The results of this study will help to bridge the numerous perspectives on family literacy and teachers who are experiencing shifts in student population, both culturally and linguistically, will use the results of this study to inform their practices and offer curriculum that honors families' personal style of literacy practices while supporting parents as their children successfully navigate their way through school.

# CHAPTER 4

## THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM

A persistent problem shared by school districts across the country is the academic achievement gap that affects minority students. Berlak (2001) writes that understanding the achievement gap, the disparity of academic achievement between white mainstream and minority students, is a complicated issue but that research studies point to three plausible explanations. These explanations revolve around students' opinions of available opportunities, opportunities within school settings, and the psychological effect of negotiating a world permeated with racial prejudices (Berlak, 2001). In an effort to equalize educational opportunities and lessen the effects of the achievement gap, the largest school district in the state of New Mexico implemented a variety of improvements in the city's south valley, the segment of the city where the achievement gap was the most profound (Zancanella & Lopez, 2005). These improvements addressed "inequitable distribution of resources, library inadequacies, achievement scores, course selections, community involvement and the condition of the physical plant" (Zancanella & Lopez, 2005, p. 17). Additionally, the university's College of Education faculty and teachers from the school district joined forces to create the College of Education Family Literacy Program, a family literacy program designed to advocate for and address literacy learning in families who reside in the city's south valley. Since its inception in the fall of 2005, over 150 families have participated in the university's College of Education Family Literacy Program.

## The Pilot Year: 2005-2006

The College of Education Family Literacy Program began in the fall of 2005 as a way to address literacy learning in families who live in the city's south valley. Designed by members of the college's literacy staff and funded by various businesses in the area, the Family Literacy Program was originally housed at a south valley community center. A university faculty member, along with several graduate students, met on Saturday mornings with parents who were interested in learning about literacy and ways that they could support literacy learning with their children. Though the program's design was destined to adjust and change, the long terms goals established during this pilot year have endured. These goals were to develop within the family 1) oral language skills, 2) literacy skills, and 3) increased parental involvement within schools (Flores-Dueñas & Torres, 2006).

These collective goals would most assuredly bridge the parents' learning to the school and the school to the parents. It was decided that these goals, though explicitly directed at parents, would best be met by including children in the program as well. Though children's activities were loosely defined, the director and instructors reasoned that as parents developed their own literacy skills, they would encourage literacy learning with their own children. Moreover, having the children on-site might provide opportunities for parents to put into practice literacy skills that they were learning in the larger, adult setting. The two groups, however, would be separated; while parents worked towards meeting the explicit goals of the program, their children would have the opportunity to practice their literacy skills, those that were learned in school as well as those that drew upon the background knowledge of their parents.

The goals of the Family Literacy Program centered on literacy development and parental involvement. To be able to truly consider these goals, it is important to examine the foundational theories upon which the program was based. Family literacy programs encompass a variety of philosophical points of view. There are those that are grounded in the belief that by supporting the development of adult literacy, early child literacy, and by teaching effective parenting skills, a family's cycle of illiteracy will be broken. These programs seek to replace a family's personal style of literacy with the literacy of the dominant culture. There are programs, however, that support the development of adult and early childhood literacy and adopt a sociocultural stance; they are situated within the context of the community. The goal of these programs is to build on a family's existing strengths while they resist replacing a family's current literacy practices. This is, however, difficult to execute. Critics argue that even programs that claim to be couched in a family's personal style of literacy still perpetuate a transmission of school practices model (Auerbach, 1989, 1992), that is, programs support parents as they learn literacy techniques that are sure to be encountered in a school setting (e.g., read-alouds and literacy-based/reader-response activities). Literacy, Auerbach (1989) argues, is not simply an acquisition/development of skills; rather, it is a set of social practices that differs according to context, content, function and begins with the learners' experiences and grows through activities, sharing, and dialogue. Delgado-Gaitan (1990) wrote almost two decades ago, "The challenge for educators to prepare minority students for successful participation in the school system is dependent on the ability of the school to incorporate the parents and the culture of the home as an integral part of the school instruction plan" (p. 1).

This social-constructivist perspective coupled with the concept of incorporating parents and culture into the school is an important underpinning of the Family Literacy Program. Designers of the program purposely looked to a broad application of sociocultural theory as well as a structure of personal beliefs to construct content that was based on the participants' culture, knowledge, interests, and needs. They firmly believed that this perspective was essential to ensure ongoing participation in the program. Specifically, Lena Duran shared that we learn through social interaction and that we learn best when content is "socially contextual" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 165).

From an interview, Lena stated:

> My belief is that if you start with the families, see what they have, find out how they share literacy socially and culturally, you'll be in a better position to help them to understand…that what they already know from home can contribute to their children's education. (personal conversation, August 18, 2008)

Lena firmly believed that she is able to make a solid connection with these families. She has been a classroom teacher, a bilingual teacher, and taught traditional English as a Second Language classes for nine years. During these nine years, Lena came to understand that most adult immigrants with school-aged children want to know about the American school system. During the same interview, Lena stated:

> They learn so much from each other, but they don't really see themselves as part of the school. They interact with the school but feel that they don't have rights, they don't feel empowered to demand that their children receive a high-quality education. (personal conversation, August 18, 2008)

Lena's stance was firmly grounded in what Auerbach (1992) has coined as a "participatory approach" (p. 14) to adult education. Laying the foundation for a community-based family literacy program is not happenstance; careful planning heightens the chances for longevity and success. To that end, Lena, assisted by a graduate

student, mapped out the various components of the Family Literacy Program. These components ranged from curriculum, content, and teachers to establishing criteria for choosing the multicultural children's literature that would be shared with families. Each component, though conceptualized, would fully emerge as the overarching label of *participant* transformed into individual women and mothers. This idea is essential in that possessing a sense of the unique needs of individuals implies that learners are not "passive recipients," rather, they exercise considerable influence and are engaged in curriculum development on a continuous basis (Auerbach, 1992, p. 16). The result is that the Family Literacy Program was primed to become a vehicle where literacy construction transcended school practices; literacy would become closely linked to the community and "socially significant in family life…and provide a context conducive to children's literacy acquisition" (p. 8).

While Lena Duran strived to connect communities and school, Nelda Chavez came from a different, yet complementary stance. Though Nelda did not participate in the overall philosophical design or construction of the Family Literacy Program, I believe she has impacted the program with her personal philosophical stance. Nelda expressed that she is guided by the concept of *servant leadership* as well as the writings of Myles Horton. Servant leadership is a term that refers to the idea that willingness to serve precedes aspirations to lead. Greenleaf (1998) writes,

> The servant-leader is servant first…It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first…The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. (p. 37)

The concept of servant leadership is ingrained in the educational philosophy of Myles Horton. Horton specifically addressed social change through education. Horton (Jacobs, 2003) writes that schools are akin to state and federal-controlled playpens. Children are not free to consider any ideas except those that are valued by the bureaucrats in charge. Moreover, the information that is presented to students is reflective of Freire's (1970) banking model in that information is stored to be recalled at some distant point in time. This is utterly opposed to Horton's stance. He specifically writes that in order to learn, knowledge must "be connected to what you already know…Knowledge must be built on previous knowledge. Unattached facts are not knowledge, they're just facts" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 61). To that end, Horton believed that everyone has the potential to learn, and that they will learn best when personal experiences become a starting point. A final tenet of Horton's approach is that learning depends on the teacher's "genuine respect for you as a human being and…faith that you have a potential to learn…" (p. 62). Horton's stance became visible as Nelda interacted with the mothers who were participating in the Family Literacy Program. She stated that in order for adults to learn, there must be an element of trust grounded in a community of learners. This, she noted, is achieved by being a perceptive listener and by respecting the adults who are participating in the program. These pieces coupled with respect help to form deep personal connections. Chavez shared, "I can't learn from somebody that I can't connect with. I have to find a connection to somebody…that person has to matter to me." These stances, one grounded in socio-cultural theory and a participatory approach to family literacy curriculum and the other in servant leadership, supported Lena and Nelda as they made solid and lasting connections with mothers who were participating in the Family Literacy Program.

*Early meetings*

One of the first obstacles to overcome was to find a meeting location for the Family Literacy Program. Lena was familiar with San Carlos Elementary School located in a neighborhood in the city's south valley. Also in the neighborhood was the Homer Sanchez Community Center. Initial contact with the center was positive; they were excited to house the Family Literacy Program and would provide a room, storage cabinets, and access to the center's computer lab. With the problem of location solved, Lena forged ahead. She hired teachers, most of whom had been her students, found books, and with the assistance of a doctoral student, developed activities that would be engaging and culturally relevant to Mexican-immigrant parents. Regardless, in the early days, attendance was low and sporadic. Despite distributing flyers to potential participants, only four or five parents attended every week. These parents represented a wide variety of literacy needs and skill levels. For example, a colleague from the university attended with her daughters as did several parents who represented the lower socioeconomic status of the surrounding neighborhood. Regardless, parents would attend and never return and new parents would take their place. Though retention was an early, on-going issue, Lena and her staff were undeterred. The program met weekly and, over time, garnered several stable participants.

*The move to River View*

The community center, though helpful and supportive to the newly-formed Family Literacy Program, proved not to be an ideal location. Primarily, the program had no direct contact with a school and therefore it was evident that all potential participants were not being reached. The solution to the problem came from the teachers who had

been hired to work in the program. The teachers, many of whom were Lena's students, were teaching at River View Elementary School which was located in a different part of the city. These teachers were highly-qualified and well-experienced; they were responsible, they attended planning meetings, thoughtfully carried out activities, and truly enjoyed working with the parents. Most, however, were strangers to the San Carlos community. They traveled to the community center from their elementary school in a different part of the south valley. These teachers, along with Nelda Chavez, a doctoral student, were instrumental in moving the program from the Homer Sanchez Community Center to the library at River View Elementary School. Nelda, who had previously worked for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) at River View, Lena, and the teachers all approached the school's principal and suggested that the Family Literacy Program would benefit the River View neighborhood and community. Beginning in the spring of 2006, and still on Saturdays, the Family Literacy Program moved into the school's library.

Though attendance remained low and inconsistent, there were several parents who followed the program from the community center to its new location. One notable participant was José Z., one of the few fathers who regularly attended the Saturday meetings. Lena reported that in the beginning, José was very uncomfortable at family literacy meetings. Researchers have inferred that participating in literacy activities is viewed in some cultures as an activity not appropriate for males and therefore often avoided by boys as well as adult men (Newkirk, 2002). With encouragement and support, José was asked to talk and write about his life, from his beginnings on a ranch in Mexico to his immigration to the United States. José had five children, two were born in Mexico

and three were born in the United States. He shared that his U.S. children had little knowledge of their Mexican roots; they had never traveled there nor had they ever met their grandparents who still lived in Mexico.

José had little formal education and lacked confidence in his literacy abilities, therefore, he was somewhat embarrassed when his children attended meetings with him. As time went by, however, José began to participate in the program's activities. He read stories and he began to understand the importance of sharing his history with his children. He wrote poetry that was personal and cathartic. José related that he was apprehensive to tell his children about his life in Mexico; he was ashamed to tell them that his presence in the United States was undocumented. He felt this knowledge would become a needless burden to his children. But with the support of the staff, instructors, and other parents, José began to open up. He began to talk and write about his life. And over time, he began to feel comfortable with his stories and sharing his history with his children. More importantly, José's children began to regard him differently. They became accustomed to seeing their father engaged in literacy events and they took pride in their father's new-found skills. They listened with delight as José read the poems that he had written. Over time, José began to encourage his children. He talked to his children, listened to their stories, and helped with their homework. And he continued to attend the Family Literacy Program; he reported that he was growing as a reader and writer and that an added benefit was that his children were learning traditional Mexican folk-dances. José continued to attend the Family Literacy Program for the entire 2005-2006 school year. Poor health, however, began to hinder his participation and eventually, he dropped out of the program. But even though José and his children were unable to attend, more and more families

began to take advantage of the Family Literacy Program. By the fall of 2006, there were approximately twenty mothers and thirty children who were attending the weekly program. And in an effort to make the program more accessible to the community; meeting days were changed from Saturday mornings to Thursday afternoons.

Year Two: 2006-2007

The fall of 2006 saw the Family Literacy Program firmly grounded at River View Elementary School. Changing the meeting day from Saturday morning to Thursday afternoon proved to be beneficial; the school-day afternoon meeting time meant that parents who normally picked up their children from school would now stay an extra two hours to attend the program. Children would meet their mothers after school and together would walk over to the school's gymnasium. Two members from the community would be waiting for the children and for the next two hours, they would be reading stories and teaching traditional folk-dances dances to the children, activities and stories that were intentionally chosen for their cultural relevancy (Moll, 1992, Taylor& Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). After dropping the children off at the gym and signing in, the mothers would make their way to the school's library to engage in a variety of workshops led by guest speakers or to participate in culturally relevant literacy activities led by the directors and three experienced teachers. One notable activity selected for its cultural relevance was the reading of *El Juego de la Lotería* (Laínez & Arena, 2005). Mothers read the story and then over the course of the next several weeks, constructed their own *lotería* boards based on their individual histories and experiences. Their personal connections to this activity were apparent as mothers continued their work at home, then brought their *lotería* boards to subsequent meetings to publicly share with the other participants.

There were two notable guest speakers during this semester; a children's author read from her latest book and a health professional presented on mammography and other related topics. The literacy activities were often thematic in nature and centered on several selections of high-quality bilingual literature. In the following section, I will describe family literacy meetings during year two that integrated the parents' culture with selections of children's literature and meetings that highlighted guest speakers. I will conclude this description of the second year by sharing the directors' reflections and their suggestions that were intended to improve the Family Literacy Program during year three.

*Día de los muertos*

The following is a description of a family literacy meeting taken from field notes. The meeting started promptly at 3 p.m. and without delay, the mothers were asked to organize themselves into three groups and each went to join the teachers in one of three locations in the library; two tables in the main area and the library's story pit. Thelma Sánchez, a kindergarten teacher at River View and an instructor in the Family Literacy Program, was meeting with her group of mothers in the library's story pit. Thelma began by showing the mothers a children's picture book titled *Day of the Dead in Mexico: Through the Eyes of the Soul* (Andrade, 2000). There were other books displayed in the story pit; *Dem Bones* (Barner, 1996), *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book* (Morales, 2003), *El día de los muertos/The Day of the Dead* (Lowry & Knutson, 2006), and *The Festival of Bones/el Festival de las Calaveras: The Little--Bitty Book for The Day of the Dead* (San Vicente, 2002). Thelma would refer to them all during the next hour. After Thelma shared the picture book, she asked the mothers to talk about their

memories of the holiday. They discussed trips to the graveyard and the altar that many of them had in their homes. After the discussion, Thelma suggested that they write about their memories. She suggested that they write about the significance of the day, how they celebrate the holiday in their homes, and what kinds of things they place on the altar to honor their loved ones. The mothers wrote, in Spanish or English, for about five minutes. When their pencils quieted, Thelma asked the mothers to share what they had written. One mother shared her memories of a party and another wept when she read about missing her father. When the mothers had finished, Thelma took two large photographs out of a bag; they were photographs of her parents. Her father was a young man in the photograph but her mother's photograph was of a much older woman. Thelma shared that these were the photographs that she put on her alter and that she honored her deceased parents by placing a potato and a banana pepper near their pictures. "Oh, how he loved papas!" Thelma exclaimed.

Next, Thelma took one of the books that were displayed on the steps of the story pit. She pointed out the title, author, and illustrator of the book. She showed the front cover, back cover, and the spine of the book. She told the mothers that these were terms that their children should know. Then, Thelma started turning the pages of the book. She asked, "What are you noticing?" One mother offered that the text was a poem and Thelma used this comment to segue into techniques for talking about the text. She reminded the parents to ask their children questions and to reread books several times. "One book can last for a week," she explained.

Thelma introduced the next activity; she passed out pens and overhead transparencies. She asked the mothers to think about their family's traditions and to draw

pictures of things that they felt were important to share with their children. This time, mothers took turns using the overhead projector as they talked about their drawings. The time passed quickly and after an hour, children started coming into the library. They fanned out, quickly found their mothers, and together they took seats around the library's tables. Lena was ready with an activity: *papel picado*. She talked about the tradition of paper cutting and how they were used for decorations. As the families worked, Lena serenaded them with traditional Spanish songs. At 5 pm, parents and their children began cleaning up and leaving; they were on their way to pick up the bags of groceries that were provided by the program. After restoring the library, the directors and teachers met briefly to talk about the evening and to plan for the next session. This pattern of thematic group work endured for the remainder of the school year.

*Guest speakers*

During the second year, the Family Literacy Program welcomed a variety of guest speakers; they ranged from children's authors and health professionals to graduate students from the university. A local author read her story, *Los Bizcochitos de Benito/Benito's Bizcochitos* (Baca, Castilla, & Accardo, 1999). A health professional from the medical school talked to the mothers about the importance of mammograms. One of the most engaging, however, was a visit from a university graduate student who visited the Family Literacy Program in early December. He told of his experiences celebrating Christmas as a boy in Mexico. He told of the importance of the three kings, of gift-giving, and of *esperanza* (hope). The graduate student explained that it is traditional for children to write their wishes and hopes on a small piece of paper and tie the paper to the string of a helium balloon, then release it to the heavens. He passed out slips of papers

and the mothers all wrote their wishes. As if by magic, helium balloons appeared and the mothers tied their wishes to the balloon string. The mothers walked outside into the courtyard and as a group, released the balloons together. It was a wonderful sight to see all the balloons carrying their messages of hope floating into the sky!

*Reflections*

Despite engaging activities and guest speakers, attendance in the program's early days was sporadic and Nelda, experienced in community-based family literacy programs, thought about adding a new dimension to the program, a recruitment tool that came from an unlikely source. The Family Literacy Program was not the first family literacy program with which Nelda had been associated. She previously was involved with a program that had disbanded after the program's director left the school district. Though a participant tried to step into the position, that family literacy program was not able to sustain. Nelda, however, learned important lessons from participating in this earlier program. Primarily, she learned key techniques for attracting and retaining participants. Participants of the Family Literacy Program were already receiving a high-quality bilingual children's book every time they attended. To add to that incentive, the Family Literacy Program formed a partnership with an area food bank that distributed food to low-income families and organizations that support low-income families. The food bank was contacted and the goals of the program were explained. The Family Literacy Program's application was approved and Lena and Nelda began making regular trips to the food bank every Thursday morning. They would shop for staples such as bread and vegetables, load them in their cars, and take the food to River View Elementary School. There, parents from the community would be waiting in the parents' meeting room. The

groceries would be unloaded and packed into bags for mothers to take home at the completion of each meeting. This task was enormous but offered an additional incentive for mothers to regularly participate.

The Family Literacy Program's association with the food bank is a clear example of Greenleaf's (1998) concept of servant leadership. The result was parents who attended the meetings from beginning to end would receive a bag of groceries to take home. As an additional technique to ensure attendance, Nelda phoned participants and encouraged them to attend family literacy meetings. Over time, these phone calls would become an important pathway of communication between Nelda and the mothers. When she would call, she would chat with the mothers and she would find out what was happening in their lives. This exchange of information helped the mothers to bond with Nelda and ultimately had a positive influence on their participation; mothers came to chat and visit as much as they came to learn.

At the end of the school year, those involved with the program reflected; Lena and Nelda discussed what had gone well during the past year and also explored areas that needed improvement. On the positive side, attendance at each meeting had stabilized. There were usually fifteen to twenty mothers in attendance. And with consistent attendance, mothers were beginning to form deep relationships, not only with the directors, but also with the other participants. The negatives, however, were profound. Both felt that, despite prolonged engagement, the mothers were failing to bond with the teachers and additionally, they felt that it was very important that the teachers in the program receive related staff development. These teachers were highly-qualified, but as professionals, their talents lay in working with children; adult learning presented a

different set of issues. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) write that children are often taught as if literacy is comprised of an isolated set of skills that encompass phonics and comprehension strategies. Adult literacy often encapsulates this view while applying skills to perform a variety of socially constructed tasks such as reading the want ads or filling out government forms. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) write,

> Viewing literacy as skills or tasks does not adequately encompass the complexity of the experience of literacy in adults' daily lives. Literacy reflects the fundamental interdependence of the social world at many levels; oral language is a shared understanding of a set of relationships between symbols, sounds, and meanings. Meaning reflects shared cultural heritage, individual personality, and unique life experiences. Although literacy requires knowledge of the technical skills of forming letters, spelling words, decoding, and so on, these technical skills are useless without social knowledge that attaches meaning to words *in context*. (p. 62)

To that end, Lena and Nelda observed that the teachers were having considerable difficulty planning literacy-based activities that were appropriate for adult learners. For example, the mothers were often asked to participate in the making of simple crafts and the reader response activities rarely produced substantive writing that reflected their daily lived experiences. Though the teachers were not instructing mothers on how complete discrete tasks (such as how to read the newspaper or fill out forms), neither were they offering socially-constructed literacy experiences. Additionally, Nelda stated that though the inclusion of literature was important, other ways must be established to integrate bilingual stories into the culture and language of the mothers who were attending the Family Literacy Program.

Another important issue involved the teachers and their weekly levels of preparedness. The Family Literacy Program met at the end of their duty day and understandably, the teachers were exhausted. Instead of greeting mothers when they

walked into the room, the teachers were often working on materials that they would be using for the day's activities. And as the year progressed, they fell into the pattern of preparing no real activities at all. The teachers would simply rely on their arsenal of classroom instructional practices; they would read the week's story, discuss the theme and plot, ask the participants to write, and share the participant's writing in their small group. Though some mothers produced high-quality writing, Nelda described many of their attempts as weak. Nelda began to feel that she was better able than the teachers to plan and deliver instruction. After all, she, too, was getting to know the mothers and forging relationships that would keep mothers coming back week after week. As the 2006-2007 school year drew to a close, Lena and Nelda collaborated and made some tough decisions. Their most important was to restructure the design of the individual sessions. Instead of teachers and small group work, Lena Duran and Nelda Chavez would assume instruction and the mothers would remain in a whole group setting.

There were several advantages to downsizing the instructional staff. Primarily, the funds that had been used to pay the teachers would now be used for books and groceries. Also, there would now be enough money to continue meetings during the summer months. Though Lena and Nelda would miss the teachers, reducing the teaching staff would ensure that both directors would have greater control and therefore greater impact on the instructional side as well as the administrative side of the program. Perhaps most importantly, the additional funds would now be available to pay for a project that Lena and Nelda had been planning: Heritage Albums.

The Family Literacy Program continued to meet during the summer months. Though Lena had other obligations, Nelda met weekly with a small group of mothers.

Nelda introduced the concept of *scrapbooking* and purchased albums, scrapbooking supplies, and inexpensive digital cameras. Nelda explained and demonstrated how photographs go into a scrapbook along with narratives and decorations. She gave the cameras to the mothers and over the course of the summer; the Heritage Albums began to take shape. In fact, the preliminary results were so promising that scrapbooking was a theme that was to continue throughout the following year.

## Year Three: 2007-2008

As the third year began, the structures of the Family Literacy Program were firmly in place. Once again, the program would meet weekly on Thursday afternoons, immediately after the school day ended and the routine for the children and their parents rarely varied from week to week. As in the past year, mothers would arrive at the end of the school day, find their children, and drop them off at the school gymnasium. Then, they would make their way to the designated classroom where Lena and Nelda would be waiting for them, ready to start the day's activities.

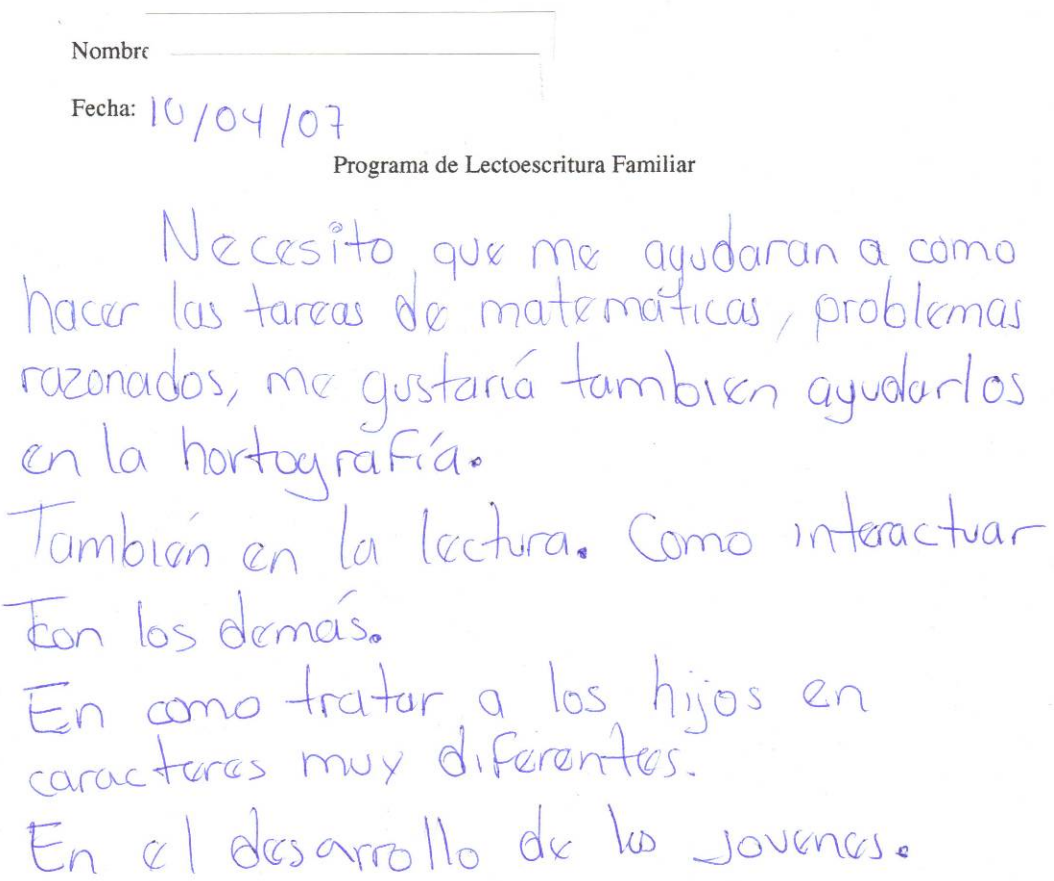
### *Parent meetings*

Unlike the previous year, the mothers met as a whole group and divided their time between literacy and skill development and parental involvement and advocacy issues. Though their roles frequently overlapped, Lena concentrated on the aesthetic aspects of literacy (Rosenblatt, 1978) and skill development while Nelda focused on parental involvement and advocacy (advocacy issues centered on parents' rights, health care, education, and social justice). In accordance with their discussions from the previous year, Lena and Nelda would take on the responsibility of teaching the mothers. Though the general structure of the meetings was in place, Lena and Nelda met to plan specific

activities for the family literacy meetings during the year. The two directors felt that the first meeting of the year was particularly important; this initial meeting would set the stage for all remaining meetings. Together, they mapped out a tentative schedule that included introducing the theme (Heritage Albums) and they also planned an icebreaker to help build a sense of community within the group of mothers. The icebreaker activity and the resultant product would become part of each mother's Heritage Album.

Lena began that first meeting promptly at 3pm. There were approximately twelve women in the room; most were monolingual or bilingual Spanish-speakers but there were several mothers present who spoke only English. Lena began the session by explaining what the Family Literacy Program was all about. She shared that the Family Literacy Program was about literacy development, not only reading and writing, but also how to behave in a variety of situations. She spoke first in Spanish and then in English and told the mothers that during the year, they would be making an album, a memory of their lives. While Lena talked, mothers continued to drift into the classroom. By 3:15 pm, there were sixteen mothers in the room and seven toddlers and all were clustered around small student desks. Next, it was Nelda's turn to greet the participants. Most were old friends; she began by explaining how happy she was to see them and she told how some of them had been making their albums over the past summer. Nelda told the mothers that making these Heritage Albums would be a transformational experience, that they would be finding a new identity for themselves. Nelda suggested that the mothers were used to seeing themselves as daughters, wives, and mothers. Now they would be thinking and learning about themselves. They would hear each other's life stories and these stories would help them to better understand their own lives.

After introductions and an overview of the program, the mothers were arranged into three small groups; the groups were led by the directors and the researcher. The purpose of these groups was two-fold; primarily, these small discussion groups gave mothers an opportunity to write and talk about why they were attending the program and how they hoped to benefit. Elisa Castro, one of the mothers and a focal participant, wrote specific reasons for attending the Family Literacy Program (figure 4.1).



Nombre

Fecha: 10/04/07

Programa de Lectoescritura Familiar

Necesito que me ayudaran a como hacer las tareas de matemáticas, problemas razonados, me gustaría tambien ayudarlos en la hortografía.
También en la lectura. Como interactuar con los demás.
En como tratar a los hijos en caracteres muy diferentes.
En el desarrollo de los jovenes.

***Figure 4.1. Necesito que…***

> I need help with mathematics homework, reasoning problems, and I would also like to help them with writing, reading, and interacting with others. Also in

> treating children with different characters [and] in the development (motivation) of young people.

Secondly, mothers would begin their first assignment, a *¿De donde soy?* (Where I'm from) writing assignment (Christensen, 1998). This assignment was designed to lay the foundation for the narratives that the mothers would be writing in their albums. Mothers were able to complete some preliminary brainstorming during this first session. The *¿De done soy?* writing activity would take several more weeks to complete and was one of the first that found its way into the Heritage Albums. It is interesting to note that though the mothers were divided into small discussion groups, these groups were decidedly different from the previous year's groups. In the previous year, small group work was instruction-based—these groups were designed solely to elicit information and would not be a recurring part of the weekly routine.

The sessions for the mothers, however, were not without issues. These mothers had school-aged children, but they also came complete with toddlers, babies, and strollers. The toddlers had free run of the classroom and were content to play and explore for about one hour. The second hour of the meeting, however, was often bedlam. The young children had had enough; they were hungry, tired, and ready to go home. One possible solution was to have them accompany their older siblings to the gymnasium. This was quickly discarded; they were simply too young to effectively participate in the literacy and dance activities and most required close supervision. The toddlers' presence would have proved to be too distracting. An obvious solution was to find someone who was willing to look after the toddlers. There was an early childhood teacher at River View and she was approached with an offer to baby-sit the children who were too young

to attend the dance activities. Together with a high-school student-volunteer, the early childhood teacher joined the program and opened her room to the babies and toddlers whose mothers were participating in the Family Literacy Program. Though some of the participants could not be convinced to leave their young children, these two volunteers typically watched five to seven children each week. Though there continued to be some young children who attended meetings with their mothers, the activity level in the room diminished significantly and mothers were better able to concentrate on writing activities. The early childhood volunteer continued to work in the program until she was no longer needed. As in years past, attendance leveled off and some mothers who had toddlers dropped out of the program. The student volunteer, however, attended weekly; she was stationed in the early childhood room and often cared for three or four children, giving their mothers a welcome break and an opportunity to relax while they worked on their albums.

*Children's activities*

Also returning to the Family Literacy Program were two community members, Rena and Jen, who worked with the school-aged children; they offered opportunities to participate in read-alouds, reader-response activities, and taught traditional Mexican folk dances. Rena was a veteran of the Family Literacy Program; she was hired as a dance instructor during the program's second year. Jen was a newcomer to the program. She worked as an educational assistant at an elementary school on the west side of town. She too was a dancer and had heard about the program from Rena; both women danced in local groups. Though Jen was a novice to the program, she came with considerable

classroom experience. She was extremely resourceful and called upon this experience to implement activities that the children found engaging.

With the children's instructors in place, the directors and instructors met to map out the remainder of the meetings for the first semester. Though the parent meetings would remain fluid in nature (the needs of the mothers specifically dictated content), it was felt that the children's activities should be structured. A schedule was developed; the children would arrive at the gymnasium and have a few minutes of play-time and a quick snack. They would then participate in a read-aloud (the read-aloud selection was decided upon the week before by Lena and Nelda) accompanied by a literacy-based, reader-response activity. Finally, the children would practice or learn a traditional dance and/or song.

The first meeting of the year did not deviate from this pre-planned schedule. The children who met in the school gymnasium on that first day ranged from four to eleven years in age. Rena and Jen began the day's read-aloud selection, *En mi familia/In My Family* (Garza, 2000) and then engaged the children in a discussion about where they were born and who was in their family. Then, like their mothers, the children were given paper and markers and instructed to write and draw what they had talked about. As the children worked, Rena and Jen talked to individual children and helped the young children conceptualize their work. As expected, these writing samples ranged from drawings with labels (provided by the dance instructors) to paragraphs that were written by the older children. After the writing was completed, Rena and Jen segued into music and dance; they taught the children some simple, introductory footwork. Finally, the children cleaned up their supplies and promptly at 5 pm, the two dance instructors

brought the children over to the classroom and reunited them with their mothers. The children's arrival signaled the end of the family literacy meeting; the mothers helped clean up the room and then made their way to the school's parent room to pick up a bag of groceries. Rena and Jen continued this schedule of read-alouds, literacy-based activities, and dance instruction throughout the fall semester. In fact, the children's dance skills progressed so rapidly that they performed at the National Hispanic Cultural Center for the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe in early December.

As the fall semester came to a close, however, Jen gave notice that she would not be returning in the spring. The pressure of planning activities and the personality differences between her and the other dance instructor proved to be too stressful. Jen decided to concentrate on her position as an educational assistant and she also decided to take education classes at a popular, on-line university.

When the Family Literacy Program resumed meetings in January, Jen was replaced with Angelica, Rena's younger sister. Angela was visiting from Mexico; her husband was in Spain caring for his father who was undergoing a medical treatment. The partnership between Rena and Angela was a strong one. Both were accomplished dancers and the children blossomed under their leadership. Also, Angela worked as a substitute teacher at a charter school in the south valley and she was learning important skills (both instructional and behavioral) that she applied to the children in the Family Literacy Program. Though there was no other large-based performance during the spring semester, the children were successful in learning a variety of dances. They had a chance to show off their skills when they danced for their parents at a Mother's Day celebration.

Reflection was an important part of each meeting's conclusion and most evenings, the directors would remain to talk about the afternoon's activities. Lena and Nelda discussed the mothers, their struggles as well as their accomplishments. Lena and Nelda were highly intuitive women and both had developed keen observational skills. They talked about what each had noticed, talking over each other and finishing each other's sentences in order to paint a vivid picture of the afternoon's activities. There was a brief discussion involving plans for the next week and by 6 pm, the directors made their way to the school's front door. Often times, incidental activities for the next week were not fully planned; the directors would have many opportunities to see each other and prepare literacy as well as advocacy activities during the coming week. The Family Literacy Program ended its third year on a high-note. The basic structures of the program were firmly in place and the directors and instructors had effectively worked together to offer opportunities for parents to become more confident in their personal literacy skills as they advocated for themselves and their children.

The successes of the Family Literacy Program were also gaining recognition in the larger community. The directors of the program were interviewed and an article appeared in the local newspaper. Elisa Castro, a focal participant shared that she was forty-six years old, a Mexican immigrant, and a native Spanish speaker and that she was genuinely enthusiastic about helping her children learn to love learning. Elisa reported to the newspaper reporter (Dominguez-Lund, July 15, 2008),

> I didn't talk much to my children's teachers or know how to help them much with their homework before I was in the program. I was very timid because of the language barrier. Now I have an understanding of English, even though I still may not be able to speak it. And I understand my rights or role as a parent in the

> school and feel more confident talking to the teachers and helping my children if they need me to. (p. B4)

In addition to the mothers, the voices of the directors were heard. Lena Duran shared in the same newspaper article that while building literacy skills,

> the program creates a learning community of parents who among many things, engage in reading, writing, and public speaking exercises while their young children and toddlers play educational games and learn literacy in their own supervised classrooms…the Spanish/English bilingual families receive literacy instruction from specialized teachers and professors; opportunities to engage in reading and writing activities for all ages and bilingual literature to share at home with their children. (p. B4)

Nelda Chavez added the program was creating lifelong learners. "We're not teaching a single concept like literature, math, science or scrapbooking…we're teaching these parents how to learn and how to facilitate learning. We're teaching the process of learning and how it critically overlaps into everyday life" (Dominguez-Lund, July 15, 2008, p. B4). Having this opportunity to showcase the Family Literacy Program helped to cement its place in the River View community; the program's fourth year would begin two months after the article appeared in the local newspaper.

## Year Four: 2008-2009

As in past years, the Family Literacy Program began its fourth year at River View Elementary School in early October 2008. The basic structures of the program endured but there were some minor changes among the program's directors and instructors. Most notable is that during this fourth year, Lena Duran would assume full responsibility as the program's director. Nelda Chavez would take an assistant position; this would free Nelda to take on different responsibilities outside of the Family Literacy Program. Rena returned as the children's dance instructor. Angela, Rena's sister, left the program at the

end of the previous year. Because Lena was the program's sole director, she hired a graduate student to assist her.

Tessa Garcia was a powerful addition to the program. A native Spanish-speaker, Tessa was educated in Mexico and held a bachelor's degree in Social Psychology and Teaching English as a Second Language. She believed in the basic tenets of the Family Literacy Program as well as the notion of empowerment through literacy and held an interest in women's construction of their gender identity. Recently, Tessa noted several points that she believed were strengths of the program. Primarily, the mission to empower adult learners through literacy is profound, she added, "…and to help in the construction of family ties between generations and across cultures…I also think that Dr. Duran's enthusiasm for and dedication to the program is contagious" (email communication, 1/19/09). To that end, Tessa has brought a complementary view of literacy coupled with a fresh perspective both of which have improved the overall quality of the program.

A final change occurred during the first half of the fourth year when a visiting professor from Mexico conducted a series of writing workshops with participating mothers. This professor visited the Family Literacy Program in November, 2008 and presented parts of a reading/writing workshop titled *Reading and Writing the Changes of Our Lives*. The goals of the writing workshop were:

1). To promote participants' literacy skills in Spanish

2) To reflect on personal development through writing the important moments in one's life and

3) To develop a space to exchange ideas and experiences.

These goals were aligned with the goals of the Family Literacy Program. Though the professor was unable to present the entire workshop, Lena, Nelda, Tessa, and I met with her one afternoon and on a Saturday to learn more about the program and to experience some of the writing activities first-hand. It was the intention to offer more of her writing activities when the program began again in January 2009.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have described the Family Literacy Program from its inception in the fall of 2005 through the end of the 2008-2009 school year. Lena Duran, a faculty member from the university's College of Education, doctoral students, and teachers from the local school district received donations from area businesses to fund a family literacy program. Grounded in sociocultural theory and with a broad understanding of literacy, this group of professionals began to make lasting connections with families and a move to an elementary school in the south valley solidified the Family Literacy Program's position in the community.

The Family Literacy Program began its second year with a familiar staff and a set routine. Now on Thursday afternoons, mothers worked on a variety of text-related activities with teachers while their children learned traditional folk dances in the school's gymnasium. The third year brought several changes to the Family Literacy Program. Primarily, the staff was reduced; only Lena Duran, Nelda Chavez, and the children's folk dance instructors regularly met with participants. Reducing the number of staff ensured that Lena and Nelda had greater control and therefore greater impact on the instructional side as well as the administrative side of the program. Additionally, funds originally intended to compensate teachers were rerouted to pay for an ongoing, authentic literacy

project: Heritage Albums. Heritage Albums and the concept of *scrapbooking* had been introduced during the previous summer. Mothers were given digital cameras and they spent the summer months writing narratives to accompany their photographs. Their preliminary albums were so promising that the Heritage Album theme continued throughout the year.

During this third year, parents (mothers for the most part) met with Lena and Nelda while their children continued to learn traditional folk dances and participate in an assortment of literacy activities. The Family Literacy Program entered its fourth year with a stable staff, predictable routines, and a loyal group of participants. The Family Literacy Program ended its fourth year with plans to resume in the fall of 2009. Funds that were intended to span three years were stretched to four. The program's directors and university development staff are presently investigating additional funding sources to ensure that the Family Literacy Program will continue meeting a fifth year, and beyond.

# CHAPTER 5

# COMMUNITY

In order to get to school, Leandra Lopez and her two youngest children walk a fair distance from their home in Westgate Heights to Coors Boulevard. On Coors, they board a city bus that takes them to downtown Albuquerque. From there, it is a short walk to River View Elementary School. Leandra could send her children to an elementary school in their neighborhood but Leandra chooses to make this daily trip because the dual language program at River View is first rate. After her children have been safely delivered to their classrooms, Leandra turns around and heads back home. The trip from her home to River View and back takes Leandra well over an hour and she shared that she is grateful that her older daughter is able to drive the children home after school. Given the distance and the time it takes to travel to her children's elementary school, it seems remarkable that on Thursdays, Leandra makes the trip twice; the Family Literacy Program meets on Thursday afternoons. During the 2007-2008 school year, Leandra never missed a family literacy meeting. She explained, "I like everything about the program. For me, this program is a family reunion, I get together with a huge family."

Leandra reported that she began attending family literacy meetings because the Even Start program at River View required a parental involvement component. Though the school offered a variety of choices, Leandra chose to attend family literacy meetings. Primarily, she had an established relationship with Nelda Chavez; Leandra had previously participated in a parent advocacy class when Nelda worked for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). When Leandra arrived at the first meeting, she was delighted to be greeted by several familiar faces. Besides Nelda,

there were other mothers in attendance who had also participated in the MALDEF parent advocacy class. In the beginning, these were the mothers with whom Leandra socialized. Consistent attendance and a variety of socially constructed activities ensured that within a short amount of time, new acquaintances became good friends and it was within this circle of support that Leandra began to grow and gain confidence as a reader and writer.

The commitment and dedication that Leandra has shown the Family Literacy Program is a contradiction to the opinion held concerning low-income, immigrant families. Jorge Osterling (2001), a researcher who has conducted studies of successful community-based programs that serve Latino populations in the Washington D.C. area, writes that in reality, it is "cultural barriers, particularly linguistic differences" (p. 1) that prevents immigrant parents from participating in their children's formal education. Osterling (2001) writes,

> If we want all K-12 students to develop to their respective individual potentials, we may borrow from the economic game theory, the "non-zero sum game" concept, where every player can be a winner and where cooperation, teamwork, and the tapping in on knowledge and resources that each individual possesses is the key to success. (p. 1)

Osterling describes the tapping of knowledge and resources as waking the sleeping giant, "the fully alive and communicating society demonstrated at the community level" (p. 3).

## Latinos in the United States

Tapping into the community's knowledge and resources is crucial if immigrant parents are going to participate in their children's education in a meaningful way. In 2007, the population of the United States reached over three-hundred million; forty-five million, or approximately fifteen percent, of those were Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Judged to be the nation's fastest-growing demographic, educating this culturally

and linguistically diverse population has become an important focus of school districts. Historically, Hispanic children have not excelled in U.S. schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (Llagas, 2003) reports that four risk factors have been identified that affect student outcomes. Those risk factors are 1) having a mother who did not finish high school, 2) being a recipient of food stamps or living on welfare, 3), living in a single-parent family, and 4) having parents who have a first language other than English. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that Hispanic kindergarteners are thirty-five percent more likely to have at least two of these risk factors than their White peers. Likewise, Hispanic students have higher retention and suspension rates, are more likely to drop out of high school than either White or Black students, and only two out of every five Hispanics who are seventeen years or older participate in adult education (Llagas, 2003).

The failure of minority students to make academic gains has also been examined in educational research. Cummins' (1986) analysis of minority students' academic failure and subsequent framework are juxtaposed against "power relations within the broader society" (p. 32). Cummins writes,

> Specifically, language-minority students' educational progress is strongly influenced by the extent to which individual educators become advocates for the promotion of students' linguistic talents, actively encourage community participation in developing students' academic and cultural resources, and implement pedagogical approaches that succeed in liberating students from instructional dependence. (p. 32)

The position of the National Center for Educational Statistics coupled with Cummins' (1986) research helps to further the notion that academic achievement for minority students is challenging, but not impossible. Osterling (2001) writes that one of the

strengths of the Latino[5] community is its diversity. Therefore, in light of these statistics and studies, it seems more important than ever to tap the knowledge and resources at the community or grassroots level (Freire, 1970) with contributions from parents and students as well as school district bureaucrats.

## Building a Community

Vélez-Ibáñez (1988) and more recently Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) and the concept of *funds of knowledge*, the cultural artifacts and bodies of knowledge that underlie household activities, is directly applicable to tapping the rich resources found in Latino communities. Osterling (2001) writes that though there are "neither easy solutions nor quick fixes" (p. 9), Latino parents do become involved in their school community when teachers and staff make efforts to learn about the specific needs of their community and consequently embed instruction in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

A primary reason that the Family Literacy Program has flourished at River View is because the school itself has made considerable gains in understanding and building community through fostering parental involvement. The staff has adhered to Epstein's (2001) framework that details six types of parental involvement and is thoroughly committed to the notion of overlapping spheres of influence and therefore has been successful at steadily building efficacy in the parent community. Though the framework was originally implemented as a way to understand parents in relation to PTA

[5] *Hispanic* is a term that I use only when referencing government documents. According to Suaréz-Orozco & Paéz (2002), *Latino* is a self-identifying term used to refer to peoples/cultures from Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas and the Caribbean. The majority of the mothers who are participating in the Family Literacy Program, however, self-identify as *Mexicana* rather than Hispanic or Latina.

involvement[6], the school commonly uses Epstein's framework to understand parental involvement across the school community. Epstein's first type of parental involvement is *improving communication* between the school and the family. Shelly Walters, parent coordinator at River View, described *hearing the parent voice* (Parent Engagement at River View handout, 2007-2008) as the first step in improving communication. At present, teachers at River View communicate with parents via newsletters, flyers, and through family events such as Open House and parent-teacher conferences. And since parents have access to computers and the internet at the school as well as at the public library, minutes from the school's instructional council meetings are emailed to all parents who provide current email addresses. Teachers and staff intentionally seek to hear parents' voices and the first step in this process is to encourage parents to visit the school. To that end, parents are invited to attend classes, workshops, or simply to visit or volunteer as their schedules permit. Presently, classes and workshops center on learning English or Spanish as a second language, preparing for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test, and learning about general parenting skills. Informal observational data collected by Walters and teachers confirm that parents are making meaningful connections at their children's school.

The Family Literacy Program took advantage of the structures of communication that existed at River View. Families were initially recruited through the use of flyers hung in the hallways and on the front doors of the school. Additionally, teachers spoke personally to students and their mothers and encouraged them to attend the program. Finally, early on, Nelda took on the responsibility of phoning mothers a day or two

[6] National Standards for Parent & Family Involvement were created by Dr. Joyce Epstein and the national PTA.

before each family literacy meeting; these opportunities to chat with mothers helped to solidify their participation and subsequent regular attendance in the Family Literacy Program.

Epstein's (2001) second type of parental involvement is *promoting positive parenting.* The teachers and staff at River View share positive parenting skills in a variety of rich and multifaceted ways. The school offers workshops and sponsors a family health fair in which parents receive information and books on a variety of topics such as nutrition and childhood obesity. The school also sponsors an Embracing Fatherhood event, encourages participation in the annual Run for the Zoo, provides an on-site ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education) coordinator to help families locate community resources, and hosts the Family Literacy Program; these strategies all provide the foundation for parents to take an active role in their children's education. The Family Literacy Program provides an additional avenue for Epstein's (2001) framework of promoting positive parenting. Mothers regularly share issues that they are confronting with their children. It is interesting to note that Lena and Nelda do not attempt to offer specific advice or solutions to mothers' parenting concerns; rather, mothers listen to other's parenting challenges and construct solutions for themselves.

Epstein's (2001) third type of parental involvement is *enhancing student learning*. This type of parental involvement speaks explicitly to the notion of overlapping spheres of influence and is accomplished through a variety of parent and student events. Parent learning opportunities revolve around English as a Second Language (ESL), Spanish as a Second Language (SSL), preparing for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test, and computer classes. The school also pays for interested parents and educational assistants to

attend the *Las Semillas* annual conference sponsored by Dual Language Education of New Mexico as well as Family Leadership and state PTA conferences. Finally, the ENLACE coordinator works closely with parents, helping to remove obstacles that effect their lives and therefore pose a roadblock to supporting student learning. Examples of ways that the ENLACE coordinator supports parents is by helping to find affordable housing, childcare, and medical assistance. Additionally, a variety of functions are hosted specifically for students. These include a family math night, science night, and a reading slumber party. Because parents have so many opportunities to become involved in the community, teachers have reported a growing parent presence which they feel directly impacts student learning (personal conversation, Shelly Walters, October 23, 2008).

River View Elementary School addresses Epstein's (2001) fourth type of parental involvement, *increasing volunteerism*, by implementing a school-wide open door policy. The school has become a welcoming place for parents. The principal and teachers are receptive and much of the staff is bilingual; the resulting climate effectively communicates that parents are appreciated and that the act of volunteering is important to the education of their children. Specifically, parents volunteer in individual classrooms, facilitate a variety of fundraising activities, oversee the food bank back-pack program (this program provides healthy snacks to approximately seventy students), and assist with a myriad of family, school-sponsored events.

Epstein's (2001) fifth type is *supporting decision-making and advocacy* and constitutes one of the highest levels of parental involvement. An example of this type of involvement is parents who serve on the PTA board, attend higher-level training opportunities, and present to the larger city, state, and national community. As expected,

few parents are involved in the school community at this high level. There is, however, distinction in the fact that the school's PTA president served on the state PTA board, and is presently PTA president-elect of the state of New Mexico. It has been reported that participation at this level is increasing (Parent Engagement at River View handout, 2008-2009), more parents are attending *Las Semillas* annual conference, attending dual language advocacy meetings, and providing input on the school's Title I proposal. Though modest gains have been made, teachers and staff recognize that more parent input is needed on the day-to-day management of the school. To that end, there is ongoing exploration in ways to include more parents in monthly meetings of the school's instructional council.

Epstein's (2001) final type of parental involvement is *collaborating with the community* and it is in this type that River View excels. Teachers and staff have reached out to a variety of local businesses to help support River View Elementary School monetarily and through goods and services. These collaborations have effectively promoted community building through collaboration as well as by addressing the majority of Epstein's framework for parental involvement.

Examining these existing structures that have been implemented at the school is essential to fully understand why the Family Literacy Program has thrived at River View. The teachers and staff at River View have made a concerted effort to fully implement Epstein's (2001) parental involvement framework. They are familiar with the different types of parental involvement and understand that they occupy different regions on the hierarchy of Epstein's parental involvement framework; to that end, they expect that there are more parents participating in school-wide events such as Open House and

parent-teacher conferences than in conferences such as *Las Semillas*. The Family Literacy Program has found its niche principally because it satisfies a number of features of Epstein's framework and is easily accessible to parents whose children are enrolled at River View. And most importantly, the teachers and staff fully support the Family Literacy Program, principally because participation affords parents the opportunity to participate in higher levels of parental involvement such as advocacy and shared decision-making.

In order for the Family Literacy Program to offer parents opportunities to participate in higher levels of involvement, the framers of the program constructed ways to understand and ground culturally relevant instruction in the needs of the community while teaching parents (and their children) literacy practices that are essential for full participation in schools as well as in the larger context. Though Lena Duran and Nelda Chavez have experience working with the Latino community, they both also realize that parents who are participating in the program come with diverse academic and social backgrounds (Osterling, 1998). In order to understand their background, subsequent needs, and to awaken the sleeping giant, parents were surveyed (through the use of questionnaires as well as small group discussion) early in the program's onset as well as when the program reconvenes in the fall of each year. Questions from written surveys were designed to obtain general information and to gain an understanding of why parents were attending the program, what they have learned from participating in the Family Literacy Program, what types of literacy activities they were modeling with their children at home, and what concerns they may have in relation to their children's learning. Lena and Nelda believed that if they had a better understanding of parents' reasons for

attending as well as their current literacy program and concerns for their children, they would be better able to design curriculum that would meet parents' unique needs and as a desired outcome, ensure regular participation.

Representative survey questions designed by the directors were 1) *¿Qué le atrae a Usted al programa de lectroescritura?* (Why do you come to the Family Literacy Program?); 2) *¿Personalmente, qué ha aprendido usted de este programa?* (In general, what have you learned from this program?); 3) *De todas las actividades que hemos hecho en el programa, ¿Cuáles ha usado con sus hijos en la casa?* (Of all of the activities you have experienced in this program, which ones have you modeled at home with your children?); and 4) *¿Qué preguntas tiena usted acerca del aprendizaje de su hijo/hija o sobre las escuelas en general?* (What concerns do you have about your children's learning and/or his/her school?). As expected, responses were varied and centered on diverse topics. Mothers wrote that they attend the Family Literacy Program because

- "We chat about everything and it is very interesting what they teach us."
- "We learn how to share and at the same time how to teach our kids."
- "I have learned how to have better communication with my son and a better way of helping him at home."

It is interesting to note that the mothers' responses for why they attended family literacy meetings centered on ways that they might help their family. Trueba (1999) writes about the role of Latina women in the context of family and posits that their responsibilities are many. They are the backbone of the immigrant family and are charged with maintaining ties to extended family that remain in Mexico as well as acculturating the immigrant family who now resides in the United States. Women become the decision-makers and

“engineer the quality of education” (p. 109) which their children receive. Within this context, it seems safe to suggest that while mothers detailed their reasons for attending the Family Literacy Program, their over-arching motivation for attending was to benefit their children and their family through social networking and the improvement of their personal literacy skills. Attending the program to benefit the family is culturally congruent (Trueba, 1999) while improving their literacy skills for personal achievement would have been less culturally acceptable.

Next, mothers detailed what they felt that they have learned from the Family Literacy Program.

- How to help and teach children.
- How to share various ideas.
- How to help children with homework.

When surveyed as to what literacy activities they model at home, mothers responded

- How to take notes from books.
- How illustrations show what is happening in the book.

Mothers found these questions to be clear-cut and straightforward. Their responses centered on their children and ways to enhance communication as well as ways to support their children in school. The mothers found one survey question, however, considerably more difficult to answer. In response to being asked about concerns for their children’s learning and/or school, mothers either left the question unanswered or answered broadly. One mother wrote, *“Pues yo estoy muy contenta porque hos dan los libros y me gusta leerle a la niña y nos enseñan vien”* (I am very content because they give us the books and I like to read to my daughter and they teach us well). Another wrote, *Por el momento*

*no tengo preguntas por que apenas estoy comensando con mis niños de 5 y 3 años. Esto me a ayudado mucho"* (At the moment, I don't have any questions because I am starting with my children of 5 and 3 years old. This has helped me very much). In fact, it is not surprising that mothers had difficulty answering the above question. Primarily, the question was open-ended and required mothers to interrogate their children's previous school experiences and to conduct this interrogation in a fairly short amount of time. This is an extremely difficult task to accomplish and given the relatively young age of the children who were participating in the program, it is not surprising that mothers had difficulty expressing their concerns. Regardless, Lena and Nelda used the responses that were generated from this survey to plan activities that would intentionally build community within the group of participating mothers and within the larger school community.

### The Family Literacy Program: Building an Educational Community

Lena Duran and Nelda Chavez recognized that in order for mothers to consistently attend the Family Literacy Program, efforts must be made early on to cultivate a sense of friendship, empathy, cohesiveness, and community among the program's participants. They knew that regular attendance was not enough. In fact, in the Family Literacy Program's third year, there were several mothers who, in spite of regular attendance, struggled to make strong connections within the group. Though one mother eventually dropped out of the program, thoughtful and purposeful activities and discussions supported the other two mothers to become respected members of the Family Literacy Program community.

## Overcoming Resistance among Mothers

Roxanna was a young immigrant mother from Mexico City. She began attending at the beginning of the program's third year and her strong opinions and outgoing personality made her highly visible within the group of mothers. I first noticed Roxanna during a discussion that Nelda was facilitating; the discussion topic was book clubs and the mothers were talking about good books that they had read. Nelda shared that she had read *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997) and that she felt the mothers would also enjoy reading it. Roxanna was very interested in reading a book as a group and she shared that she had recently read a book about smart women and what they need. Nelda countered by articulating that the mothers would be writing about what they as women need, real or spiritual, and that their writing would be private. The exchange between Roxanna and Nelda stands out because within a short amount of time, Roxanna would publicly speak out against the Family Literacy Program.

Specifically, Roxanna voiced that she felt that elements of the program were disrespectful to her. She questioned the quality of the groceries that she received from the food bank and more importantly, she indicated she felt that the program's instructors, Lena Duran, Nelda Chavez, and the dance instructors who worked with her young children, talked down to her and the other mothers. Roxanna's personality was strong and she was considered to be a leader among the young mothers. She used her position of leadership to encourage some of the mothers to not attend the family literacy meetings. When the directors became aware of this controversy, they withheld sharing comments and their opinions and simply encouraged the participants to think for themselves. Roxanna quit attending family literacy meetings in early November of the third year and

despite her best efforts, she ultimately failed to influence other mothers in the program; her friends continued to attend regularly. Lena, Nelda, and the dance instructors remembered Roxanna and the controversy that she had instigated. Though they were certainly respectful of Roxanna's right to disagree and to not participate in the program, they felt that by helping mothers to build relationships with each other, incidents of this kind would be less likely to occur.

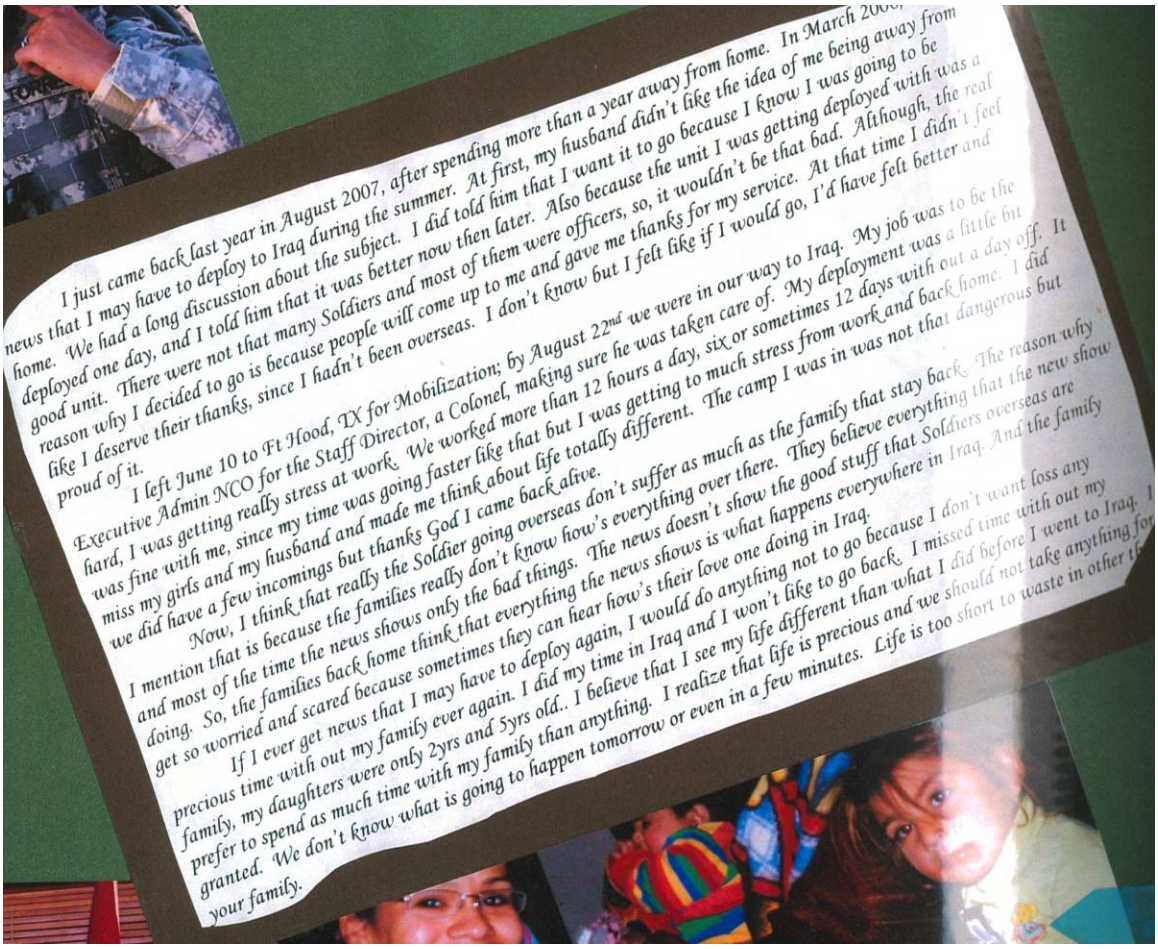
Roxanna was not the only mother who possessed a strong and questioning personality. Elisa Castro, a focal participant, described herself as quiet and introverted. Her behavior during family literacy meetings, however, was quite the opposite. During meetings, Elisa's behavior was difficult. She would often sit alone at a table near the back of the room. Her distance from other mothers, however, did not prevent her from sharing her insights and opinions on a variety of topics. Though her opinions were often insightful, they were tinged with combativeness and opposition. Nelda shared that on more than one occasion, Elisa dominated the conversation to the point that the other mothers became somewhat resentful. Though no one explicitly voiced their displeasure, it was evident by the expressions on the mothers' faces that they were growing tired of Elisa's constant need to share her singular point-of-view.

A turning point occurred in November of Elisa's second year when she arrived at a meeting after it had already begun. Nelda was standing at the front of the room and she was passing out blank scrapbook pages to the mothers. The mothers were talking with each other and Nelda was moving from group to group. Elisa dashed into the room and sat down with Leandra, Anna, and one other mother at a group of desks towards the rear of the room. Within moments, the mothers who were sitting with Elisa started giggling

and their giggles soon turned into raucous laughter. Elisa, laughing too, walked quickly out of the room; Nelda made her way to the back of the room to see what the commotion was all about. The mothers, still laughing loudly, shared that Elisa had arrived late to the meeting wearing a shirt that was turned inside out. Elisa's obvious embarrassment led the mothers to believe that she had been involved in an afternoon liaison and had dressed hurriedly so that she would not be late to the meeting. Elisa laughed at their good-natured teasing and with that incident and her ability to laugh at herself, Elisa gained access and was accepted by the group. Elisa, a gifted writer, was always admired by the other mothers but her aloofness coupled with combative behavior and aggressive opinions kept her marginalized from the larger group. When the meeting ended, Nelda and I stayed to discuss the meeting in general; the conversation soon turned to Elisa and her encounter with the other mothers. Nelda and I agreed that the night had been a turning point for Elisa; her encounter with the mothers had solidified her place in the group. In retrospect, however, it was a variety of consciously planned conversations and activities that not only laid the groundwork for Elisa's acceptance but that proved to be the foundation for the success of the Family Literacy Program.

A final example of overcoming resistance among the mothers involved Anna, a newcomer to the program and a soldier in the Army who had left her husband and two young daughters to serve in Iraq. Anna's husband, Joel was a long-term substitute teacher at River View. He encouraged his wife to attend family literacy meetings because he felt that she was hesitant and somewhat unwilling to engage their daughters in home literacy activities. For example, though he had told his wife of the benefits of storybook reading, she rarely read to her children. Joel convinced Anna to attend and the mothers noticed her

when she walked in wearing her Army fatigues. None understood, however, the sacrifice and commitment that she had made for her country until she stood up and read from her album (Figure 5.1).


I just came back last year in August 2007, after spending more than a year away from home. In March 2006, I received news that I may have to deploy to Iraq during the summer. At first, my husband didn't like the idea of me being away from home. We had a long discussion about the subject. I did told him that I want it to go because I know I was going to be deployed one day, and I told him that it was better now then later. Also because the unit I was getting deployed with was a good unit. There were not that many Soldiers and most of them were officers, so, it wouldn't be that bad. Although, the real reason why I decided to go is because people will come up to me and gave me thanks for my service. At that time I didn't feel like I deserve their thanks, since I hadn't been overseas. I don't know but I felt like if I would go, I'd have felt better and proud of it.

I left June 10 to Ft Hood, TX for Mobilization; by August 22nd we were in our way to Iraq. My job was to be the Executive Admin NCO for the Staff Director, a Colonel, making sure he was taken care of. My deployment was a little bit hard, I was getting really stress at work. We worked more than 12 hours a day, six or sometimes 12 days with out a day off. It was fine with me, since my time was going faster like that but I was getting to much stress from work and back home. I did miss my girls and my husband and made me think about life totally different. The camp I was in was not that dangerous but we did have a few incomings but thanks God I came back alive.

Now, I think that really the Soldier going overseas don't suffer as much as the family that stay back. The reason why I mention that is because the families really don't know how's everything over there. They believe everything that the new show and most of the time the news shows only the bad things. The news doesn't show the good stuff that Soldiers overseas are doing. So, the families back home think that everything the news shows is what happens everywhere in Iraq. And the family get so worried and scared because sometimes they can hear how's their love one doing in Iraq.

If I ever get news that I may have to deploy again, I would do anything not to go because I don't want loss any precious time with out my family ever again. I did my time in Iraq and I won't like to go back. I missed time with out my family, my daughters were only 2yrs and 5yrs old.. I believe that I see my life different than what I did before I went to Iraq. I prefer to spend as much time with my family than anything. I realize that life is precious and we should not take anything for granted. We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow or even in a few minutes. Life is too short to waste in other th your family.

***Figure 5.1.*** **Deployment in Iraq.**

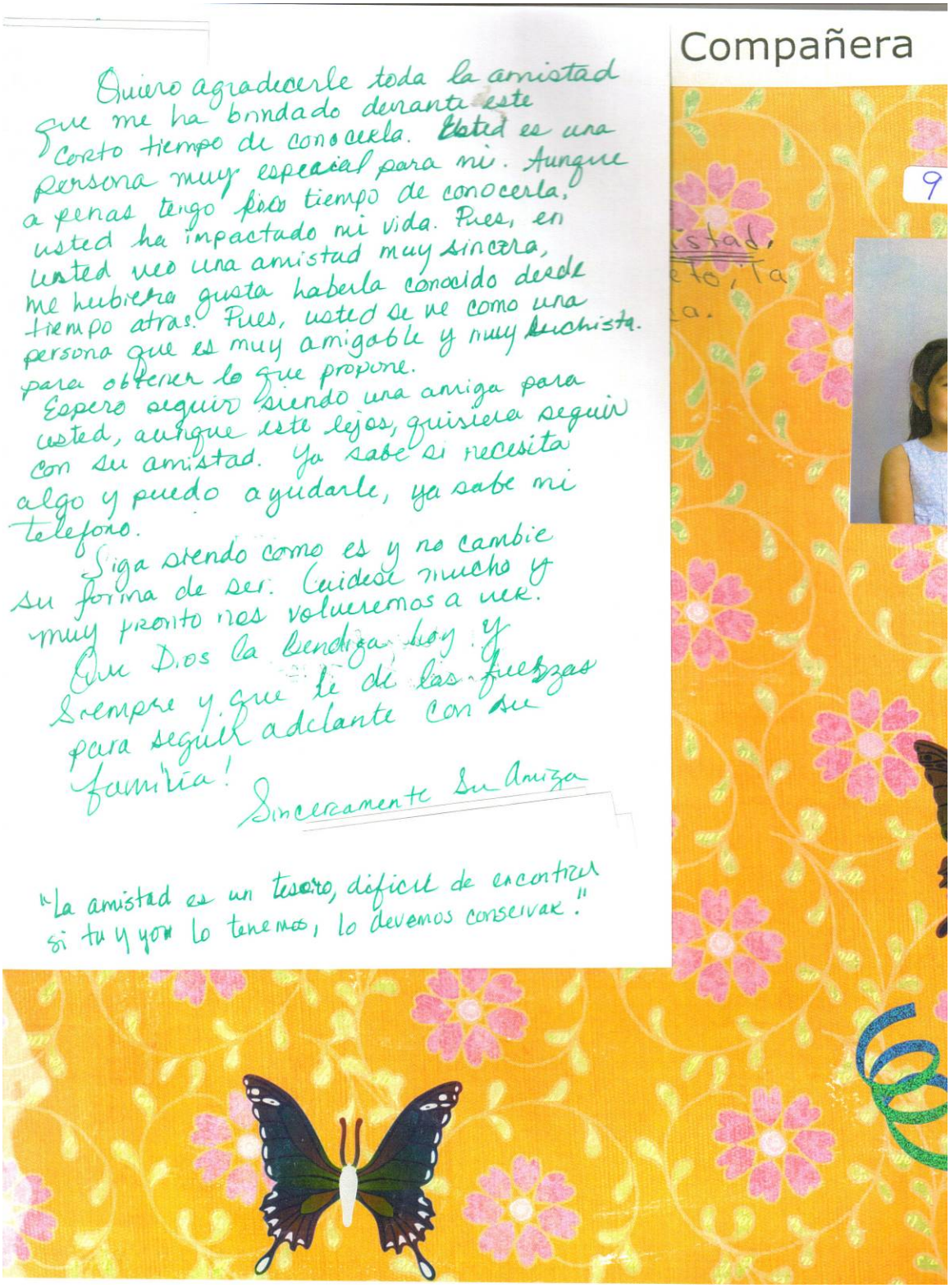
Anna's album entry reads,

> I just came back last year in August 2007, after spending more than a year away from home. In March 2006, I received news that I may have to deploy to Iraq during the summer. At first, my husband didn't like the idea of me being away from home. We had a long discussion about the subject. I did told him that I want it to go because I know I was going to be deployed one day, and I told him that it was better now then later. Also because the unit I was getting deployed with was a good unit. There were not that many soldiers and most of them were officers, so, it wouldn't be that bad. Although, the real reason why I decided to go is because people will come up to me and gave me thanks for my service. At that

> time I didn't feel like I deserve their thanks, since I hadn't been overseas. I don't know but I felt like if I would go, I'd have felt better and proud of it.
>
> I left June 10 to Ft Hood, TX for Mobilization; by August 22nd we were in our way to Iraq. My job was to be the Executive Admin NCO for the Staff Director, a Colonel, making sure he was taken care of. My deployment was a little bit hard, I was getting really stress at work. We worked more than 12 hours a day, six or sometimes 12 days with out a day off. It was fine with me, since my time was going faster like that but I was getting to much stress from work and back home. I did miss my girls and my husband and made me think about life totally different. The camp I was in was not that dangerous but we did have a few incomings but thanks God I came back alive.
>
> Now, I think that really the soldier going overseas don't suffer as much as the family that stay back. The reason why I mention that is because the families really don't know how's everything over there. They believe everything that the news shows and most of the time the news shows only the bad things. The news doesn't show the good stuff that soldiers overseas are doing. So, the families back home think that everything the news shows is what happens everywhere in Iraq. And the family get so worried and scared because sometimes they can hear how's their love one doing in Iraq.
>
> If I ever get news that I may have to deploy again, I would do anything not to go because I don't want loss any precious time with out my family ever again. I did my time in Iraq and I won't like to go back, I missed time with out my family, my daughters were only 2 yrs and 5 yrs old. I believe that I see my life different than what I did before, I went to Iraq. I prefer to spend as much time with my family than anything. I realize that life is precious and we should not take anything for granted. We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow or even in a few minutes. Life is too short to waste in other than your family.

Anna read this entry in English and as she read, she translated so that non-English speaking mothers could understand. In spite of the translation, however, one mother clearly did not understand and asked Anna how she took her children to Iraq with her. Anna laughed and looked embarrassed and Nelda explained that Anna did not take her children to Iraq; they stayed with their father in the United States. This information gave the mothers pause; few could understand how Anna could willingly leave her two young daughters. But reading this album narrative represented a turning point in how the mothers regarded Anna. Though they clearly did not understand her decision, they were proud of her and her decision to leave her young children and serve in Iraq. Anna told me

that soon after this incident, she went to a computer class and another mother from the program was there. When Anna was asked to introduce herself, before she could say a word, Leandra stood up and told everyone that Anna was a soldier in the Army and that she had recently returned from Iraq. From that day on, Anna and Leandra became close friends. And with Leandra's acceptance came acceptance from the other mothers in the program. Anna attended family literacy meetings for the remainder of the year and became a leader among the other mothers. Her Army experiences coupled with her school experiences (Anna had recently earned an associate degree from a local community college) helped mothers to envision possibilities in their own lives. Anna expressed her feelings in a letter to Leandra; this letter became part of Leandra's Heritage Album (Figure 5.2).



Compañera

9

Quiero agradecerle toda la amistad que me ha brindado durante este corto tiempo de conocerla. Usted es una persona muy especial para mi. Aunque a penas tengo poco tiempo de conocerla, usted ha impactado mi vida. Pues, en usted veo una amistad muy sincera, me hubiera gusta haberla conocido desde tiempo atras. Pues, usted se ve como una persona que es muy amigable y muy luchista. para obtener lo que propone.

Espero seguir siendo una amiga para usted, aunque este lejos, quisiera seguir con su amistad. Ya sabe si necesita algo y puedo ayudarle, ya sabe mi telefono.

Siga siendo como es y no cambie su forma de ser. Cuidese mucho y muy pronto nos volveremos a ver.

Que Dios la bendiga hoy y siempre y que le de las fuerzas para seguir adelante con su familia!

Sinceramente Su Amiga

"La amistad es un tesoro, dificil de encontrar si tu y yo lo tenemos, lo devemos conservar."

*Figure 5.2.* **Anna's letter to Leandra.**

> Miss Leandra,
> I want to thank you for the friendship that you have given me during this short time of knowing you. You are a very special person to me. Although it's been a short time of knowing you, you have impacted my life. Because of you, I see a very sincere friendship. I would have like to have met you before because you seem to be a very friendly person and very outgoing to attain what you want. I hope to keep on being your friend although I'll be far, I would like to keep with your friendship and you know if you need something and I can help you, you have my phone number. Keep being like you are, don't change your way of being. Take care of yourself and pretty soon we'll see each other again. May God bless you now and always and may He give you the strength to keep going forward with your family.
> Sincerely, your friend, Anna León.

## Community Building Activities

Though Roxanna's and Elisa's experiences are illustrative of the serendipitous nature of relationships, Lena and Nelda did not leave building community to chance. Specifically, a variety of activities were designed to help mothers become acquainted with one another and to build confidence, efficacy, and community within the group of mothers.

### *Compliment strips*

An established routine was for mothers to sign in when they arrived at the Family Literacy Program. At the first meeting of the third year, the sign-in sheet was used to pair up mothers for an introductory, community building activity. Each participant was given a strip of paper and directed to watch the mother whose name was on the strip. The mothers were told that later in the afternoon, they would be asked to write something that they had observed about that mother; if they did not know the mother, she would be pointed out by others who were in attendance.

There were sixteen adult participants in the room for that first meeting; ten of the mothers had participated the previous year and six of the mothers were new to the

program. The mothers took the compliment strips and immediately began whispering to each other; they were making sure that they understood the task that they were undertaking. As the afternoon progressed, the mothers began writing on the compliment strips. Elisa, a returning participant wrote to Anna, a newcomer to the program: *"A mi parece muy intersante el trabajo de ella. Me intrigan sus vivencias. Son [undecipherable] considero que no es nada fasil estar lujos de sus familiars."* (I think her work is very interesting. I'm intrigued by her experiences. They are….. I think it's not easy at all to be away from her relatives). Another mother to Sofia, "*Yo admiro a Sofia per ser muy buena mama y complir con las clases de lecto escritura."*

The activity served its intended purpose. After the meeting, Nelda commented, "Did you notice how pleased they [the mothers] were?" As further evidence of the success of this introductory activity, compliment strips appeared in the mothers' Heritage Albums.

Over time, the mothers would have become acquainted with each other and relationships would have formed; the compliment strips, however, facilitated this process and the group dynamics were generally positive for the rest of the year. There were other short opening activities that occurred as the year progressed. Examples of these were brief book discussions, sharing homework, and webbing activities that preceded homework writing assignments.

*Group discussions*

Group discussions were an important part of family literacy meetings and these discussions had a profound impact on building community within the group of mothers as well as within the larger school community. These group discussions centered on a

variety of topics but most were designed to help situate immigrant mothers within the larger school and community context. An example of this type of group discussion occurred during the fifth meeting of the year. As the mothers entered the classroom, they signed in and as they made their way to their seats, Nelda gave each mother a push-pin. She pointed out a large map of Mexico that she had hung on the back wall of the classroom. Mothers were instructed to use the push-pins to mark the cities where they were from. One by one, mothers approached the map. Some of them easily found their places of origin; there were several pins in the Juarez area, one pin in Mexico City, and one is Oaxaca. For some mothers, the task was not so simple; they stood for several minutes trying to find the names of their towns and villages on the map. Eventually, they approximated where they believed their former homes to be. Sofia Ortega laughed and stuck her pin near Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific coast. She shared that her home was close by but that it must be too small to be on the map.

When the mothers were once again seated, Nelda made her way to the back of the classroom and examined the map; she commented on the mothers' diversity based on their places of origin. She pointed out that some mothers came from large cities, others from small villages. Nelda also took the opportunity to comment on some of the current events that were happening in the mothers' home towns. For example, she spoke in depth about Oaxaca and about the problems that teachers in the community have suffered. She explained that Oaxacan teachers are politically strong and have been on strike. The teachers' demands included more pay as well as better working conditions. Nelda also drew the mother's attention to the push-pin that indicated Mexico City. Roxanna was still attending the family literacy meetings and she was from Mexico City. Nelda asked her to

describe the city and Roxanna replied, *"mucho gente pero mucho musico"* (There are a lot of people but a lot of music).

Nelda suggested to the mothers that in spite of their diversity, they all had one thing in common: They were immigrants. She showed the mothers a newspaper clipping and explained that it was an article about immigrants in Europe. Nelda explained that immigrants were not only from Mexico and Latin America; the immigrants described in the newspaper article were from Africa and their living conditions were so deplorable that they were seeking political refuge in Spain. During the course of the discussion, mothers shared their own immigration stories. Leandra described how she had left Oaxaca as a young woman with her new husband. She expressed the pain of leaving her family but shared that she was hopeful that she and her husband would be building a better life together. Maria, a young mother, described her journey across the Chihuahuan desert and the risks that she had undertaken to come to the United States. Through the map activity and the thoughtful discussion that ensued, the mothers came to understand that immigration is a human phenomenon and people undertake great risks to move to new locations with the hope of improving their living conditions. More importantly, through sharing their personal stories of immigration, the mothers experienced a heightened awareness and developed a deep empathy for one another.

Another example of a group discussion that helped to build a feeling of community among the mothers was again led by Nelda. During the seventh meeting of the year, Nelda discussed high school and the dropout rate among Latino students.[7] She noted that dropping out of school is a common theme among high school-aged girls.

[7] The U.S. Census Bureau (2003) estimates that the drop-out rate among Hispanic youth is 21.1 per cent. This is three times greater than the drop-out rate for non-Hispanic (Anglo) youth.

Nelda discussed the pressures that are unique to teenage girls and the fact that these pressures often revolve around boyfriends. Nelda suggested that boyfriends are often viewed as trophies and that teenage girls are admired for their boyfriends. With this contextual information, Nelda invited the mothers to come up and write their children's names on the whiteboard. When the mothers returned to their seats, Nelda took out the marker and crossed out selected children's names. She stated that these crossed-out names represented children who would drop out of high school. Nelda paused to watch the mothers' reactions and then asked, "How did that make you feel?" Anna, the mother of two daughters, responded quickly. She said, "I wasn't bothered because I knew it wasn't true!" Nelda laughed and suggested that Anna's attitude and belief in her daughters was an important step in ensuring that her daughters remain in school. Nelda explained that as a child, her mother had felt the same way about her.

The discussion that ensued was brief; Nelda challenged the mothers to think of themselves not only as wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters. She suggested that they were women with their own emotions and desires and that an important desire should be to guide their children through school. The large group discussion ended and mothers began to share their homework. But Sofia Ortega continued the discussion with another mother who was sitting at the table. Sofia confessed that she had dropped out of school during her sophomore year. She explained her conversation to me, "I wasn't getting anything out of school. My mother was upset but I told her I wanted things that she couldn't buy." Sofia related that after she had dropped out of high school, she had worked at a series of fast-food restaurants before getting married and having children. Sofia eventually passed the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test and she shared that she has dreams for her

daughters. She wants them to become educated and she wants them to attend college. The other mother agreed that she, too, wanted her children to become educated.

This activity and discussion surrounding high drop-out rates among Hispanic students was an important community building mechanism. Nelda would extend the conversation during a later family literacy meeting. She would talk about the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, supporting paths to citizenship, and the lottery scholarship available to select New Mexico high school students. Though advocacy in nature, this information and ensuing discussions allowed mothers to exchange personal stories, offer support to each other, and create the social cohesion necessary to ensure engaged participation in the Family Literacy Program.

*Heritage albums*

During the course of the program's third year, Lena Duran and Nelda Chavez planned a variety of activities that were designed to build a sense of community among the mothers. None was more profound in building community than the construction of the Heritage Albums. The Heritage Albums were conceived of at the end of the program's second year and begun as a pilot program during the summer months. Several mothers were provided digital cameras and instructed to take photographs of their home and families and then to write about them. These photographs and accompanying narratives laid the foundation for the Heritage Albums, a project that would endure during the upcoming school year.

Setting the stage for the introduction of the Heritage Albums was thoughtfully planned by Lena and Nelda. At the first meeting of the year, the mothers who had met during the summer brought their albums to show to the other mothers. Additionally,

Lena, Nelda, and I borrowed albums from our friends; the intent was to provide mothers with a variety of models and styles of albums as well as to construct background knowledge. Over the next several meetings, Lena and Nelda continued to bring examples of albums; mothers could examine concrete examples of albums and could see that though they came in a variety of styles, they were all comprised of photographs and accompanying narratives. Lena selected albums and went through them, page by page; she explained each photograph and read each narrative. A scrapbook that heightened the mother's interest was one that Lena's friends had made for her; it chronicled her participation in the city's music community. As Lena showed the album, she talked about its significance in her life and she posed these questions to the mothers: *¿Quién es su familia en tiempo?* (Who is your family in the present?) and *¿Quién es su familia en pasado?* (Who is your family in the past?) Lena remarked that these questions would guide the mothers' work over the course of the year.

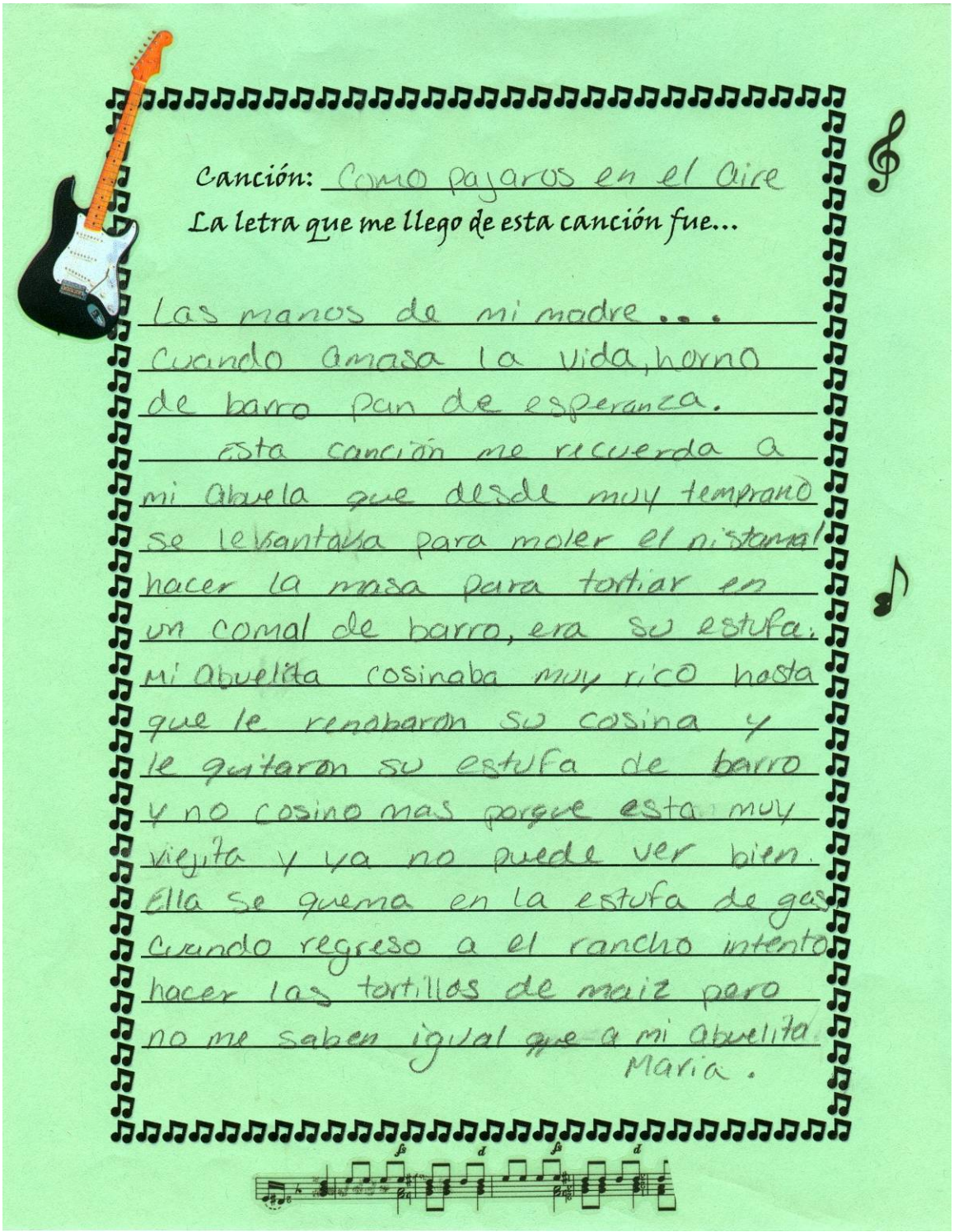
Lena and Nelda clearly understood the strength of community that lay in the Heritage Albums. Though the mothers who participated in the Family Literacy Program came from a variety of backgrounds (large cities as well as isolated non-urban areas), the directors were convinced that each came with cultural knowledge that, when shared, would empower and strengthen the self-confidence and sense of community in the group as a whole. The Heritage Albums became one vehicle for sharing this cultural knowledge.

Lena and Nelda began the Heritage Album project by designing activities that would help mothers to interrogate their own rich, personal experiences. These activities were often grounded in bilingual multicultural children's literature. An example of using

children's literature to assist mothers in making personal connections was found in Carmen Lomas Garza's book, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (1990). The book was a collection of vignettes that depicted families participating in a variety of home and community activities. Lena introduced the book by explaining that it would not tell a story in the traditional sense; rather that each page was a narrative, much like the ones that the mothers would be writing in their own albums. Reading the text sparked a variety of conversations among the mothers. They reacted to the vignettes by sharing stories from their lives. Three mothers shared stories in quick succession. They spoke in rapid Spanish and though I do not know the exact content of their tales, I could observe their animation and excitement. I also observed that the stories were intended to be humorous in nature; the mothers talked in such a way that their story lead to a climax, a definite point where the story concluded and laughter from the audience was anticipated.

Lena did not lose sight of the day's instructional goal. Though the mothers enjoyed sharing their personal stories, Lena used their stories to segue into a discussion about writing their own descriptively rich narratives. Over the course of the year, Lena routinely used examples of children's literature, photographs, and music to spark mothers' memories and inspire discussions which would ultimately support the development of their Heritage Albums. On one occasion, Lena and the mothers brought a number of photographs to the meeting. She talked about what her photographs meant to her and encouraged the mothers to share the photographs that they had brought. Sofia Ortega, the young mother from San Juan de Abajo, Nayarit, Mexico turned to show me photographs of her recent trip to her grandmother's ranch. She had three photographs. One was of her grandmother and her two young daughters, one was of her children

playing on the beach, and the third was of Sofia sitting tall on a mule. Sofia revealed that she felt very close to her grandmother. She related that when she was a very young girl, only five or six years old, her grandfather had passed away. It was traditional to prepare the deceased for burial and to have a viewing for the deceased in the main living area of the house. Sofia remembered that all of her cousins were frightened of her grandfather's corpse and that they refused to enter the house. Only Sofia was brave enough to attend the viewing; she stayed close to her grandmother's side. Sofia did not write about this incident in her album; she chose instead to write about her grandmother and how her grandmother would prepare food (Figure 5.3).



Canción: Como pajaros en el aire

La letra que me llego de esta canción fue...

Las manos de mi madre...
Cuando amasa la vida, horno
de barro pan de esperanza.
Esta canción me recuerda a
mi abuela que desde muy temprano
se levantaba para moler el nistamal
hacer la masa para tortiar en
un comal de barro, era su estufa.
Mi abuelita cosinaba muy rico hasta
que le remodaron su cosina y
le quitaron su estufa de barro
y no cosino mas porque esta muy
viejita y ya no puede ver bien.
Ella se quema en la estufa de gas
Cuando regreso a el rancho intento
hacer las tortillos de maiz pero
no me saben igual que a mi abuelita
Maria.

***Figure 5.3. Los manos de mi madre.***

The hands of my mother…when you knead the life, the oven of red clay, hope. This song reminds me of my grandma. Early in the morning, she would get up to

> grind the kernels of corn to make corn flour. She probably got up at four because when we got up at five, the tortillas were ready. She didn't have a stove, she had an horno with a disc on top. It's called a comal. That was her stove. My grandma would make really good food until they remodeled her kitchen and she was too old and she didn't have her stove anymore. She had a stove of gas, she couldn't see very well and she was so used to her old one that she didn't get burned. She would get burned on the gas stove. I miss her food because she doesn't cook any more.

Sofia stood before the group and read this narrative, one that described a significant memory in her childhood. Eventually, it was one that became a highlight of her album. The narrative was produced within the realm of community and acceptance and against the backdrop of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Lena affirmed, "We're constantly encouraging community. Every time we ask them to get up and read, there is a safety issue, they have to feel comfortable." This level of safety does not always come easily to the participants in the Family Literacy Program. Sofia confessed that it was hard for her to stand up and read from her album. Her early experiences of moving to the United States, being ridiculed by her classmates, and dropping out of high school had left her somewhat guarded; she shared, however, that the albums are important to her. "I have memories of my grandmother but they're somewhere way behind. I want them [her children] to have that memory. My grandma is a lady full of stories…she's 88 years old and she's not going to be with us forever." Sofia's sentiments are not unique among the participating mothers; the Heritage Albums were an enduring activity during the third year of the Family Literacy Program. Though they were an important means of chronicling family histories, the Heritage Albums ultimately became a vehicle for skill construction as well as identity development.

## Building Community: Linking Children to Traditional Dance

Epstein's (2001) sixth type of parental involvement involves collaborating with the community. Staff and teachers at River View have laid the groundwork for a variety of collaborative associations and an important one is with the city's National Hispanic Cultural Center (NHCC). Located in the neighborhood, the school enjoyed a unique relationship with the NHCC; the NHCC was generous with its resources and advertised school events on its marquee. Osterling (2001) writes that community educators are experienced at finding non-threatening ways to connect parents to schools. An opportunity that connected the Family Literacy Program to the National Hispanic Cultural Center arose early in the program's third year.

Rena and Jen, the dance instructors who worked with the children had strong connections to the National Hispanic Cultural Center; both were active in the dance community and had participated in numerous dance performances over the years. Early in the third year, they suggested that the children should work towards an achievable goal: performing traditional dances at the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe at the National Hispanic Cultural Center. To that end, the autumn months were spent preparing for the performance which would take place in early December. Though the majority of the preparation fell to Rena and Jen, parents had an active role in that they signed a permission form that outlined the project's attendance guidelines for participation. In essence, parents committed their children to rehearsals as well as to attending the final performance.

Rena and Jen worked closely with the NHCC and the resulting performance was a resounding success. Every student who attended rehearsals was present at the final

performance and families were invited to attend the event free of charge. Additionally, many mothers worked backstage to help the children with their hair, make-up, and costumes. This performance produced the desired effect; mothers established strong relationships and forged social networks with each other and the children made strides in learning skills in collaboration and cooperation that would serve them in the classroom. More importantly, this collaboration between the Family Literacy Program and the National Hispanic Cultural Center helped to build an additional critical linkage (Lareau, 2000) that tied families to the school community.

This theme of building community through children's dance endured for the remainder of the program's third year. On several occasions, parents ended family literacy meetings by watching their children perform traditional folk dances and Rena and Angela prepared a Mother's Day performance in early May. During the program's fourth year, the children once again took the stage at the National Hispanic Cultural Center and parents clearly valued the program as demonstrated by increased participation and their children's consistent attendance.

## Chapter Summary

Their lack of visibility on the school landscape often characterizes low-income, immigrant parents as unsupportive, disinterested, or unable to assist in their children's education. In fact, Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair (1999) suggest that despite in-depth analysis of collected data, the correlation that minority parents are any less interested in their children's education than middle-class parents simply does not exist. Osterling (2001) writes that in many cases, cultural and linguistic differences versus disinterest are most often to blame for parents' lack of participation and presence at school events. To

that end, Lareau (2000) suggests ways in which schools and parents can create linkages, connections that ensure a level of closeness between home and school. In this chapter, I have examined the various ways that the Family Literacy Program tapped River View Elementary School and established linkages that created a sense of community among family literacy participants.

Primarily, the Family Literacy Program was successful at River View because the school had made considerable gains in understanding and building a sense of community within the parent population. Building a sense of community, however, did not occur without resistance. There were some mothers who had extreme difficulty identifying with either the directors or other participants in the program. In one case, a mother stopped attending family literacy meetings but in the other two cases, resistant mothers persevered and developed relationships that secured their membership within the group.

A significant community-building activity that was profoundly unifying was the construction of Heritage Albums. Mothers used multicultural children's literature, writing protocols, and story starters to write narratives about their life experiences and as mothers shared their narratives with each other, they were able to identify commonalities and bridge differences in order to build a cohesive unit within the boundaries of the Family Literacy Program. And over time, the Heritage Albums became a vehicle for skill construction and identity development; mothers learned about the mechanics of their native language by editing and revising their original narratives.

Finally, the Family Literacy Program and participating parents entered into a collaborative relationship with the National Hispanic Cultural Center when family literacy children performed traditional folk dances at the celebration of the Virgin of

Guadalupe. The community building effects of this collaborative relationship were profound. Not only did mothers attend the final event free of charge, but many also assisted with backstage responsibilities such as helping the children with their costumes. And as a result of this event, mothers reported that they attended other events at the National Hispanic Cultural Center.

In closing, a strong sense of community within the Family Literacy Program was dynamic and forceful within the lives of the mothers. They attended meetings because they had developed meaningful relationships with a variety of people and they were learning attitudes and skills that were impacting the education of their children. More importantly, mothers were considering that the family literacy community, school community, and community at-large were intricately connected and that knowledge and familiarity in one area had the ability to transfer to another.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM: A VEHICLE OF EMPOWERMENT

> Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (Freire, 1970, p. 47)

The mothers who attended the Family Literacy Program did so for a variety of reasons. Some attended because parent education was a required component of the Even Start program. Other mothers attended because they had forged relationships with the directors of the program and still others shared that they participated because they received free books and groceries. An underlying commonality between the mothers, however, was that all were interested in improving their literacy skills and wished to become empowered and advocate for their children's education; each comprehended that establishing ties to the school would contribute to their empowerment (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Empowerment is a term widely used in educational research (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). There are many nuances of meanings; I am heavily influenced by the work of Delgado-Gaitan (1990; 2001) and therefore define *empowerment* as "the change which a person or a group of people undergoes that enables them to participate fully in their social environment" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, p. 42). A vehicle for empowerment, Lena Duran described the Family Literacy Program as a *grass roots*[8] program, one that taps the knowledge and skills that each member of the community brings. Tapping human and social capital and laying the groundwork for empowerment via personal knowledge and skills is not an unfamiliar concept. John Dewey (1916) and later, Freire

[8] *Grass roots* is Freire's (1970) term for a program that avoids the trappings of political bureaucracy and is grounded in the strengths and needs of the people.

(1970) present a pedagogical stance steeped in dialogue, organization, and cooperation; these enduring concepts have influenced the works of many educational reformers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Valdés, 1996).

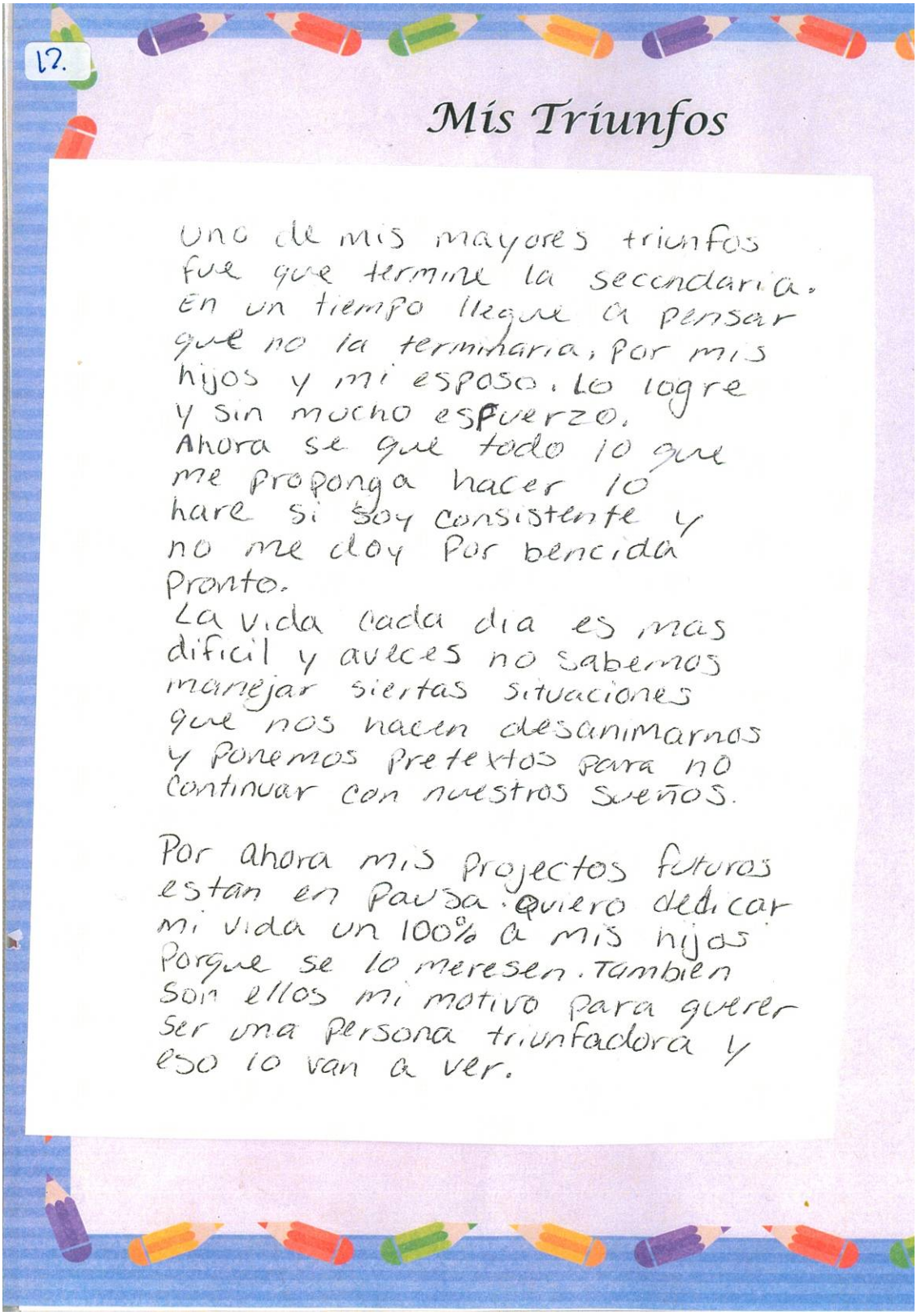
Through discussions, activities, and in the construction of the Heritage Albums, Lena and Nelda consciously tapped the human capital (the knowledge and skills held by each individual person) as well as the social capital (knowledge and skills that exist in relationships between people) of the participants. Coleman (1991) writes, "Those children succeed best in school whose parents are intelligent and well educated (human capital) and involved and interested in their children's progress (social capital)" (p. 10). Coleman extends this discussion by making a distinction between the social capital of the family and the one that exists in the school community. He writes that while the social capital contained in the household is important, the social capital of the adult community outside of the household also impacts children's success in school. Coleman (1991) writes,

> A school with extensive social capital in the community of parents is one in which parents have been able among themselves (or sometimes with the help of the school) to set standards of behavior…to make and enforce rules that are similar from family to family, and to provide social support for their own and each others' children in times of distress. (p. 10)

With the support of teachers and staff at River View, Lena and Nelda have made great strides in understanding the needs and attitudes of the families participating in the Family Literacy Program. As a result, they also made significant progress in utilizing the human and social capital of these families.

## Parents' Goals for Their Children

Uncovering human and social capital and laying the groundwork for subsequent empowerment began with understanding parents' educational goals for their children. Without exception, parents who participated in the Family Literacy Program wanted their children to succeed in school. Sofia Ortega, a twenty-four year old participant with four young children, dropped out of high school but eventually earned a General Equivalency Diploma. She indicated in an album entry that earning this diploma was a personal triumph (Figure 6.1).



12.

# Mis Tríunfos

Uno de mis mayores triunfos
fue que termine la secondaria.
En un tiempo llegue a pensar
que no la terminaria, por mis
hijos y mi esposo. Lo logre
y sin mucho esfuerzo.
Ahora se que todo lo que
me proponga hacer lo
hare si soy consistente y
no me doy por bencida
pronto.
La vida cada dia es mas
dificil y aveces no sabemos
manejar siertas situaciones
que nos hacen desanimarnos
y ponemos pretextos para no
continuar con nuestros sueños.

Por ahora mis projectos futuros
estan en pausa. Quiero dedicar
mi vida un 100% a mis hijos
porque se lo meresen. Tambien
son ellos mi motivo para querer
ser una persona triunfadora y
eso lo van a ver.

***Figure 6.1. Mis Tríunfos.***

> So one of my biggest triumphs was to finish high school. There was a time that I thought I would never think of it because of my children and my husband. So I did it and it was easy. It didn't take much to do it. Now I know that everything that I want, I can accomplish if I'm consistent and I won't give up soon. Life is more difficult every day and sometimes we don't know how to manage different situations, like situations that make us give up and we always put excuses to not continue with our dreams. For now my future projects are in a pause. I want to dedicate my life one hundred percent to my children because they deserve it. They are my motivation to want to be a triumphant person and that's what they're going to see.

Presently participating in the Family Literacy Program, Sofia also has set a personal educational goal. Once her youngest child begins school, Sofia would like to take classes and earn an associate degree, or possibly a bachelor's degree in education. Sofia reported that she dreams of becoming a classroom teacher. For now, Sofia has kept these plans to herself. She admitted that her husband is suspicious and possessive. He does not approve of her working outside of the home and has taken issue with her regular attendance at family literacy meetings. Sofia is positive that her husband would be resistant if she shared her college plans. But Sofia noted that attending the Family Literacy Program and listening to the stories of the other mothers has given her the courage to advocate for herself. She was particularly moved when a mother shared how she had dealt with an alcoholic husband. This mother had stood up to her husband and told him that her children would never see him drunk again!

During her second interview, Sofia admitted that listening to this mother, an example of utilizing the social capital of the group, had given her the resolve to talk to her own husband. She shared that she had recently confronted him; Sofia told him that she loved him and that he had to learn to trust her. And to allay his fears, she invited her mother-in-law to attend family literacy meetings with her. Sofia reported that her

husband has been getting better but that he still has a long way to go. But he is making progress. As a result of her attendance at the Family Literacy Program, Sofia learned about a part-time childcare position in the school's Even Start program. She interviewed and with her husband's support and approval, Sofia was hired for the job. She understands that her part-time job is a far cry from attending college but, in time, she is confident that she will reach that goal, too. Sofia advocated for herself by attending the Family Literacy Program; her attendance afforded Sofia the opportunity to listen to other mothers discuss their relationships and hear solutions that she could apply to her own marriage. Though she began attending the program to assist her children, she learned skills from other mothers as well as from the program's directors that helped her learn to advocate for herself. These were skills that assisted Sofia when she was presented with a challenging situation during the second half of her fourth pregnancy.

When Sofia was seven months pregnant with her fourth child, she began to experience symptoms of early labor. She was immediately admitted to the hospital and remained until her son was born about five weeks later. During her hospital stay, I was a frequent visitor. I brought her books and magazines and sat and visited with her to help her stave off the hours of boredom. During these visits, she confessed that she missed her children and felt guilty that she was not there to take care of them. Sofia talked about her own mother and how she was too busy with her job and helping with Sofia's children to come and visit her. Her lifelines, she noted, were friends from the Family Literacy Program. Though not all of the mothers could visit personally, she reported that several of the mothers phoned every day. Each phone call brought news and advice and several mothers encouraged her to speak up for herself. Sofia said she had no idea so many of the

mothers had experienced difficulties during their pregnancies but that in total, these phone calls gave her the courage to advocate for herself and her baby while she was in the hospital. She requested to be seen by her favorite doctors and ordered a special diet. She spoke up when she was uncomfortable and asked a barrage of questions concerning the health of her baby. In sum, with the assistance of a rich resource of social capital, Sofia customized her hospital stay. The final outcome of Sofia's hospital stay was positive; after five weeks and a cesarean delivery, Sofia left the hospital with a healthy baby boy.

Like Sofia Ortega, Leandra Lopez also had high hopes for her children. Her two oldest of five children were girls; one was in mid-school and Patricia, the oldest, was in high school. Leandra reported that she had tried to be involved in her children's education. It was much easier when her children were young and enrolled in elementary school. Leandra reported that she had always attended parenting classes and shared that she had always read to her children and helped them with their homework. As her children have gotten older, however, it had become more and more difficult to participate in their education. Once her children reached mid-school, she found that she was no longer able to help them with their school work. To further complicate the situation, Leandra felt that communication between school and home began to diminish. To illustrate her point, she related the difficulties that her oldest daughter had in high school. Patricia, in her sophomore year of high school, began skipping classes. She would go to school in the morning but failed to attend her two afternoon classes. Leandra reported that she was never notified by the school until Patricia had over twenty-five absences and no hope of passing the semester. Leandra was angry that she did not find out until it was

too late to help her daughter. She shared that Patricia was not a trouble-maker. She never got into fights with other students; she just simply stopped going to classes.

Leandra knew other mothers in the community whose children attended a charter school in the south valley. She took her daughter to the school to enroll her and the school refused. There were no openings and Patricia had no problems other than excessive absences. The school principal explained that the school usually took students who were having academic difficulty in traditional schools; teachers at this charter school routinely differentiated instruction to meet the learning styles of the students. Patricia showed no evidence of requiring this type of intervention. Leandra reported that she calmly explained Patricia's situation and her disappointment in her daughter's high school. Leandra shared that it was a lack of communication between school and home that contributed to Patricia's excessive absences and that she wanted her daughter in a school that cared about its students. The principal was convinced and Patricia was enrolled in the charter school.

Leandra's unwillingness to accept the principal's refusal to admit her daughter and her subsequent calm negotiations were advocacy skills that she learned at the Family Literacy Program. Many of the whole-group conversations at family literacy meetings revolved around parents' rights and how to advocate for children. In fact, early in the program's third year, Nelda distributed a handout titled *Para Mis Hijos/For My Children*, a handout that will be discussed later in this chapter. This handout coupled with ensuing conversations provided Leandra with the necessary tools needed to advocate for her daughter.

Leandra reported that Patricia was doing better in school. She had skipped class several times, but each time it happened, the secretary of the school had phoned Leandra to let her know. Additionally, Patricia had suffered consequences for skipping classes, both at school and at home. For every missed class, the school required Patricia to perform several hours of community service. And at home, Patricia had important privileges revoked. Finally, Leandra reported that her experiences with her oldest daughter will help with her other four. She admitted that since her daughter was going to school every morning and not getting into trouble with other students, she felt that everything was alright. Leandra noted that she will be more watchful and that she is grateful to the charter school for agreeing to take Patricia.

Unlike Sofia and Leandra, Anna had only two young daughters. Adriana was a second grader and Elsa attended the early childhood program at River View. Anna's husband, Joel, was a long-term substitute teacher at the school; his daily attendance meant that he was able to keep a watchful eye on his daughters and because of his presence in the school community, Anna and Joel were able to customize their children's education. Coleman (1991) writes that parents such as Anna and Joel hold important social capital and are more likely to engage in behaviors, such as nightly reading and requesting teachers that will maximize their children's success in school. Additionally, their social capital will also help to ensure that their children will eventually attend college.

Elisa Castro had three children. Her oldest son attended college, her middle son was in high school, and her young child, a daughter, was a first grader at River View. Elisa confessed that her early experiences in school were difficult. As one of many

children and the oldest daughter, she felt that her parents were only interested in educating their sons. Her father told her repeatedly, “only men study.” She attended a school in a village that was a forty-five minute drive from her family’s ranch near Chihuahua. Her father drove her and her brothers to school in the morning and when she returned in the afternoon, Elisa helped her mother with her younger siblings and household chores. She cleaned the house and helped her mother cook; her chores had to be done before she could do her homework. Elisa fell behind in school and she quickly realized that she had no support at home. In fact, when she failed to advance to second grade, her family told her that not only was she the oldest daughter, she was also the dumbest daughter.

These messages from her family took their toll on Elisa’s self-esteem; eventually she repeated first grade as well as second grade. With the help of a teacher, Elisa began to progress; she found that she was very analytical and that she enjoyed studying language and grammar. Her love of language coupled with her analytical mind helped Elisa to overcome her feelings of shyness and insecurity and she emerged as a gifted writer and strong leader in the Family Literacy Program. Among the other mothers, Elisa’s experiences with her children’s education were unique. She shared that when her oldest son was in elementary school, a teacher recognized that he was very bright. This teacher recommended him for a scholarship to a prestigious private school and Elisa’s son attended the school’s summer session. Though he returned to public school, Elisa kept close tabs on his school activities. Her son graduated from high school and attended a state college in a nearby city. Elisa reported that her middle son had now entered high school and was also doing well. Finally, her youngest child, Silvia, was a first grader at

River View. Elisa believed that Silvia was already making excellent progress and she and the classroom teacher had set a common goal: both would like Silvia to participate in gifted education.

Elisa made excellent use of the opportunities offered at River View and attended several parent education classes as well as the Family Literacy Program. Shelly Walters, the school's parent coordinator, conveyed that Elisa was an example of a parent who was extremely motivated to learn and that she took her work very seriously. Shelly remembered that Elisa attended an *assertive parenting* workshop. Shelly reported that Elisa was "very into it. She asked questions, shared her personal experiences, and eventually borrowed the video and showed it to her whole family. She's out to change the world!" Elisa laughed and noted that this assertive parenting video has helped to build a strong relationship with her children. She made a conscious effort to talk to her children to help them think critically about life situations. An example of this was when her oldest son, Ruben, wanted to move out of a small mobile home that the family owned and into an apartment with several college friends. Instead of telling him that he could not move, Elisa talked to him about the cost of the mobile home versus the cost of the apartment. By the time the conversation was over, Ruben understood that it would be much more expensive to live in an apartment. Elisa commented that she did not command her son to stay in the mobile home, rather, "I helped him to see what the consequences would be. He might make the choice to do the wrong thing, but at least he's clear on what the consequences are and he has to pay the consequences."

Elisa believes it has been harder with her oldest son because she did not start giving him choices until he was almost an adult. Viewing this assertive parenting video

changed her style of conversation with her youngest daughter. Instead of telling Silvia what to do, she began to give Silvia choices. For example, she let her daughter choose how she wore her hair or choose what outfit she wore to school. Elisa admitted that it can be challenging. Silvia is very bright and she recently told her mother, “What if I don’t want those choices? You’re just bossing me!” Elisa laughed; she ended up letting her daughter go to school with clothes that did not match and with her hair uncombed, but that was Silvia’s choice! In the Family Literacy Program, Elisa expressed frustration. She shared her recent challenges with her six year old daughter and said, “It’s difficult to know how far to go with it.” In spite of her frustrations, Elisa believed that talking to her children and getting to know them as individuals would help them to become better students. She read to her children and helped them with their homework, but she believed that thinking critically was the key to success in school. Like the other mothers, Elisa felt empowered with her new-found knowledge and as a result, set educational goals for herself. She reported that she is learning with her kids and learning from them. She is presently studying to pass the General Equivalency Diploma test.

Without question, all four focal mothers expressed high expectations for their children. All wanted their children to graduate from high school and attend college. Additionally, they wanted their children to learn to think critically, make informed choices, and deal with consequences. These topics (questioning educational decisions made by the school, setting high expectations, developing critical-thinking skills through conversation, engaging in school-like activities at home) have been discussed repeatedly in the Family Literacy Program as well as in the larger context of parent education

opportunities at River View; these conversations have laid critical groundwork necessary for parents' empowerment.

## Cultural Brokers

Delgado-Gaitan (2001) writes that in order to participate more fully in a new community, children and adults require "a mediator between the familiar and the new" (p. 16) and are described as *cultural brokers*. Ideally, cultural brokers should have a working knowledge of the school community as well as the larger community outside of the school. In Delgado-Gaitan's ethnographic study of social and cultural adaptation of Latino immigrants in a small California town, the cultural broker was a "Spanish-speaking Euro-American…his work with community groups and Latino families was a continual stabilizing force, especially between Latino families and schools" (p. 16).

The Family Literacy Program and the larger River View community possessed several cultural brokers. Both Lena Duran and Nelda Chavez were fluent Spanish-speakers and were familiar with the River View parent community. Though both women were born in the United States, both had access to Mexican culture through time spent in Mexico as well as living in border communities. Additionally, both were involved in community programs that addressed *Mexicanos*. Their cultural background coupled with their prolonged presence in the school community enabled them to construct a variety of pathways, both inside and outside of the school community that empowered parents who participated in the program. Lena and Nelda initially acted as cultural brokers when they established early goals and grounded the program in a strengths and participatory approach (Auerbach, 1992) to family literacy. This perspective targeted parents as possessing rich resources and skills that can positively impact literacy development. To

that end, Lena and Nelda were charged with connecting the familiar to the unfamiliar. Their work was most visible in the area of helping mothers to become knowledgeable about common school practices. Both routinely helped mothers think through situations that involved their children's teachers (e.g., homework, low expectations, classroom incidents, talking about text, etc.) and, when needed, approached school personnel to advocate on behalf of individual participants as well as the parent community as a whole. Lena and Nelda also functioned as cultural brokers when they brought in guest speakers with the explicit goal of widening mothers' vision of the world beyond family and school. These guests shared information on topics such as health and literacy and served to empower mothers in the larger community. Finally, Lena and Nelda served as cultural brokers when they connected the Family Literacy Program to resources in the larger community. This was observed when the directors established connections between the Family Literacy Program and the National Hispanic Cultural Center, a resource which mothers made use of with increasing frequency over the life of the program.

In addition to Lena and Nelda, the primary function of Shelly Walters, the school's bilingual parent coordinator, was to coordinate a variety of resources for families in the school community. She worked with the teachers and staff as well as a variety of outside organizations such as Catholic Charities, ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education), and CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health) to help parents access resources that may help to ensure their children's success in school.

### Pathways Within the School Community

Many of the mothers who participated in the Family Literacy Program shared that they felt unprepared to assist their children with school-like activities. For example, when

surveyed, mothers stated that they were unsure of how to help with homework assignments, how to structure effective parent-teacher conferences, and expressed discomfort about speaking to teachers about issues that affected their children. One particular situation came to light early in the year. The mothers were involved in a discussion about teachers and the low expectations that they have for their children. One mother complained that her child rarely was assigned homework; when she approached the teacher, this mother confessed that she felt ignored. Another mother added that she, too, was upset with her son's teacher. This mother related that her child, a second grade boy, wet his pants after his teacher refused to let him go to the bathroom. She told the group of mothers that she was angry and that she was going to stop by and see the principal.

Nelda used this opportunity to present a handout to the teachers titled, *Para Mis Hijos/For My Children* (Figure 6.2). She explained that the handout was important because it gave parents a procedure for talking to the teacher concerning grievances.

Para Mis Hijos

No dejen que mas de tres quejas pasen si direjirse con la maestra, y si nada pasa, haga una cita con la directora.

¿Fecha?
¿Que paso?
¿De quien se trata?
¿Cual maestra tomo su queja?
¿Con que acción se comprometió?
¿Cumplió?

For My Children

Don't let more than three complaints accumulate. Se an appointment with the teacher and discuss your problem; if nothing happens, please meet with the principal.

1. Date
2. What happened?
3. Who is this about?
4. Which teacher heard your grievance?
5. What action was agreed upon?
6. Was there a follow through?

***Figure 6.2. Para Mis Hijos*/For My Children.**

At a subsequent meeting, mothers met in small groups to talk about parent-teacher conferences. Anna León admitted that parent-teacher conferences made her very nervous.

Anna said, “You think everything is going fine and then at the conference, you find out that your child is failing.” Leandra agreed and though she did not share the information with the group, I knew that she was confronting the difficulties that her oldest daughter was experiencing in high school and her subsequent move to a charter school.

I was part of the group and I took this opportunity to share my personal feelings about the function of parent-teacher conferences. I discussed that as a veteran teacher, I felt that it was my responsibility to talk to parents about issues when they were occurring and not wait for a conference that might not be scheduled for another month or two. But I also encouraged the mothers to be empathetic. I argued that teachers generally like children but teaching can be stressful and that teachers can unwittingly minimize situations that inevitably have profound effects on families. I encouraged the mothers in my group to form relationships with teachers and advocate for their children before problems arose. I spoke specifically to the mother whose second grade boy had wet his pants. I told her that I understood why she was upset; second graders do not generally have bathroom accidents and I imagined that her son must have been very embarrassed. But I also asked the mothers in the group to consider the situation from the teacher’s perspective. I posed the question, *what might have been the teacher’s point-of view?* Both Anna León and Sofia Ortega suggested that maybe the children had just come in from recess or that maybe the class was working on an important activity. I reminded the mothers that none were a valid excuse, simply that it is important to remember that there are always two sides to a story. As an observer, I have thought carefully about my role in family literacy meetings. As an observer, I rarely offer my opinion to the families who are participating in the program. I am, however, an experienced classroom teacher (and in

this instance, a cultural broker) and felt that this would be an excellent opportunity to share my experience and insights. Two weeks after this meeting, the second grader's mother approached me and told me that things were much better with her son's teacher. The two had met and had discussed ways to work together to ensure that the son's previous experience would not reoccur. This mother also shared that she was supporting the teacher's policies by reminding her son to use the bathroom during recess. In hindsight, this conversation, one which took place in the presence of other mothers, lifted this second grader's mother out of a place of anger and into a position of empowerment. Instead of complaining and further alienating her son's teacher by seeking out the principal, she was able to articulate her concerns and find ways to effect a suitable solution. The teacher also benefited from this interaction. Cummins (1986) suggests that "when educators involve minority parents as partners in their children's education, parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children, with positive academic consequences" (p. 26). In this case, a powerful message was communicated to this mother in regards to her ability to effect change on behalf of her child.

Lena Duran was a strong cultural broker and helped mothers create multiple pathways within the school community. A fundamental conversation that Lena had with mothers concerned learning English and the role that Spanish occupied in their children's lives. An explicit goal of the Family Literacy Program was to promote and develop Spanish literacy. In addition to building literacy skills through reading and writing instruction, Lena also engaged mothers in conversations that detailed the importance of their children developing strong literacy skills in Spanish. Lena talked to the mothers

about the impact that first language development has on second language learning and impressed that their children will be stronger students if they are literate in their first language. Some of the mothers expressed that they want their children to learn English and they are concerned that speaking Spanish will hinder learning English. Lena assured the mothers that being literate in Spanish is an asset and pointed out that English is everywhere. Their children will learn English!

The effects of this conversation were interesting in that they led to a discussion concerning alternative forms of literacy (ways of reading and writing that are not generally taught within the classroom) such as video gaming, phone texting, and navigating the *Facebook* website. For example, Leandra was concerned that phone texting would negatively impact her children and as an example, questioned the letters that a mid-school class had recently sent to the newspaper. The published letters were full of spelling errors and seemed to give weight to the notion that children were not learning important fundamental literacy skills. Nelda was helpful in this conversation. She pointed out that writing often requires editing and revision and suggested that the students' letters should not have been sent to the newspaper until they had been corrected. In this case, Nelda remarked that the teacher had been at fault. And both Lena and Nelda assured the mothers that phone texting would not hamper children's literacy skills! In fact, Gee (2007) suggests that students who are able to navigate a variety of discourses will excel in a global market. These conversations regarding acts of reading and writing were important. Lena and Nelda had opportunities to share sound research as well as their personal beliefs and mothers had opportunities to express opinions and concerns as well

as deepen their understanding of issues that impacted their children's education. All will inform the mothers' goals to become more involved in their children's education.

## Empowerment in the Larger Community

In addition to activities and discussions designed to support mothers as they become involved in the school community, the Family Literacy Program also seeks to empower mothers in the larger community. Lena and Nelda shared that the needs of the families are great and sometimes it is difficult to know where to begin. By participating in the program, the mothers received groceries, books, and assistance designed to support their children's educational needs. To supplement these basics, Lena and Nelda tapped outside resources to support parents as they further constructed knowledge and skills.

Healthcare was an issue for parents who participated in the Family Literacy Program. Most did not have private health insurance and therefore did not seek preventive healthcare services. For example, mothers who participated in the program were unaware that breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among Hispanic/Latina women. Though most of the participants were under forty, the age at which a baseline mammogram routinely occurs, it was still vital that mothers become educated about breast health including self-examination and mammography. To address this gap in the mothers' knowledge, Nelda arranged for a guest speaker to talk to the mothers about mammograms and general women's health issues. The mothers watched a video and had the opportunity to ask questions and participate in a discussion. The mothers were initially quiet; the guest speaker opened the discussion by asking if mothers had heard about the HPV (Human papillomavirus) immunization. She spoke to the mothers about teenage girls, and the dangers of casual or unprotected sex. A mother who

regularly participated in the program spoke at length about young girls and the traditional *quinceañera*, a celebration that occurs at a girl's fifteenth birthday. This mother expressed that young girls believe that this 'coming of age' party is permission to behave like a woman, specifically, to participate in sexual relationships. This mother spoke at length about the need to talk to our daughters and tell them that even though they are women in the cultural eyes of the community, they are too young to accept the responsibilities that accompany mature, sexual relationships.

Leandra Lopez had an intense response to this conversation. She related that in the home, girls are taught to obey and never say *no*. She shared that this led to girls being unprepared to stand up (advocate) for themselves; boyfriends pressure them for sex and they do not have the skills to refuse. Nelda suggested that this was a complicated topic; one that was tied to specific cultural behaviors and that there was no simple solution. The mothers did leave this meeting, however, with information on accessing women's health resources. Perhaps more importantly, they had the opportunity to share their opinions as they listened to the experiences of other women. This was a profound experience and though it was clear that the topic was much too complex to be fully addressed at this meeting, the topic of mother and daughter relationships was one that would be explored often at subsequent family literacy meetings.

Though healthcare was critical to the mothers who participated in the program, most attended to learn about and improve their personal literacy skills. To that end, Lena or Nelda frequently addressed some aspect of literacy development during family literacy meetings. There were also opportunities to introduce the mothers to literacy experts from outside the Family Literacy Program. In the spring of the program's third year, a retired

professor from the university visited to talk to the mothers about literacy and how it impacted lives.

A retired university professor who is presently teaching at the United Arabic Emirates University was invited to talk to the mothers about literacy, specifically writing. She proved to be an engaging speaker and the mothers warmed to her immediately. The professor began her presentation by suggesting that there were three principles that governed *the act of writing*. The first was that writing is different from speaking; writing is managed by conventions or rules. She illustrated this principle by discussing the rules for writing her name. She demonstrated writing her name in English (left to right) and in Arabic (right to left). This professor also remarked that her first name begins with a soft /g/ sound; if this rule transferred to Spanish, *José* would be spelled, *Gosé*. She confessed that writing her name in Arabic was new to her, and therefore, somewhat intimidating and difficult to learn. But she noted that she was interested and therefore engaged. She drew a connection to the mothers by suggesting that they also must learn new things in order to help their children succeed in school and that interest and engagement will smooth this process.

The second principle concerning writing (literacy) that the professor discussed was that access does not guarantee use. To illustrate this point, she shared information about libraries in the United Arab Emirates, that they are full of books covered with dust. The only books that are regularly used are religious in nature. She suggested that they, too, had books in their homes but that mothers must put the books where they can be accessed. And access can also be applied to writing. The professor encouraged the

mothers to write with their children and “not put it [their writing] on a shelf where it will get covered with dust.”

Finally, the professor discussed the fact that complex or plentiful materials are not required to teach. Reading and writing with children in authentic situations conveys powerful messages about the importance of literacy and the construction of a literate identity. Moreover, parents’ understanding about text and their willingness to engage in literacy activities helps their children to establish a strong link between home and school literacy activities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). To that end, she stated that parents must make concerted efforts to model literacy events with their children. Mothers who attended the Family Literacy Program had opportunities every week to hear about the benefits of modeling reading and writing with their children and the fact that this is happening is evident in the mothers’ albums. An example of mothers working with children on literacy tasks occurred when participants were constructing time-lines of their lives. Lena invited mothers to share their work and one participant shyly made her way to the front of the room. This participant’s timeline was unusual, it resembled a paper robot with the body, arms, torso, legs, and feet all covered with writing. As the mothers looked on, the participant folded the papers until the robot’s appendages were all contained in a neat package. The mother explained that the robot design had been her son’s idea. Together they selected the paper and he constructed the robot as she wrote her story. He then cut out her time-line and glued it onto the robot. Many of the mothers reported that they felt inadequate and sometimes incapable of helping their children with school-assigned literacy activities. I suggest that this inadequacy comes from homework assignments that are often mired in skill-based, reductive types of literacy activities; the literacy event that

this mother and son were engaged in required not only critical-thinking skills but also included the family's sociocultural experiences outside of the classroom. As important, engaging in this and other types of authentic literacy activities cultivates empowerment and acts to strengthen the link between home and school.

## Empowerment Through Multicultural Literature

Rudine Sims Bishop (1997) writes, "…multicultural literature should be defined in a comprehensive and inclusive manner; that is, it should include books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world" (p. 3). Bishop continues,

> Self-esteem develops from a number of sources, not the least of which is the social context in which children grow up, including the context beyond family and community. As a part of the social and scholastic context, literature can contribute to the development of self-esteem by holding up to its readers images of themselves. (p. 4)

There were concrete attendance incentives attached to the Family Literacy Program, one of which is the distribution of multicultural (bilingual) children's literature. The reasons for distributing high-quality children's literature are clear. Primarily, the directors understood the value of getting books into the hands of children. Children who are strong readers acquire significantly more general knowledge and have a much larger vocabulary than struggling readers (Allington, 2000; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Sénéchal, et al, 1998) and therefore, have an increased likelihood of succeeding in school. But equally as important, the directors understood the power that multicultural literature has on the "achievement of children who have historically been denied realistic images of themselves and their families, community, and culture" (Bishop, 1997, p. 4). To that end, the literature that was distributed by the Family Literacy Program celebrated the

experiences of Latinos, the majority of whom have immigrated to the United States. In the next section, I will highlight three picture books and discuss how they were used with the mothers and children who participated in the Family Literacy Program.

*Prietita y La Llorona/Prietita and the Ghost Woman (Anzaldúa & Gonzales, 1995)*

Anzaldúa's retelling of the classic *la Llorona* story was highlighted early in the program's third year. The book was introduced to the children and read aloud to them. Prior to this book, the children in the program stated that they viewed *la Llorona* as a malevolent spirit, an apparition to be feared. The premise of Anzaldúa's book, however, is that *la Llorona* can be helpful. *Prietita y La Llorona* tells the story of a young girl growing up in South Texas. When her mother becomes ill, Prietita goes to *la curandera* and asks for her help. *La curandera* agrees but lacks an essential medicinal ingredient. Prietita must scour the nearby forest and find the herb. In the dark of night, Prietita encounters *la Llorona* and asks for her help. *La Llorona* illuminates the herb, then guides Prietita back through the dark forest.

The children had the opportunity to participate in several reader-response activities based on the re-telling of *la Llorona*. Initially, they shared their knowledge of *la Llorona*. Next, they answered a variety of questions concerning *la Llorona* as she was depicted in the story. Finally, they drew pictures and wrote about *la Llorona*. As predicted, most held to the traditional telling of the tale; the children wrote that *la Llorona* was very bad, that she was angry at her husband and drowned her children. The children recognized that this story painted a different vision of *la Llorona*. The children's instructors summed up the views of the children. "*Yo creo que aueces las leyendos son diferentes. Algunas dicen que La Llorona es muy buena y otras dicen que se lleva los*

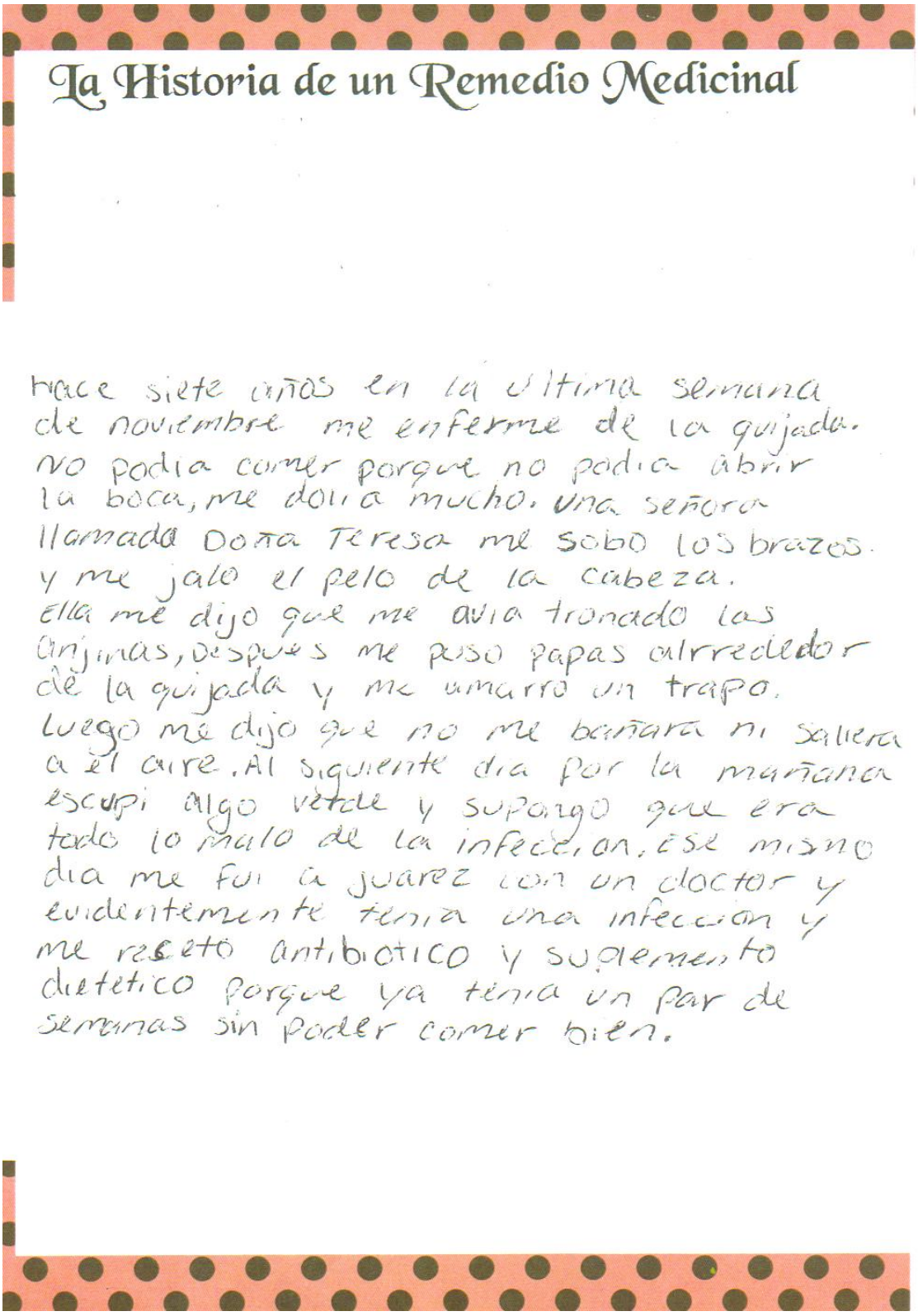
*niños y nunca los regresa.* (I think that some *leyendas* are different. Some say that *la Llorona* is nice and others say she takes kids and never brings them back). And as expected, the pictures the children drew depicted *la Llorona* as an ugly witch.

Bishop (1997) discusses a variety of aspects that are helpful for evaluating multicultural children's literature. These features focus on visual and verbal stereotyping, authenticity, authority, worldview, and underlying ideology. In the case of *Prietita y La Llorona,* the folktale is embedded in the experiences of a young Latina girl living in Texas. Anzaldúa (1995) writes in the Afterward (n.p.),

> When I was a little girl growing up in South Texas near the King Ranch, my mama Grande, my grandmother used to tell me scary stories about la Llorona, the ghost woman. These stories were well known throughout the Southwest and in Mexico. All the children were afraid of la Llorona—I was afraid too, but even at that age I wondered if there was another side to her. As I grew older and studied the roots of my Chicana/Mexicana culture, I discovered that there really was another side to la Llorona—a powerful, positive side, a side that represents the Indian part and the female part of us.

Bishop (1997) would agree that Anzaldúa's retelling is authentic and meets the rigorous demands required of high-quality multicultural children's literature. Moreover, by being involved in this story, children had an opportunity to confirm their culture, draw on previous knowledge (schema), and extend their worldview by learning an alternate version of the familiar folktale.

The mothers who participated in the Family Literacy Program engaged in a very different literacy activity—they read the book and wrote about their memories and experiences with home remedies. Sofia Ortega, a focal participant, recalled an illness she experienced as a teenager. Sofia's album entry described a woman named Doña Teresa and a folk remedy (Figure 6.3).



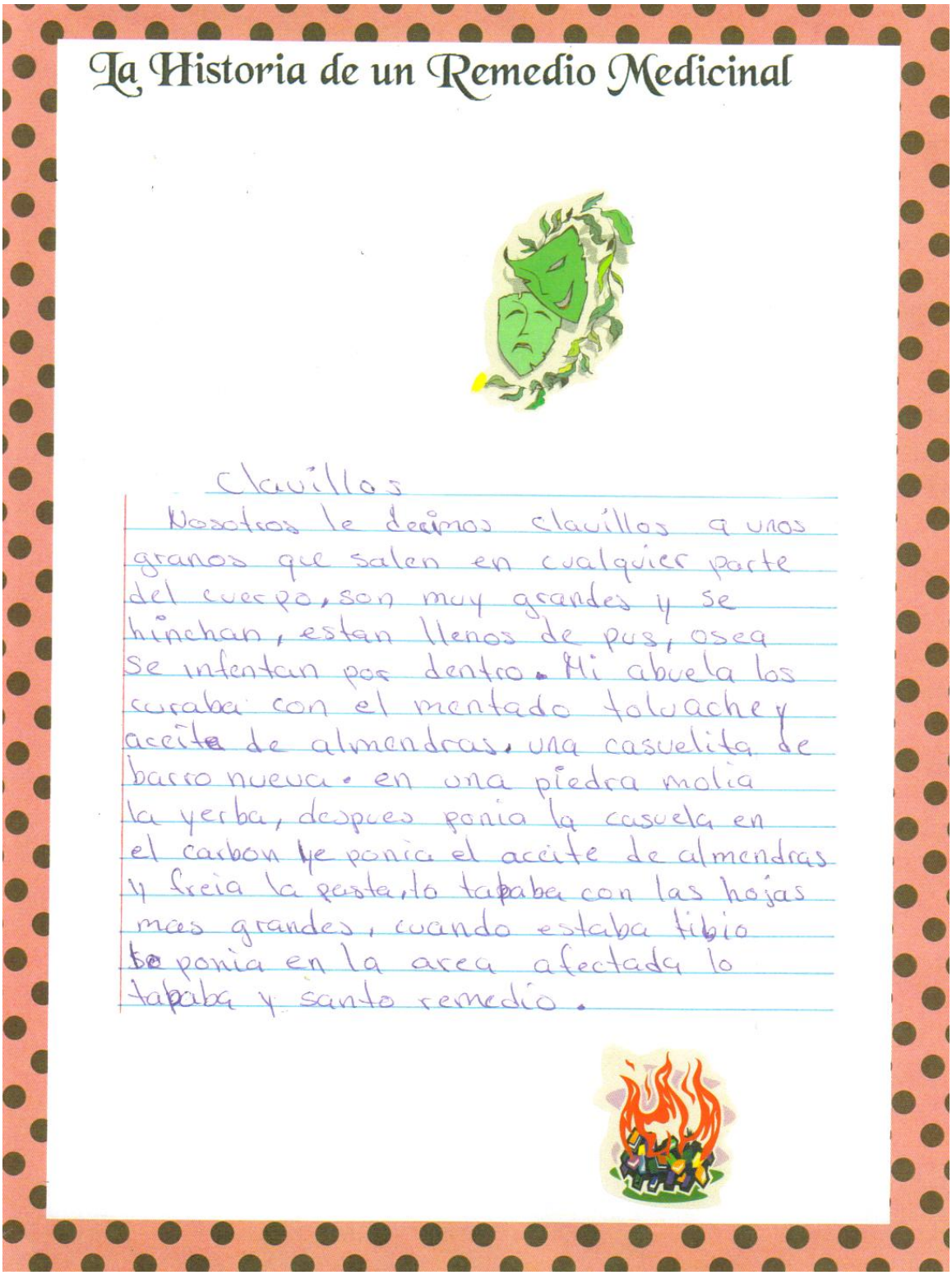
La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal

hace siete años en la ultima semana
de noviembre me enferme de la quijada.
no podia comer porque no podia abrir
la boca, me doli a mucho. una señora
llamada Doña Teresa me sobo los brazos.
y me jalo el pelo de la cabeza.
ella me dijo que me avia tronado las
anjinas, despues me puso papas alrrededor
de la quijada y me amarro un trapo.
luego me dijo que no me bañara ni saliera
a el aire. Al siguiente dia por la mañana
escupi algo verde y supongo que era
todo lo malo de la infeccion. ese mismo
dia me fui a juarez con un doctor y
evidentemente tenia una infeccion y
me reseto antibiotico y suplemento
dietetico porque ya tenia un par de
semanas sin poder comer bien.

***Figure 6.3. La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal (Sofia).***

> Seven years ago, the last week of November, I got sick. I don't know what it was. I couldn't open my mouth wide because it hurt a lot. A lady named Doña Teresa put cream on and rubbed the bone in my arm. She did something funny, she pulled some parts of the hair. I didn't believe that this would help, but it did. When she would pull the hair, there would be a popping noise. By doing that, she was going to break the infection in the tonsils. Then she cut a potato and put it all over my jaw. She got a rag and tied it on my jaw. She told me to go home, to not take a shower, and not go out in the air. Just to go home and lie down. The next day, I got up and threw up something green. I suppose it was the bad stuff from the infection. I thought I was dying…

Sofia eventually did go to see a physician; he diagnosed an infection and prescribed antibiotics. Sofia is convinced, however, that her visit with Doña Teresa was instrumental in her cure. Sofia's healing experience was not unique. Leandra recalled in her album how her grandmother would cure boils. (Figure 6.4)



La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal

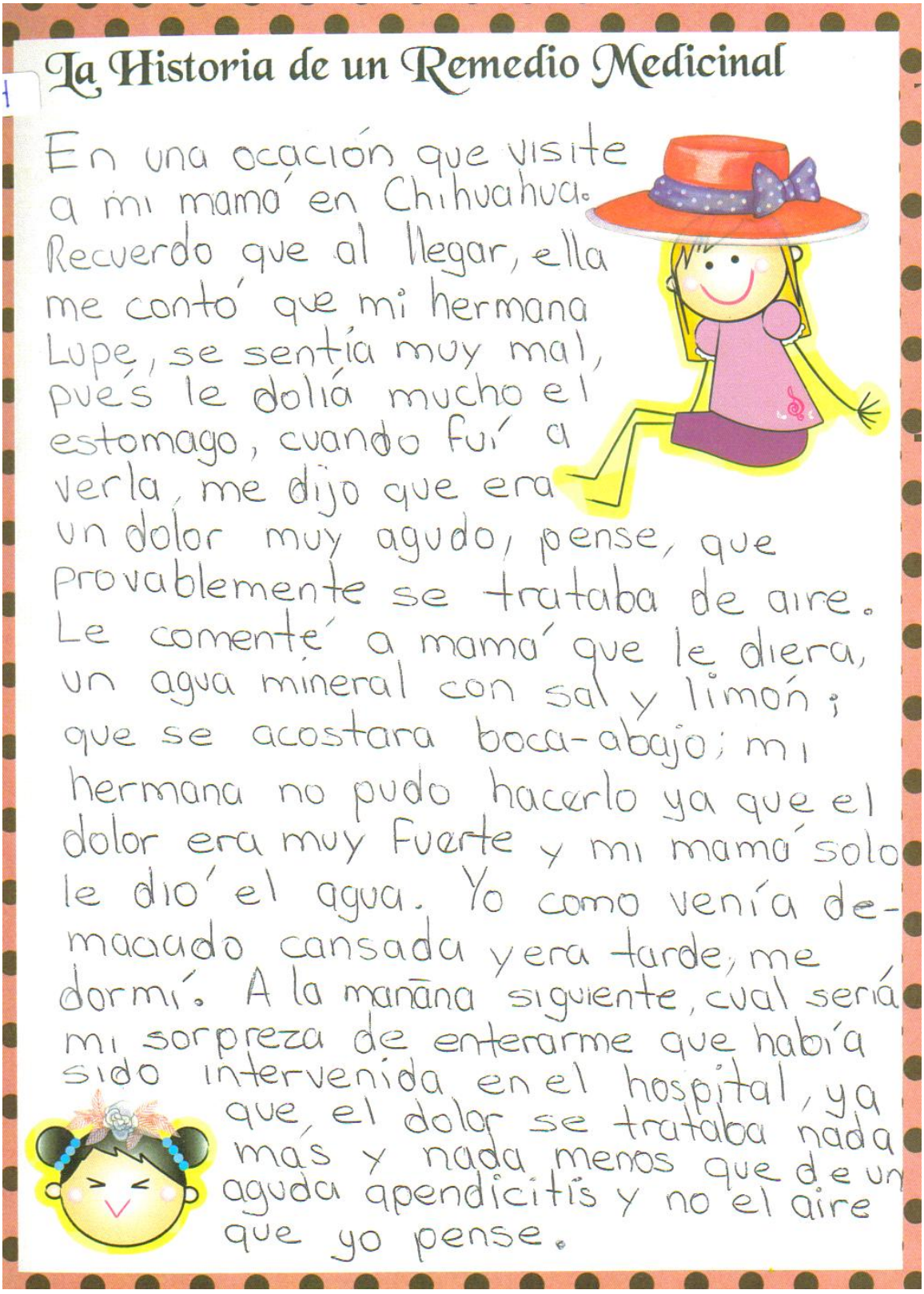
Clavillos

Nosotros le decimos clavillos a unos granos que salen en cualquier parte del cuerpo, son muy grandes y se hinchan, estan llenos de pus, osea se infentan por dentro. Mi abuela los curaba con el mentado toluache y aceite de almendras. una casuelita de barro nueva. en una piedra molia la yerba, despues ponia la casuela en el carbon le ponia el aceite de almendras y freia la pasta, lo tapaba con las hojas mas grandes, cuando estaba tibio lo ponia en la area afectada lo tapaba y santo remedio.

***Figure 6.4. La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal (Leandra).***

> We call *clavillos* a rash that comes out all over the body. But they're really big. They sort of look like a boil. But it's an infection in your body. My grandma would cure us with this thing called *toluache* and almond oil. She would smash herbs in a clay pot. Then she would put the clay pot in charcoal and heat it up. And then she would add almond oil and fry the whole thing. She would cover it with the bigger leaves and then she would remove it from the heat. When it had cooled, she would put it on the affected area. She would cover it and then those things would be gone.

Finally, Elisa recalled an experience with a home remedy. (Figure 6.5)



La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal

En una ocación que visite a mi mamá en Chihuahua. Recuerdo que al llegar, ella me contó que mi hermana Lupe, se sentía muy mal, pués le dolía mucho el estomago, cuando fuí a verla, me dijo que era un dolor muy agudo, pense, que provablemente se trataba de aire. Le comenté a mamá que le diera, un agua mineral con sal y limón; que se acostara boca-abajo; mi hermana no pudo hacerlo ya que el dolor era muy Fuerte y mi mamá solo le dió el agua. Yo como venía de-macado cansada y era tarde, me dormí. A la mañana siguiente, cual sería mi sorpreza de enterarme que había sido intervenida en el hospital, ya que el dolor se trataba nada más y nada menos que de un aguda apendicitis y no el aire que yo pense.

***Figure 6.5. La Historia de un Remedio Medicinal (Elisa).***

> On one occasion when I visited my mother in Chihuahua, I remember that as soon as I got there, my mother started telling me the story of my sister, Lupe. She felt sick because her stomach was aching. When I went to see her, she told me that it was like a sharp pain. I thought probably it was just air. I told my mother to give her mineral water with salt and lemon. And to tell her to lie down on her stomach. My sister couldn't do it because the pain, it was very strong. And my mother only gave her the water. Since I was very tired and it was late, I went to sleep. The next morning, I was surprised to find out that she had to be hospitalized. She had appendicitis and it wasn't just air like I had thought.

The memories that were recounted in these participant's albums were powerful. Like the children, the mothers had the unique opportunity to interrogate and confirm their culture and extend their world view. In addition, seeing their cultural practices framed within literature added to the mothers' attitudes concerning their experiences in relation to written text, a decidedly empowering experience.

*César Chavez: La lucha por la justicia/ César Chavez: The Struggle for Justice (Griswold del Castillo, Accardo, & Colin, 2008)*

The directors of the Family Literacy Program provided a multicultural (bilingual) children's book weekly to participants and it was a strength that the books chosen represented a wide variety of genres and topics. While *Prietita y La Llorona* retold a well-known folktale, some of the stories revolved around contemporary topics. Shortly after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in February, the directors distributed the book, *César Chavez: La lucha por la justicia/César Chavez: The Struggle for Justice.* Nelda began the book discussion by grounding the main idea in the concept of *discrimination*. She briefly discussed César Chavez, his life, his connection to Gandhi, and his predilection for non-violence. She also made a list of vocabulary words on the board that she felt the mothers needed to know in order to fully understand the book. The words that Nelda wrote on the board were *discriminación* (discrimination), *sindicato* (syndicate),

*aguila sindical* (union), and *huelga* (strike). Next, Nelda asked the mothers what they knew about discrimination. This was an example of building advocacy (empowerment); mothers connected past events to their current lives. To support the mothers' connections, Nelda drew their attention to the timeline that was in the back of the book. Participating mothers were in the process of constructing timelines of their own lives. Nelda suggested that everyone had experienced discrimination at one time or another and this might be an important topic to write about in their albums. To help the mothers begin, she drew a web on the board (Figure 6.6).

***Figure 6.6. Discriminación web.***

While Nelda drew, she talked about discrimination and *white privilege*, the advantages in social, political, and economic spaces not commonly experienced by non-whites. The mothers considered this notion and Anna León, a focal participant, spoke at length about

the episode of discrimination that she and her non-white friends had experienced at a restaurant in New York. Anna described how she and three friends had gone into a restaurant. Even though the restaurant was practically empty, her party was made to wait. And when they were seated, they were led to a table in the back of the restaurant. Anna described that this experience had made her feel angry, primarily because all were wearing their Army fatigues. She recalled that none considered speaking up. After participating in this discussion about discrimination, Anna added, "Now I might!" It is interesting to note that Anna, a soldier who had traveled the world, never considered voicing her dismay at being made to wait for a table in a restaurant until she participated in this discussion at the Family Literacy Program.

As a result of participating in discussions on the topic of discrimination, mothers were introduced to ideas that few had considered. At meetings, they shared incidents of discrimination that they had experienced in their lives and sought to understand these incidents within the context of this close-knit group. The next book that the participants received was *¡Si, Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!* (Bernier-Grand & Diaz, 2006). This children's book detailed the April 2000 janitor strike in Los Angeles, California. The janitors espoused non-violent activism and together with the previous text, the mothers were offered different perspectives on the topic of discrimination. Moreover, the mothers were encouraged to make further connections to their lives. Bishop (1997) writes that "ultimately, multicultural literature…should be evaluated on the basis for the educational purposes it is intended to serve" keeping in mind that "the purpose of a literacy work…is to encourage its readers to reflect on the human condition" (p. 18-19). If the intention of the program's directors was to create a space where mothers could interrogate and share

their experiences and reflect on the impact these experiences have had on their lives, then these children's books served their intended purpose.

It would be wrong to suggest that every book that was distributed to families served an underlying purpose other than simply to be enjoyed by parents and their children. Duran (Flores-Dueñas, 2004) turns to the work of Louise Rosenblatt and *aesthetic* reading and proposes that when children have opportunities to read stories that are grounded in their own cultures, they "…interact with the content and the characters in the texts rather than just recall text-direct information about them" (p. 196). In other words, they responded aesthetically to the text that they are reading. Over the course of the year, the Family Literacy Program distributed a variety of high-quality children's multicultural literature such as *Cuadros de Familia/Family Pictures* (Garza, 1990), *Abuelita: llena de vida* (Costal & Avila, 2007), *Abuela* (Dorros & Kleven, 1997), *Carlos y la planta de calabaza/Carlos and the Squash Plant* (Stevens & Arnold, 1999), and *Mi diario de aqua hasta alla/My Diary From Here to There* (Pérez & Gonzales, 2009). All were grounded in the families' culture and facilitated aesthetic reading, reading that was empowering in that it drew upon concepts and personal experiences of the mothers who were participating in the Family Literacy Program. These selections of literature chosen to be enjoyed aesthetically coupled with literature chosen to advance the notion of social justice provided parents and children with a varied collection of stories that reflected their lived experiences.

## Chapter Summary

The topic of *empowerment* is a challenging one and I do not mean to simplify the role of how the Family Literacy Program constructed a culture of empowerment through

a discussion of contemplative behavior, handouts steeped in advice, guest speakers, and children's stories. Taken individually, each accomplished the task of providing mothers with current information on the topic of their children's school experiences. As a group, however, the intention probed much deeper. Through group discussions and in their writing, the mothers universally expressed a sense of vulnerability and a desire to improve their literacy skills and to help their children succeed in school. These are lofty goals and if executed, certainly further parents' abilities to advocate for their children. Participating in a variety of literacy-based activities, however, is not enough to empower a group who historically has been held powerless. Rather, it was through the conscientious application of various activities and capitalizing on the experiences of others that led to empowerment and the ability "to participate fully in their social environment" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, p. 42). Examples of empowerment were many. Mothers learned how to participate in effective parent teacher conferences. They learned the importance of setting educational goals, both for themselves and for their children. Mothers broke ground in the practice of customizing (Coleman, 1991) their children's education and as a group, they contemplated how culturally-ingrained attitudes and power relationships affected their own as well as their daughter's sexuality. Finally, mothers experienced the power of sharing literacy-based activities with their children and through reading culturally authentic literature (Bishop, 1997), they explored topics in social justice. Collectively, these activities informed them, changed their behavior, and pushed the mothers to look beyond themselves in order to negotiate and ultimately change the larger community.

# CHAPTER 7

# THE FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES THROUGH LITERACY ACTIVITIES

Closing the achievement gap, the differences in academic achievement between minority and White students, has occupied an extraordinary amount of time and attention in education and the media. An abstract concept, concrete evidence that such a gap exists can be found in standardized test data, graduation rates, as well as through qualitative data collection techniques. Berlak (2001) examined several influential studies that illuminated "relationships of culture, gender, and race to the social relations within the classroom and school" (p. 3) and suggested possible explanations for the gap in academic achievement between minority students and their White counterparts. These explanations revolved around educational opportunities within classrooms and the larger school district, the psychological and emotional effects of living with pervasive racism, and students' own perceptions of opportunities and the chances of success (Berlak, 2001). One interviewee shared, "I realized that no matter how smart I was…or how hard I was willing to work…that it wasn't going to happen for me" (Berlak, 2001, p. 3). The attitude expressed is not unique; language minority students, even those who do not struggle with poverty have expressed similar attitudes concerning education and school experiences. There are numerous examples in the literature (Baez, 2002; Cárdenas, 2004; Guerra, 2004; Jiménez, 2000; Torres, 2004, Trueba, 1999) written by scholars who have struggled in school, not only with academics but with external (outside of the individual) as well as internal perceptions. These autobiographical essays revolve around common themes within family and community, barriers within social structures, resisting

stereotypes, positive and negative influences, changing relationships, perseverance, and resiliency. Survival and success (transformation) hinge on individuals' "ability to define their identity in different ways in order to function effectively in different settings and cultural contexts…" (Trueba, 2002, p. 8). This ability to negotiate barriers, cultivate the agency required to initiate change, and develop a variety of identities are common threads that seem to maximize success in school and beyond.

## Identity: An Overview

Latino identity is deeply enmeshed in the political and economic history of the southwestern part of the United States and despite the fact that as a group, Latinos have made significant contributions to the cultural and economic fabric of the United States, they have been routinely oppressed and viewed as inferior. Though diverse in origins (countries range from the Americas to the Caribbean), Latinos share a common history of slavery, oppression, and racism (Trueba, 1999). Those Latinos who reside in the United States, many as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and through immigration, have been residentially segregated and barred from public facilities as well as from participating in local, state, and national government. Immigrants from Mexico (commonly presumed to be undocumented) have to deal with border patrols, vigilantes, and white supremacists and their exclusion from economic and political life is not unintentional (Trueba, 1999). Yet, it is interesting to note, that in the face of extreme stress, there are individuals who demonstrate resiliency which then gives birth to psychological flexibility; this psychological flexibility has supported Latinos as they have made important inroads in educational, political, and economic circles. The individual's

success has its roots in the ability to persevere while constructing new identities (Trueba, 1999, 2002).

As a social construct, the term *identity* has its roots in history, social psychology, and literature and definitions are boundless and plentiful. Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) write, "Identity, from the perspective of social psychology, is often associated with a stable, internal state of being" (p. 2). Gee (1989) writes that "Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, body positions, and clothes" (p. 6-7). For the purposes of this study, I look to Lima and Lima (1998); they write

> Identity can be understood as the symbolic, significant structuring of social relations which define the appurtenance to group, granting access to collective symbolic codes and assigning participation in the web of relations of a given community, it is "filiation" at the collective level. At the same time identity is the internal structuring of sociability that confers visibility and legibility to oneself as member of a group. Identity is "cultural filiation." (p. 323)

In this sense, identity serves two distinct purposes. Identity connects individuals to the larger group(s) and mediates the individual's sense of self. It is productive and creative in the sense that a strong identity is foundational for success in a variety of sectors; it is necessary for full participation in educational, economical, and political settings.

## Influence, Barriers, and Resiliency

Identity formation connects individuals to larger groups but this connection is not without influences and barriers. In the economic arena, Latinos earn less than their White counterparts and Latina women earn the least, about 20% less than White women with the same educational résumés and 52% less of what White men earn overall (Torres, 2004). Torres writes that this data refutes the notion that self-determination has

significant impact on outcomes, that if the individual succeeds it is through concerted effort and conversely, if the individual fails, it is because “he or she did not try hard enough or is not smart enough” (p. 124). On the national level, legislation has appeared that prohibits children of undocumented workers from participating in public education. As concerning, there are states in the west (e.g., Arizona and California) that have adopted English-only laws, thereby limiting children’s access to their native language. Even when children have access to high quality education, there can be subtle barriers that must be overcome. Cárdenas (2004) describes her experiences as a young Latina growing up in a border community in the United States. Throughout her school experiences, Cárdenas encountered teachers who failed to recognize her talents and practiced an exclusionist type of education. There was a high school advisor who counseled her away from college freshman basics and towards vocational education and a college English teacher who stated that he would have awarded her an A had her first language been English.

There were those, however, who were fundamentally influential; a parent who encouraged Cárdenas (2004) to advocate for herself, junior high and high school teachers who recognized her academic talents and set high expectations, and college professors who encouraged her to read selected texts to expand her vision of the world. These encounters were significant and combined with Cárdenas’ resiliency and psychological flexibility, led to feelings of empowerment, activism, and construction of new identities. Regardless of flexibility, however, new identities were not formed without consequences. Cárdenas (2004) considers the concept of *assimilation*, the losing of oneself to cultivate a

sense of belonging to the larger group. Favoring instead the construct of *transcultural repositioning* (Guerra, 2004), Cárdenas (2004) writes,

> …in the process of becoming an American, I have not assimilated. I am a hybrid. I operate within two environments, and I look out from two perspectives…I discovered through this odyssey into literacy, that I do not have to lose my cultural background. In fact, I have been successful in affecting change within my own cultural setting: what is expected of women, how identity is constructed, and what constitutes authority. (p. 124)

Like Cárdenas (2004), there are women who participated in the Family Literacy Program who encountered a variety of barriers and influences but who demonstrated a sense of resiliency and psychological flexibility that supported them in the construction of new identities. In the next section, I examine the experiences of four women who participated in the Family Literacy Program and use selected examples from their Heritage Albums to illustrate how internal and external perceptions, transcultural repositioning, and resiliency supported them in the development of new literate identities.

Anna León

Anna was born in the United States, the youngest of eight children. She spent her early years crossing the border or hop-scotching (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) between the cities of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico and McAllen, Texas; her mother cleaned houses and her father worked in the factories located in Reynosa. Anna started school in Reynosa and flourished in kindergarten, first, and second grade. She loved school and described herself as the teacher's pet but also confessed that she occasionally found the rules to be troublesome and difficult to follow. Anna wrote in her album,

> *Los maestros eran muy estricto, si no hacías casos, te pegaban en las manos con el borrador a con la regal o una vara que train ellos. Que yo recuerde solo una vez me dieron con el borrador en las manos por andar platicando en close.*

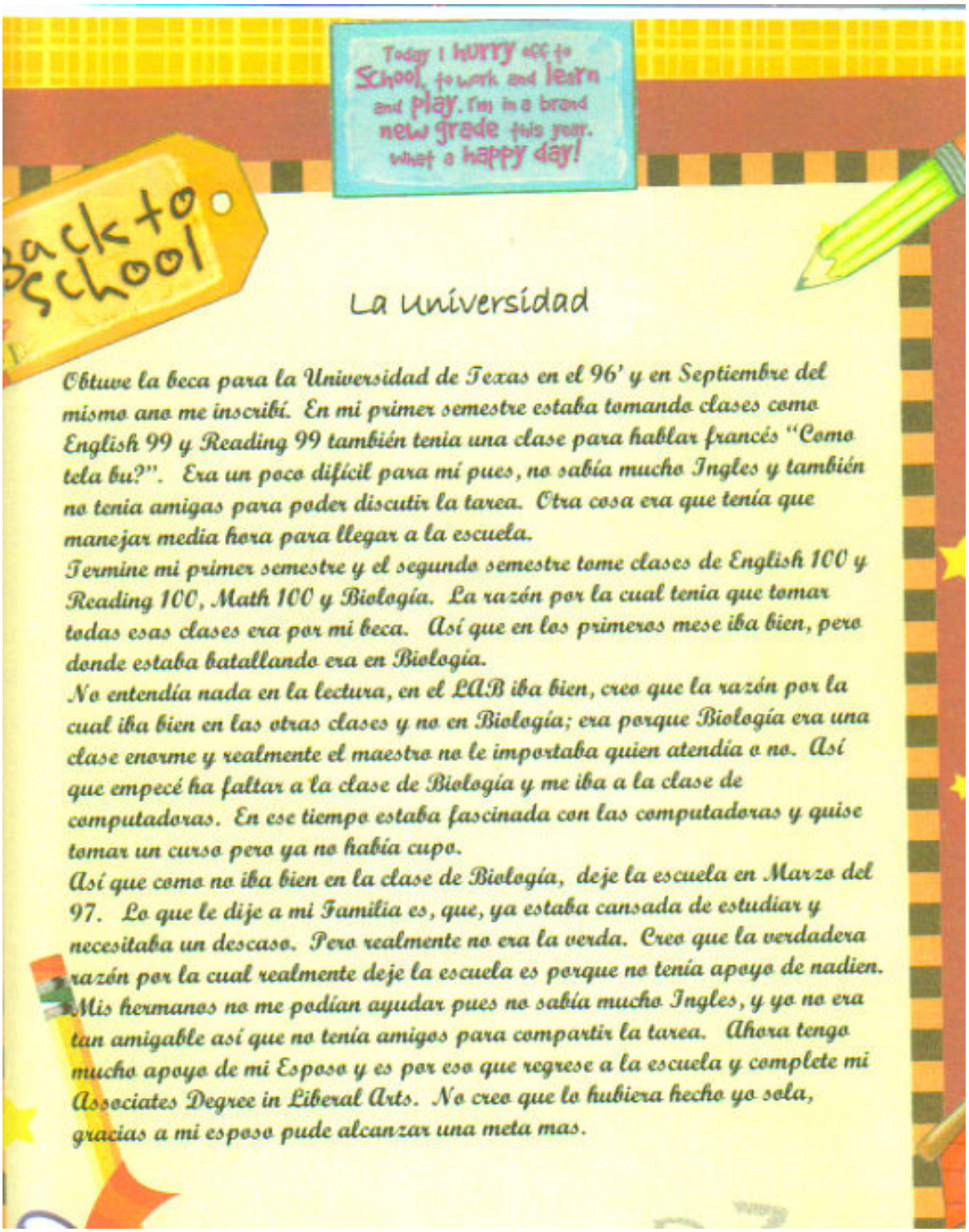
> The teachers were really strict. If you didn't listen, they would hit you on the hands with the eraser or the ruler or they would carry a stick, too. I remember only one time, they hit me with an eraser on the hands because I was talking in class.

Anna quickly learned to regulate her behavior, a skill that would prove to be advantageous when she moved to the United States at the beginning of third grade.

Anna's family relocated to McAllen, Texas when Anna was eight years old. Though she had completed three years of school in Mexico and described herself as a good student, she was placed in a second grade classroom because she did not speak English. Her lack of English skills, however, proved not to be a barrier; all of her classmates as well as the educational assistant spoke Spanish. They would simply translate key information. Anna finished second grade in McAllen but returned to Reynosa the following year. She attended school in Reynosa through mid-school and returned to McAllen in time to enter ninth grade. Anna noted that her first year of high school was spent learning English. While her classmates enrolled in core courses, Anna was in ESL classes and electives such as home economics and physical education. She was bored and frustrated but she persevered and exited ESL classes when she was a sophomore in high school. Anna continued to be a strong student but she confessed that she was resistant to learning English. Primarily, she found it difficult and it was so simple to appeal for language assistance; so many teachers and students were bilingual that she would ask them to translate and all readily complied. Nonetheless, Anna graduated from high school in 1996 at the top of her class. With the help of influential teachers who recognized her academic talents, Anna was awarded a scholarship and headed to the University of Texas Pan American in Edinburgh, Texas. For the first time in her life, she

was separated from her family and friends; this separation would have a profound influence on her life as a college student.

While Anna lived at home, she had a strong system of support. Like Cárdenas (2004), her teachers, parents, and particularly her older brothers encouraged her and helped her with her studies. At college, however, this familiar support system was non-existent and Anna drifted from class to class without making meaningful or substantive connections. She found herself in classes of hundreds taught by aloof and distant professors and within a short amount of time, Anna was failing key classes. She reflected on her early college experiences, "I didn't have no one to help me out. I had no tutors, nothing. And I think that's what it was because I like school. I love school…I just didn't have no body around me to help me out with my classes." Anna's time spent at school and away from her family was also recounted in her Heritage Album (Figure 7.1). In this entry, Anna described her college classes and began to investigate the reasons for her failure (lack of support and personal resiliency), her decision to leave college, and the reasons for her eventual academic success.



Today I hurry off to school, to work and learn and play. I'm in a brand new grade this year. What a happy day!

Back to School

La universidad

Obtuve la beca para la Universidad de Texas en el 96' y en Septiembre del mismo ano me inscribí. En mi primer semestre estaba tomando clases como English 99 y Reading 99 también tenia una clase para hablar francés "Como tela bu?". Era un poco difícil para mí pues, no sabía mucho Ingles y también no tenia amigas para poder discutir la tarea. Otra cosa era que tenía que manejar media hora para llegar a la escuela.

Termine mi primer semestre y el segundo semestre tome clases de English 100 y Reading 100, Math 100 y Biología. La razón por la cual tenia que tomar todas esas clases era por mi beca. Así que en los primeros mese iba bien, pero donde estaba batallando era en Biología.

No entendía nada en la lectura, en el LAB iba bien, creo que la razón por la cual iba bien en las otras clases y no en Biología; era porque Biología era una clase enorme y realmente el maestro no le importaba quien atendía o no. Así que empecé ha faltar a la clase de Biología y me iba a la clase de computadoras. En ese tiempo estaba fascinada con las computadoras y quise tomar un curso pero ya no había cupo.

Así que como no iba bien en la clase de Biología, deje la escuela en Marzo del 97. Lo que le dije a mi Familia es, que, ya estaba cansada de estudiar y necesitaba un descaso. Pero realmente no era la verda. Creo que la verdadera razón por la cual realmente deje la escuela es porque no tenía apoyo de nadien. Mis hermanos no me podían ayudar pues no sabía mucho Ingles, y yo no era tan amigable así que no tenía amigos para compartir la tarea. Ahora tengo mucho apoyo de mi Esposo y es por eso que regrese a la escuela y complete mi Associates Degree in Liberal Arts. No creo que lo hubiera hecho yo sola, gracias a mi esposo pude alcanzar una meta mas.

***Figure 7.1. La universidad.***

I got a scholarship from the University of Texas in '96 and in September of that same year I got enrolled. In my first semester I was taking courses such as English 99 and Reading 99. I was also taking a French class *"Como tela bu?"* It

> was a bit difficult for me as I didn't know much English and I didn't have friends to discuss homework with. Another thing was that I had to drive half an hour to get to school.
>
> I finished the first semester and in the second one I took English 100, Reading 100, Math 100 and Biology. The reason why I had to take all those courses was my scholarship. So I was doing okay in the first months, but I was struggling with Biology.
>
> I didn't understand the lectures at all, even though I was doing okay in LAB. I think the reason for doing okay in other courses but not in biology was that Biology was a huge class and the teacher didn't really care who attended and who didn't. So I started skipping Biology and went to the computer class. In that time I was fascinated by computers and wanted to take a course but the class was full.
>
> So, since I was not doing okay in Biology I dropped school in March '97. The explanation I gave to my family was that I was tired of studying and needed to take a break. But in reality that wasn't the truth. I think the real reason for dropping school was that I didn't have any support. My brothers couldn't help me as they didn't know much English and since I wasn't very friendly I didn't have friends to share homework with.
>
> Now I have a lot of support from my husband and that's why I went back to school and got my Associates Degree in Liberal Arts. I don't think I could have done this on my own, thanks to my husband I was able to reach one more goal.

Anna's experiences paralleled those of many college freshmen. For the first time in her life, she was away from home and had not developed the skills crucial for success in college. Moreover, Anna was without a social network, a fact that was accentuated due to her commuter status. In comparison, Cárdenas (2004) had made important inroads while she was a mid-school and high school student that enabled her to develop an identity that aligned with school expectations. An important influence for Cárdenas was her father, a college graduate. He possessed influential cultural capital that he used to guide his daughter as she navigated the social practices of the dominant group. Moreover, his support helped her to resist stereotypes and develop the resiliency that was necessary to confront those who erected academic barriers. Finally, Cárdenas maximized her

chances for success by enrolling in a community college near her home; she was close to those who had supported her in the past.

Anna's college experience shared none of the characteristics of Cárdenas' and before the school year was over, Anna disenrolled and returned home to McAllen. Anna spoke mainly to the lack of support as the primary reason for her failure in college. Her words, "I didn't have no one to help me out" suggest that she had thought about the reasons for her failure in college as well as why she was later successful in earning a liberal arts degree. I would suggest, however, that the reasons for Anna's failure in college are complex and go far beyond lack of support; rather, they were a combination of a sheltered history, distance, language barriers and the fact that her prior school experiences were in direct conflict to the challenges posed by a large university.

Anna returned to McAllen and faced her family's disappointment. The youngest in a large family, Anna was the first to attend a university. The fact that she failed weighed tremendously on her self-confidence. Though her mother encouraged her to take some time and grieve, she felt compelled to find employment. Within two weeks of returning home, Anna's phone rang. It was an Army recruiter. Anna admitted that her decision to join the Army was uninformed; she knew nothing about the National Guard or the U.S. Army Reserves. Nonetheless, the recruiter promised a job and training and within three weeks of exiting college, Anna found herself at basic training in South Carolina. This trip, her first time in an airplane, would change the course of her life and thrust her into circumstances where resilience and formation of new identities would be tantamount to survival. Anna recounted her decision to join the Army and the experiences of basic training in her Heritage Album. When Anna reflected on this album entry, she

was optimistic. Though it was difficult for her to be so far away from her family, she felt that joining the Army had been the correct decision. Anna excelled and credited the military for expanding her view of the world. And the main difference between this experience and her previous college experience is that the Army came equipped with a rigid routine and a social network; Anna took solace in the fact that after her failed college experience, her needs were being met and others were responsible for making important decisions. The identity of Army soldier was uncomplicated and offered elements of safety and with deployment still a year away, Anna began to flourish.

Guerra (2004) writes about the concept of transcultural repositioning and considers experiences such as Anna's. As he suggests about many residents of marginalized communities, Anna's ability to adjust to Army life had more to do with need than mere desire to fit into the larger group. And it was certainly not the result of anything that she learned in school. Rather, she was "engaging in the practice of transcultural repositioning" (p. 138). Transcultural repositioning as a term embodies so much more than *acculturation* or *assimilation*[9], terms that are troubling in that they imply that the immigrant sheds one culture in favor of another. Instead, transcultural repositioning springs from the notion of dissonance or disharmony but does not result in acquiring a new culture while the former remains intact and unchanged. Guerra (2004) suggests instead that there is a shift in identity illustrated by the individual's ability to "move back and forth…productively between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes, different cultural and artistic forms, different ways of

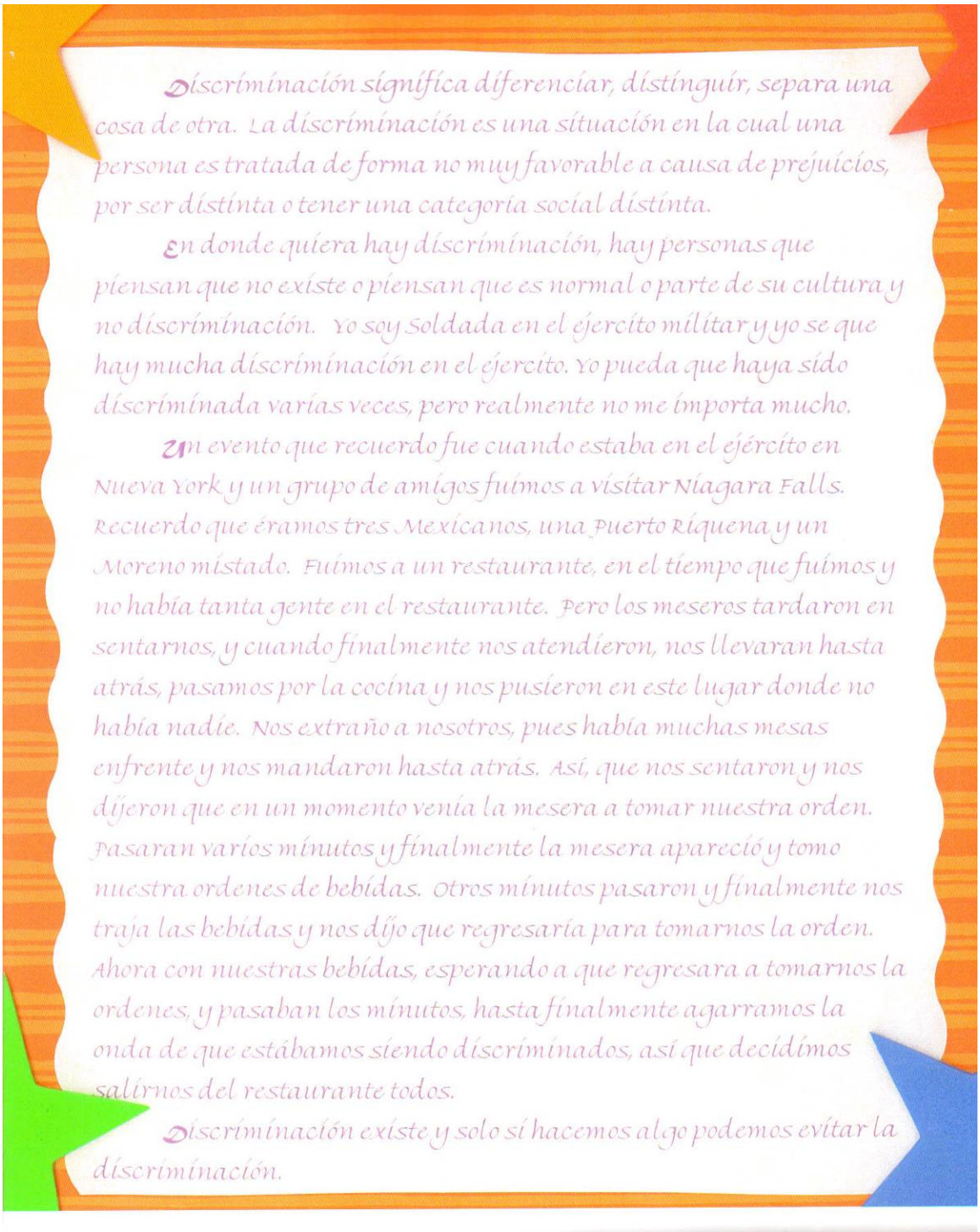
[9] Guerra (2004) cites Ortega (1940) and views *acculturation* and *assimilation* as ethnocentric words with moral connotations, i.e., these terms are steeped in the idea that non-natives must change in order to receive benefits that the dominant society has to offer.

seeing and thinking about the increasingly fluid and hybridized world emerging all around us" (p. 140). Anna's ability to strategically construct new identities would serve her as she transitioned from soldier to mother and wife and back to soldier once again.

Anna finished basic training and was stationed in Fort Drum, New York. She worked at an administrative job and met her future spouse, Joel, through a mutual friend. Her relationship with Joel proved to be immensely influential in that it provided Anna with the support that was noticeably lacking in college. With Joel, Anna traveled throughout New England, to Indiana and as far west as Chicago. She shared,

> If I hadn't joined the Army, I probably would have ended up in Reynosa, on the border with some Mexican guy. I'd probably live in a little house or a trailer or something like that. I look back and think, I don't regret joining the Army because I met Joel and a lot of things are different.

Anna credited the Army with changing her life and providing her with choices that she would certainly not have had access to in Reynosa or McAllen. She confessed that she was proud to be a soldier, that she realized that she had opportunities because of her U.S. citizenship. She related that when she was wearing her uniform, people regularly approached her and thanked her for her service. There were times, however, when despite her affiliation with the Army, she felt the stabs of discrimination based solely on her ethnicity. In her Heritage Album, Anna described an encounter in a restaurant in upstate New York where she and a group of fellow soldiers were made to wait for a table in a near-empty restaurant (Figure 7.2).



Discriminación significa diferenciar, distinguir, separa una cosa de otra. La discriminación es una situación en la cual una persona es tratada de forma no muy favorable a causa de prejuicios, por ser distinta o tener una categoría social distinta.

En donde quiera hay discriminación, hay personas que piensan que no existe o piensan que es normal o parte de su cultura y no discriminación. Yo soy Soldada en el ejercito militar y yo se que hay mucha discriminación en el ejercito. Yo pueda que haya sido discriminada varias veces, pero realmente no me importa mucho.

Un evento que recuerdo fue cuando estaba en el ejército en Nueva York y un grupo de amigos fuimos a visitar Niagara Falls. Recuerdo que éramos tres Mexicanos, una Puerto Riquena y un Moreno mistado. Fuimos a un restaurante, en el tiempo que fuimos y no había tanta gente en el restaurante. Pero los meseros tardaron en sentarnos, y cuando finalmente nos atendieron, nos llevaran hasta atrás, pasamos por la cocina y nos pusieron en este lugar donde no había nadie. Nos extraño a nosotros, pues había muchas mesas enfrente y nos mandaron hasta atrás. Así, que nos sentaron y nos dijeron que en un momento venía la mesera a tomar nuestra orden. Pasaran varios minutos y finalmente la mesera apareció y tomo nuestra ordenes de bebidas. Otros minutos pasaron y finalmente nos traja las bebidas y nos dijo que regresaría para tomarnos la orden. Ahora con nuestras bebidas, esperando a que regresara a tomarnos la ordenes, y pasaban los minutos, hasta finalmente agarramos la onda de que estábamos siendo discriminados, así que decidimos salirnos del restaurante todos.

Discriminación existe y solo si hacemos algo podemos evitar la discriminación.

***Figure 7.2. Discriminación.***

Discrimination means to differentiate, to distinguish, to separate one thing from the other. Discrimination is a situation in which a person is treated in a not

> very favorable way as a result of prejudices for being a different person or for being from a different social category.
>
> Discrimination is everywhere. There are people who think it does not exist or that it is something normal or part of their culture but not discrimination. I am a soldier in the military Army and I know that there is a lot of discrimination in the Army. I might have been discriminated against many times but I didn't care much.
>
> One event I remember is when I was in the Army in New York and a group of friends and I visited the Niagara Falls. I remember we were three Mexicans, a Puerto Rican girl and a mixed raced *moreno*. We went to a restaurant in a time when there weren't a lot of people in the restaurant. But the waiters took a long time before they took us to our place, and when they finally assisted us they took us all the way to the back, we walked through the kitchen and they took us to this place where there wasn't anybody else. We thought that was strange because there were many tables at the front and they sent us all the way to the back. So they sat us and told us that our waiter would be taking our orders soon. Several minutes went by and finally a waitress showed up and took our drink order and told us that she would be back soon to take our meal order. Several minutes went by until she finally came with our drinks and said she would come back to take our order. Now with our drinks, and waiting for the waitress to come back and take our orders, several more minutes went by, until it finally hit us, we were being discriminated so we all decided to leave the restaurant.
>
> Discrimination exists and we could avoid it only if we do something about discrimination.

Anna shared this story during a family literacy meeting and confessed that the impact of the experience that took place in this restaurant was profound. She had never experienced overt discrimination and the fact that she was wearing an Army uniform made the experience all the more intense. In this respect, the Family Literacy Program served to create an environment where Anna considered an incident and reflected on the impact it had on her identity.

Anna married Joel in 2000 when she was 23 years old. Her daughters, Adriana and Elsa were born and Anna spent several years stationed in the United States. In 2006, however, it became clear that she would be deployed to Iraq. For the first time in her Army career, Anna was struggling with how the identity of soldier would impact the

identity of wife and mother. Anna and Joel were well-aware of the struggles that women face in the military. Joel asked her to apply for a deferment but Anna argued that deployment would eventually happen. Instead of waiting for her orders to report, Anna joined a small unit comprised of officers; she felt that these were good men and her job as an executive administrator would ensure her safety.

Anna deployed to Iraq in the summer of 2006 and she left Joel to care for their two young daughters. Initially, Joel was upset; they both knew that Anna could have used her two daughters as a reason not to deploy. When she refused to reconsider, Joel felt that Anna was leaving him behind. Joel was from a small village in Mexico where male and female roles were clearly delineated. Initially, his family offered to take care of his two daughters. By now, Joel was a student at the university and despite his workload, he resisted the urge to further split up his family. During her deployment, Joel and Anna communicated via telephone and computer web cam. And Joel showed pictures of Anna to their daughters every day that she was away. Regardless, her absence was difficult. Anna noted that had Joel been a wife, there would have been a variety of military support services available to him. As a husband, however, he was left on his own. Anna was in Iraq for about one year and when she returned, her husband was ready to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree in bilingual education.

Anna is looking forward to the time when her military service is over. She understands the significance of her military service; without the military, Anna would not have traveled widely, met her husband, been deployed to Bosnia and Iraq, and had her two daughters. Her experiences in the Army also helped Anna to develop resiliency and practice the art of transcultural repositioning, qualities that would serve her when she

returned from oversees and transitioned back into the roles of wife and mother. Anna summed up her military service in her Heritage Album (Figure 7.3). In this entry, Anna explained how her decision to join the military impacted and changed the course of her life.

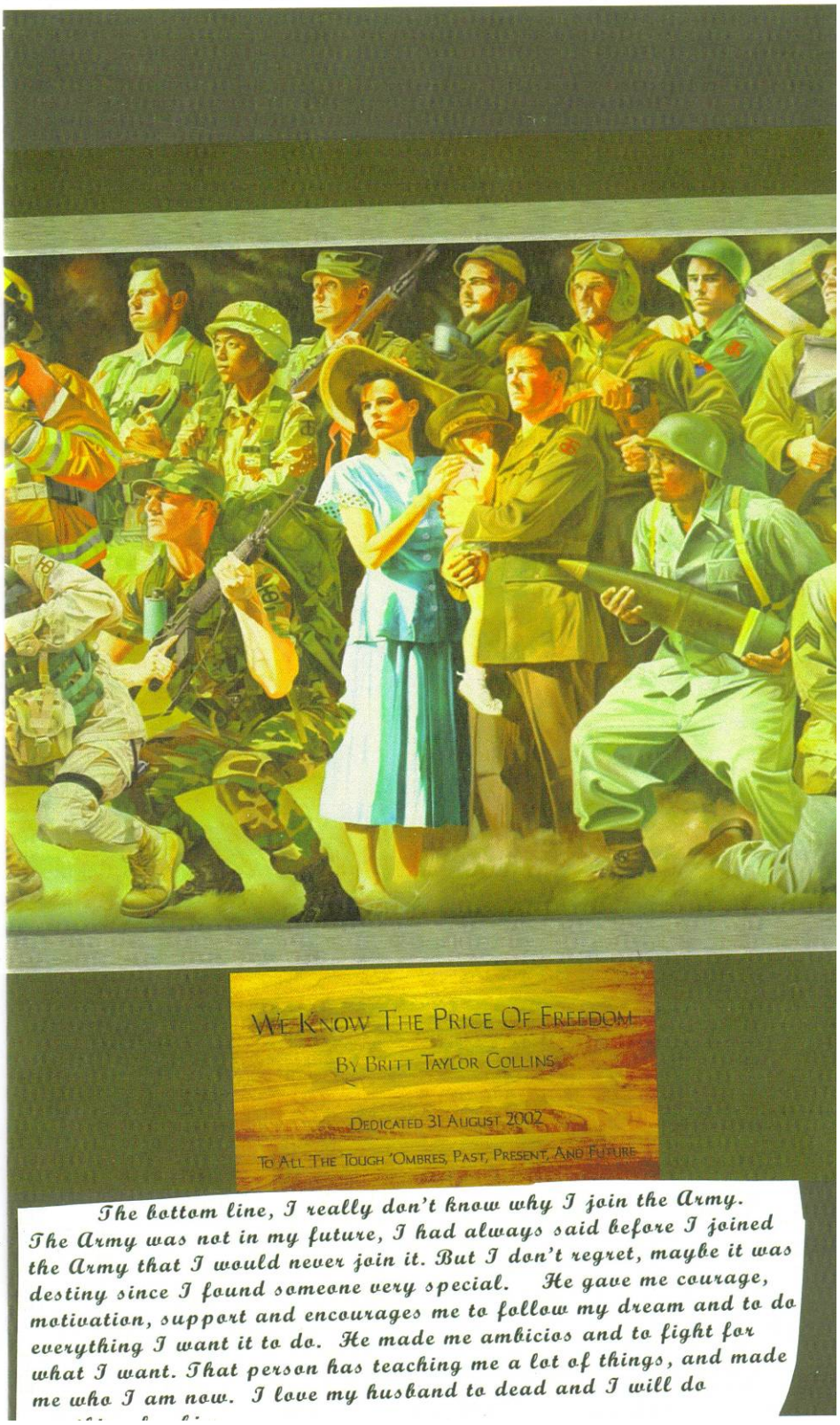



***Figure 7.3. The Army.***

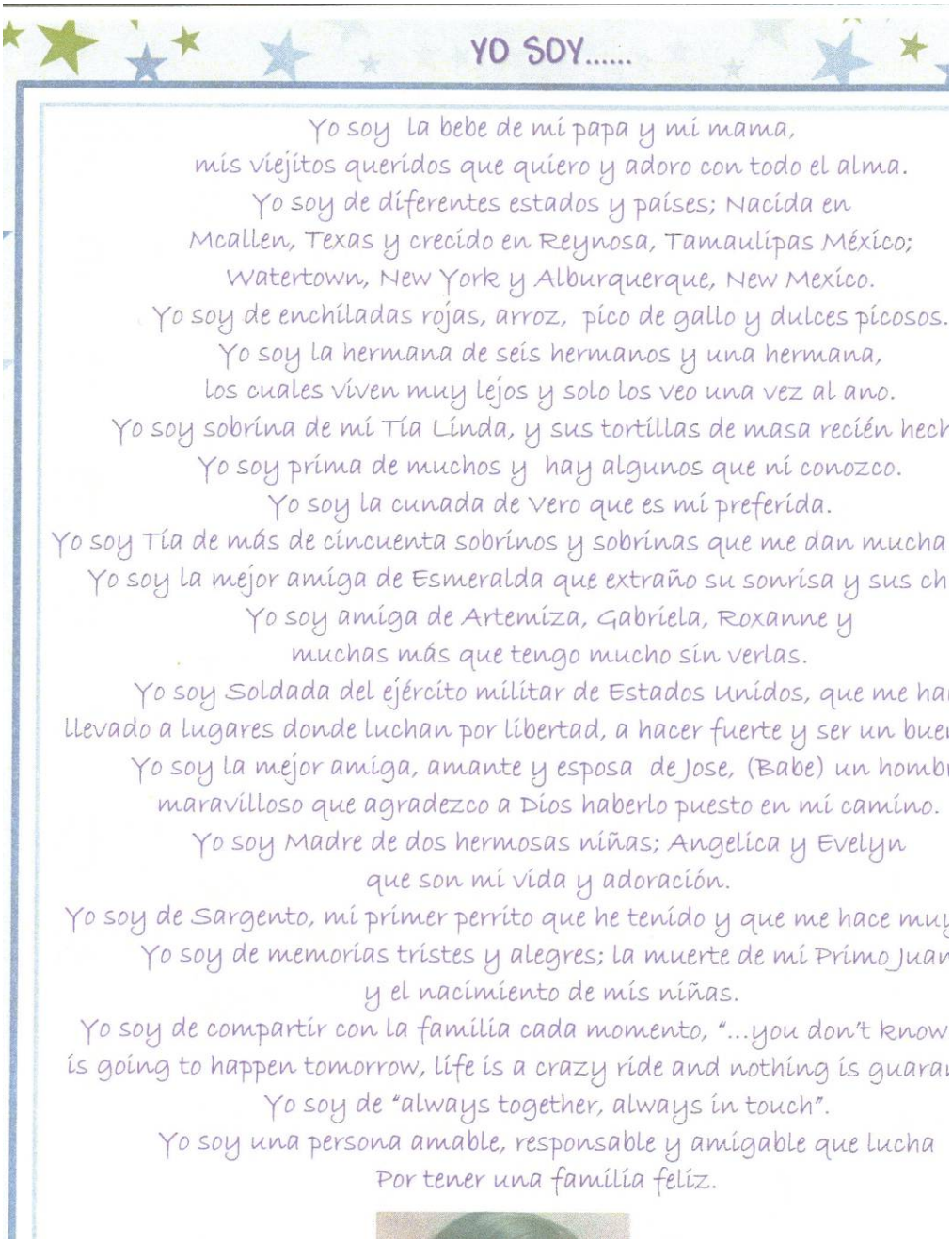
As her military service winds down, Anna is making plans for the future. She wants to attend college and, like her husband, earn a degree in elementary education.

Anna began attending the Family Literacy Program at the insistence of her husband. Initially unwilling, she quickly formed relationships with several of the mothers and because of her solid literacy skills, she became a leader in the group. Anna noted that her reasons for attending the meetings were two-fold. Primarily, her husband felt that he had learned skills in his teacher education program that were helpful to his two young daughters. When he would try to share this information with Anna, she was highly resistant. For example, she remarked that she failed to see the value in reading aloud to her children. Joel felt that her resistance was due to her tenure in the military. Anna was so accustomed to following orders; when she had opportunities to be oppositional, she took them! To that end, Joel felt that if she learned this information from an alternative source, she would be more willing to participate in these behaviors that he believed would help their daughters in school. Anna's second reason for attending the Family Literacy Program was because she enjoyed the construction of her Heritage Album. "It's good to leave something for our kids. I feel good that I'm telling my story."

Anna began consistently attending family literacy meetings early in the school year. In the beginning, the mothers were quiet and standoffish. Anna would come dressed in her Army fatigues and the other participants simply did not know what to make of her. In an effort to gain acceptance by the group, Anna began to adopt selected behaviors of the mothers who were participating in the Family Literacy Program. In another example of transcultural repositioning (Guerra, 2004), Anna changed out of her Army fatigues before meetings and dressed more in keeping with the younger mothers in the program.

And like many of the participants, Anna began bringing her mother to family literacy meetings; she later reported that attending meetings with her mother brought the two women closer.

Anna immediately embraced the idea of the Heritage Album and was able to make strong connections between skills that she learned at family literacy meetings and the narratives that she wrote. For example, at the first meeting of the year, mothers were introduced to webbing and the *de donde soy* activity (Christensen, 1998). Lena modeled webbing as a brainstorming tool and read her personal version of *de donde soy*. This meeting laid the groundwork for the first entry in Anna's album titled *Yo soy* (Figure 7.4). In this entry, Anna described her family and their influences, her friends, military service, her first dog, and the profound joy she finds in her husband and children. She wrote, "*Yo soy de compartir con la familia cada momento* (I am from sharing each moment with my family), you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, life is a crazy ride and nothing is guaranteed."



YO SOY.....

Yo soy la bebe de mi papa y mi mama,
mis viejitos queridos que quiero y adoro con todo el alma.
Yo soy de diferentes estados y países; Nacida en
Mcallen, Texas y crecido en Reynosa, Tamaulipas México;
Watertown, New York y Alburquerque, New Mexico.
Yo soy de enchiladas rojas, arroz, pico de gallo y dulces picosos.
Yo soy la hermana de seis hermanos y una hermana,
los cuales viven muy lejos y solo los veo una vez al ano.
Yo soy sobrina de mi Tía Linda, y sus tortillas de masa recién hech
Yo soy prima de muchos y hay algunos que ni conozco.
Yo soy la cunada de Vero que es mi preferida.
Yo soy Tía de más de cincuenta sobrinos y sobrinas que me dan mucha
Yo soy la mejor amiga de Esmeralda que extraño su sonrisa y sus ch
Yo soy amiga de Artemiza, Gabriela, Roxanne y
muchas más que tengo mucho sin verlas.
Yo soy Soldada del ejército militar de Estados Unidos, que me ha
llevado a lugares donde luchan por libertad, a hacer fuerte y ser un bue
Yo soy la mejor amiga, amante y esposa de Jose, (Babe) un hombı
maravilloso que agradezco a Dios haberlo puesto en mi camino.
Yo soy Madre de dos hermosas niñas; Angelica y Evelyn
que son mi vida y adoración.
Yo soy de Sargento, mi primer perrito que he tenido y que me hace muı
Yo soy de memorias tristes y alegres; la muerte de mi Primo Juar
y el nacimiento de mis niñas.
Yo soy de compartir con la familia cada momento, "...you don't know
is going to happen tomorrow, life is a crazy ride and nothing is guara
Yo soy de "always together, always in touch".
Yo soy una persona amable, responsable y amigable que lucha
Por tener una familia feliz.

***Figure 7.4. Yo soy.***

I AM…

I'm daddy's babe and my mom's, my old man and woman whom I love and adore with all my soul.

I'm from different countries and states; born in McAllen, Texas and raised in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico; Watertown, New York and, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

I'm a red enchiladas, rice, *pico de gallo*, and spicy candy type of girl.

I'm the sister of six brothers and one sister, who live very far away and I only see once a year.
I'm the niece of my aunt Linda and her home-made corn flour *tortillas.*
I'm the cousin of many, and some I don't even know.
I'm the sister-in-law of Vero, who is my favorite.
I'm the aunt of more than fifty nieces and nephews that give me a lot of….
I'm the best friend of Esmeralda, whose smile I miss and her…….
I'm the friend of Artemiza, Gabriela, Roxanne, and many more that I haven't seen in a while.
I'm a soldier in the U.S. Army, which has taken me to places to fight for freedom, to be strong and….
I'm the best friend, lover and wife of Joel (Babe), a marvelous man, that I thank God for having put him in my way.
I'm the mother of two beautiful girls; Adriana and Elsa who are my life and love.
I'm of Sergeant, the first doggy I've had that makes me very…
I'm of sad and happy memories: my cousin Juan's death and my girls' birth.
I'm one who shares every moment with the family, *"…. You don't know what Is going to happen tomorrow, life is a crazy ride and nothing is guaranteed."*
I'm one who thinks *"always together, always in touch"*.
I'm an amiable, responsible and friendly person who strives for a happy family.

This writing exercise served as a gateway activity for other album entries that also were self-reflective in nature. An example of this is an album entry titled, *I am a person that is in progress* (Figure 7.5). In this entry, Anna explored her identity as daughter, wife, and mother.

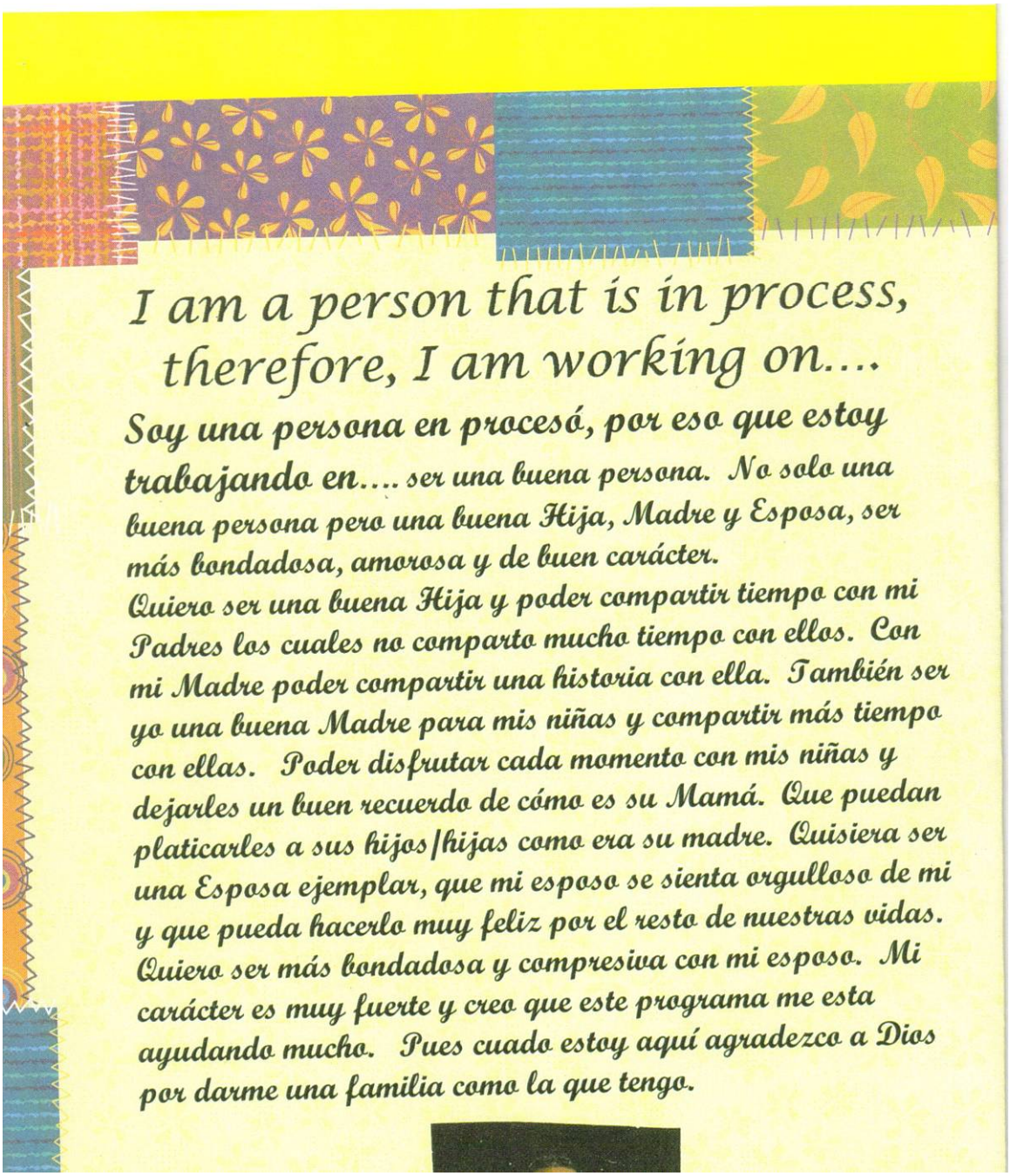



***Figure 7.5. I am a person.***

I'm a person who is in process; therefore I'm working on being a good person. Not only a good person, but a good daughter, mother and wife; a kinder, more loving person with a good character. I want to be a good daughter and be able to share time with my parents with whom I don't spend a lot of time. I want to be able to share a story with my mother. I want also to be a good mother myself and spend more time with my daughters. To be able to enjoy every moment with

> my girls to leave them a good memory of what their mother is like. I want them to be able to tell their children who their mother was. I want to be an exemplary wife, I want my husband to be proud of me, and I want to make him very happy for the rest of our lives. I want to be kinder and more understanding to my husband. I have a strong temper and I think this program is very helpful for me because every time I'm here I thank God for giving me the family I have.

The Family Literacy Program has been an important vehicle for Anna, one that has helped her to understand her literacy experiences in a social context. Through the Family Literacy Program, Anna reflected on her earliest learning experiences, explored her relationship with her family, interrogated her college experience, and understood the factors that led to her decision to drop out of school and to join the Army. In hindsight, Anna suggested that it was not surprising that she had so much difficulty succeeding in college, she had no encouragement or support system and it was only through perseverance and resiliency that she found success in the Army.

Perhaps most importantly, Anna explored her literate identity through the construction of her Heritage Album. In the pages of her album, she described herself as a daughter, wife, and mother and began to think of herself as a product of her personal experiences. Anna immediately liked the idea of making an album and felt that it would be an important artifact to leave to her children. She described the album as having great sentimental value of her family as well as her friends from the Family Literacy Program.

### Sofia Ortega

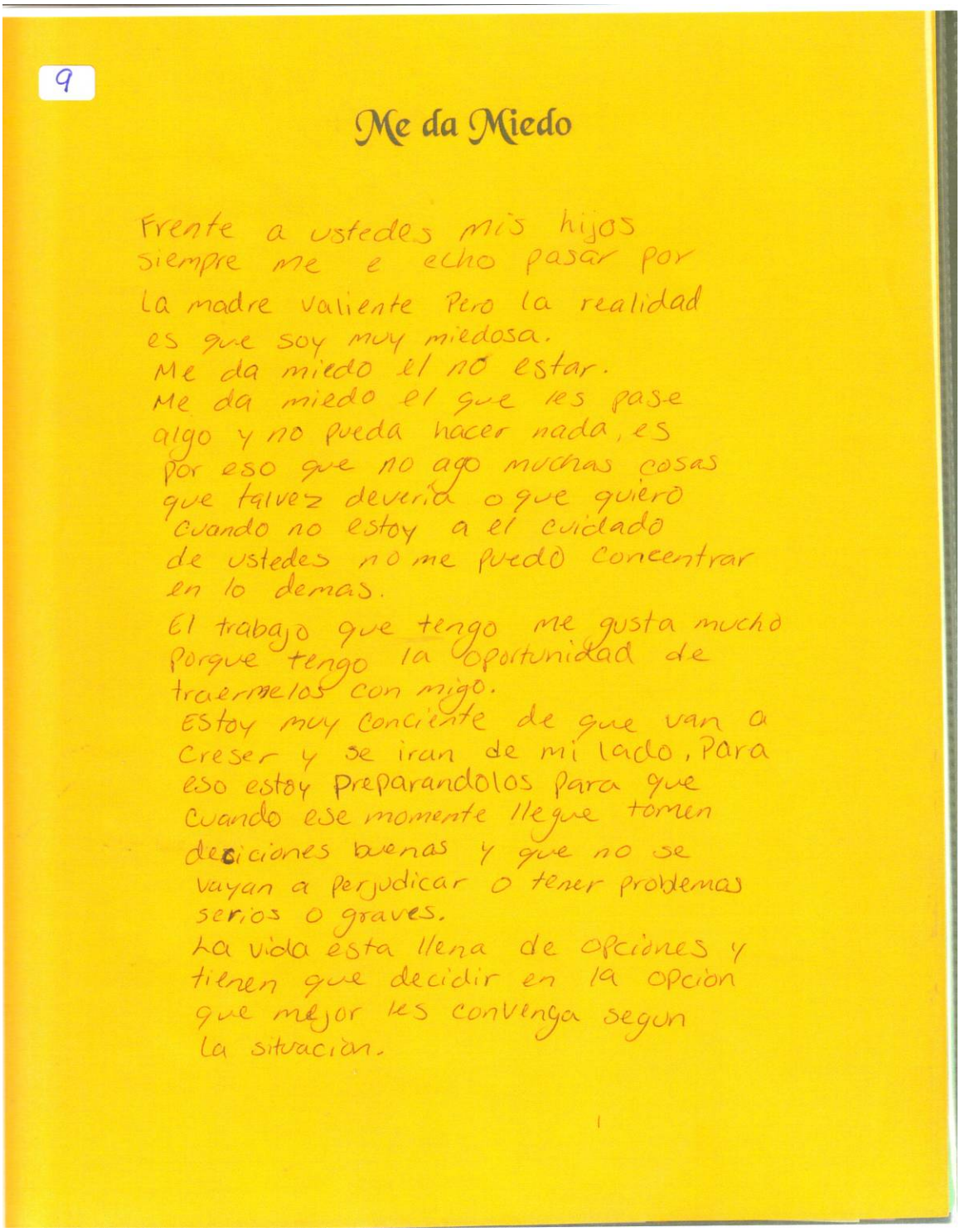
Sofia was one of the youngest women participating in the Family Literacy Program. She was born in Mexico on a small ranch near San Juan de Abajo. Sophia lived at Las Glórias with her parents, brothers and sisters, and extended family until she was nine years old. When she was nine, Sofia's family moved to an agricultural community in

California. Here her parents worked as migrants in the agricultural industry while she and her brothers and sisters attended school. Sofia described her early school experiences as difficult. Language barriers coupled with a lack of a support system made every day a trial. Sofia noted that, over time, her school experiences did improve. She began to learn English and she found that academics were easy for her. And she also noted that she considered herself to be lucky; she never had to work in the fields. When Sofia was fourteen years old, she moved to New Mexico with her mother and sisters. She entered high school but dropped out in her sophomore year. Like Anna, Sofia failed to form strong connections with influential and supportive teachers (Cárdenas, 2004) and was unable to find the personal motivation to remain in school. Sofia eventually earned her GED and counts this accomplishment as a major triumph.

When Sofia left high school, she was charged with finding employment. She worked at a variety of fast food restaurants and within two years, she met her future husband, Ivan. They married when both were eighteen years old. Though Ivan was also born in Mexico, his youth was much different from Sofia's. She described her husband's childhood in her Heritage Album as being very difficult. He begged, washed car windows, and delivered groceries when he was only six years old. In the United States, he worked at fast food restaurants and car washes. Eventually, he became the assistant manager of a car wash. Sofia wrote in her Heritage Album, "I am proud to say that my husband is a hard-working man and he never complains of how tired he is. I know how tired he is."

Within a short amount of time, Sofia and Ivan became the parents of Juanita, Inez, Joel, and Ivan Jr. Sofia reported that being a mother is a privilege and that a strong

influence was her own mother. In her Heritage Album, Sofia described her mother as being responsible and generous, traits that she was trying to replicate with her own family. Sofia also began to explore her own identity within the pages of her album. In interviews, Sofia spoke of her life in terms of accomplishments (learning English, finishing her GED, getting married and having children). In her Heritage Album, however, she revealed a different character, a young woman who was still weighing her hopes and dreams against the reality of her life. In her album, Sofia wrote about her prince, the imperfection of her spouse, and the love that she holds for her children, Juanita, Inez, and Joel. It is clear that Sofia has been influenced by the strength of her mother. She loves her husband and children, but her private reflections are tinged with doubt. She worries about her children, about their safety as well as their ability to problem-solve and make good decisions. These personal doubts and apprehension for her children made their way into another entry in her Heritage Album (Figure 7.6).



9

# Me da Miedo

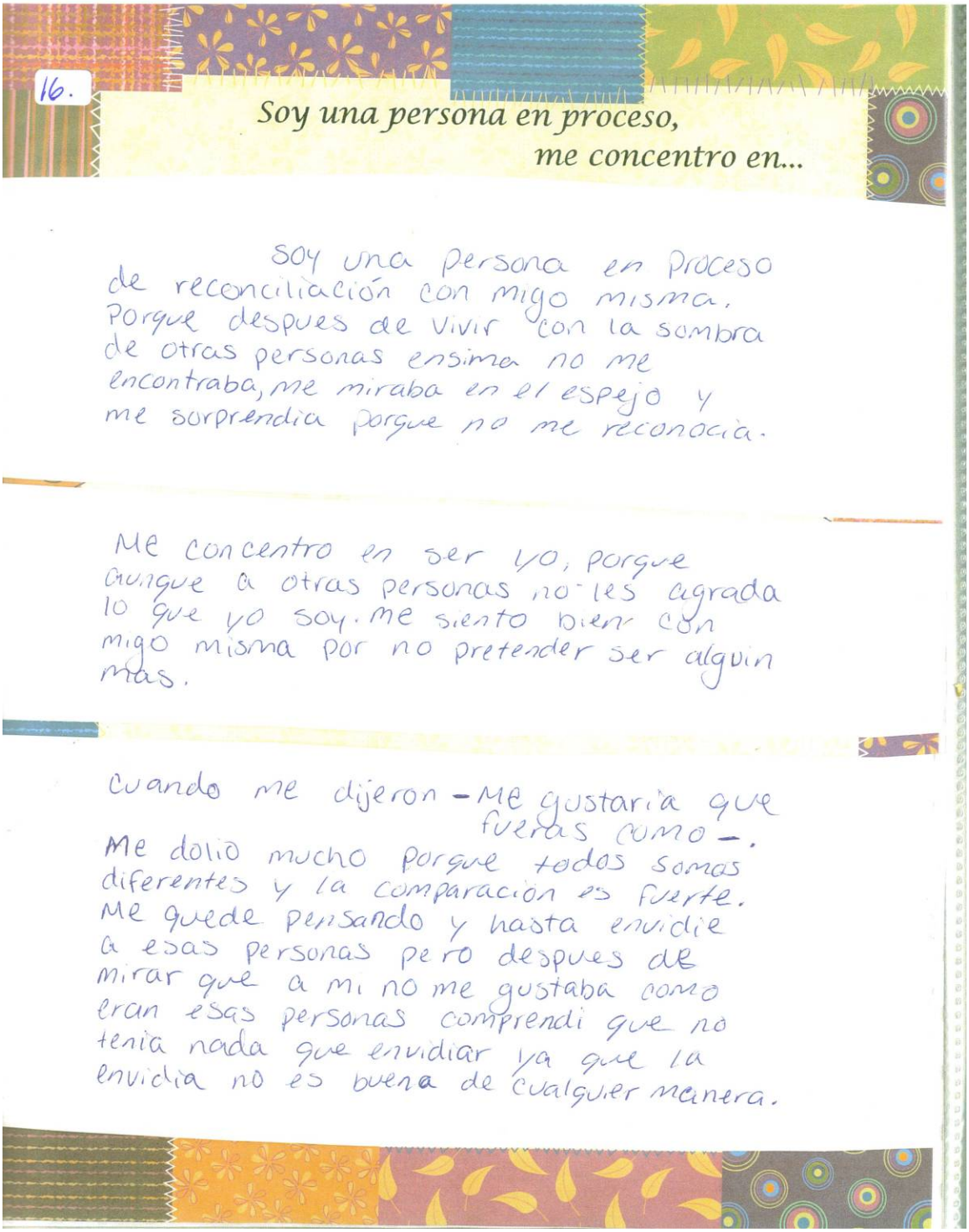
Frente a ustedes mis hijos
siempre me e echo pasar por
la madre valiente Pero la realidad
es que soy muy miedosa.
Me da miedo el no estar.
Me da miedo el que les pase
algo y no pueda hacer nada, es
por eso que no ago muchas cosas
que talvez deveria o que quiero
cuando no estoy a el cuidado
de ustedes no me puedo concentrar
en lo demas.
El trabajo que tengo me gusta mucho
porque tengo la oportunidad de
traermelos con migo.
Estoy muy conciente de que van a
creser y se iran de mi lado, Para
eso estoy preparandolos para que
cuando ese momente llegue tomen
deciciones buenas y que no se
vayan a perjudicar o tener problemas
serios o graves.
La vida esta llena de opciones y
tienen que decidir en la opcion
que mejor les convenga segun
la situacian.

***Figure 7.6. Me da Miedo.***

I’m afraid

> Before you, my children, I have always pretended to be the brave mother. But the truth is that I’m very fearful. I’m afraid of not being there. I fear that something might happen to you and not being able to respond. That’s why I don’t do many things that maybe I should, or that I want to do. When I’m not taking care of you, I can’t concentrate on anything else. I like my job because I have the opportunity to bring you with me.
>
> I’m very much aware that you will grow up and leave. I’m preparing you for that. So that when that moment comes you take good decisions and not harm yourselves or get into big or serious troubles. Life is full of choices and you have to take the one that better suits you according to the situation.

Sofia’s album echoes her feelings for her mother, her dreams, the reality of her life, and her hopes and fears for her children. The album is also reflective of the strength and resiliency that is part of Sofia’s character. This resiliency is illustrated in a variety of album entries. Sofia wrote about a favorite custom, one which she believed will keep her children safe. She wrote about her faith, hated chores, folk remedies, and all that she has to be thankful for. In total, her album chronicled her identity as a woman, daughter, wife, and mother. Moreover, it was the vehicle through which she was beginning to explore her own individualism, apart from those who help to shape her roles. Like Anna, Sofia wrote an entry titled, *I am a person in process* (Figure 7.7). In this entry, she struggled with her personal individuality against the backdrop of criticism from outside sources. Though she was intentionally not specific, this entry illustrates the high level of resiliency that Sofia possesses.



16.

Soy una persona en proceso,
me concentro en...

Soy una persona en proceso de reconciliación con migo misma. Porque despues de vivir con la sombra de otras personas ensima no me encontraba, me miraba en el espejo y me sorprendia porque no me reconocia.

Me concentro en ser yo, porque aunque a otras personas no les agrada lo que yo soy. me siento bien con migo misma por no pretender ser alguin mas.

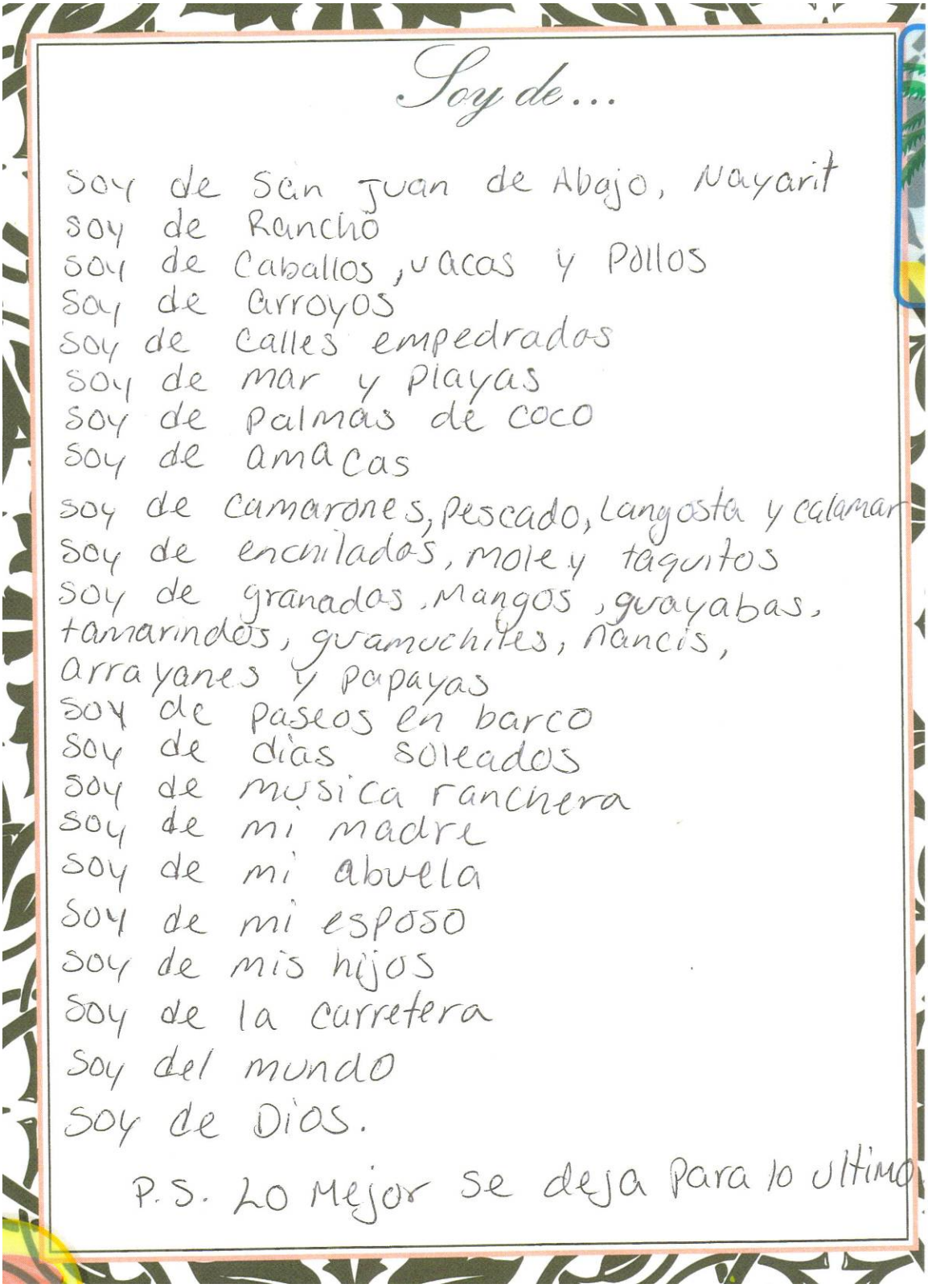
Cuando me dijeron - Me gustaria que fueras como -. Me dolio mucho porque todos somas diferentes y la comparación es fuerte. Me quede pensando y hasta envidie a esas personas pero despues de mirar que a mi no me gustaba como eran esas personas comprendi que no tenia nada que envidiar ya que la envidia no es buena de cualquier manera.

***Figure 7.7. Soy un persona…***

I'm a person that is in process, I concentrate on…

> I'm a person in process of becoming reconciled with myself. Because after living under other people's shadow, I wouldn't find myself. I would look at myself in the mirror and I would be surprised of not recognizing myself.
>
> I concentrate on being myself, because even when other people dislike who I am, I feel good with myself for not pretending to be somebody else.
>
> When I was told –I'd like you to be like…- it hurt because we are all different and comparisons are hard. I kept wondering and I even felt envious of those people but after I realized that I didn't like the way those people were I understood that I didn't have anything to envy because envy is not a good feeling anyways.

In this entry, Sofia demonstrated that she was reflective, possessed a strong voice and a strong sense of self. She recognized that aspects of her personality are not always appreciated; she would not, however, bend to the will of her critics. At 24, Sofia noted that she is not the woman that she hopes someday to be. She was aware that her children are growing up and before long, they will be in school. Sofia revealed that she is anxious for the day when she can go back to school. Like Anna, Sofia hoped to become a classroom teacher; this suggests that the Family Literacy Program has a strong influence on the mothers' educational goals. Additionally, the Family Literacy Program has provided a haven in which Sofia was free to contemplate her future while she interrogated her past. Her *soy de* album entry (Figure 7.8) is an example of Sofia's reflective and hopeful character. In this entry, she recalled memories from her past and expressed hope for her future.



Soy de...

Soy de San Juan de Abajo, Nayarit
Soy de Rancho
Soy de Caballos, vacas y Pollos
Soy de arroyos
Soy de Calles empedrados
Soy de mar y Playas
Soy de palmas de coco
Soy de amacas
Soy de camarones, pescado, Langosta y calamar
Soy de enchilados, mole y taquitos
Soy de granados, mangos, guayabas, tamarindos, guamuchiles, nancis, arrayanes y papayas
Soy de paseos en barco
Soy de dias soleados
Soy de musica ranchera
Soy de mi madre
Soy de mi abuela
Soy de mi esposo
Soy de mis hijos
Soy de la carretera
Soy del mundo
Soy de Dios.

P.S. Lo Mejor se deja para lo ultimo

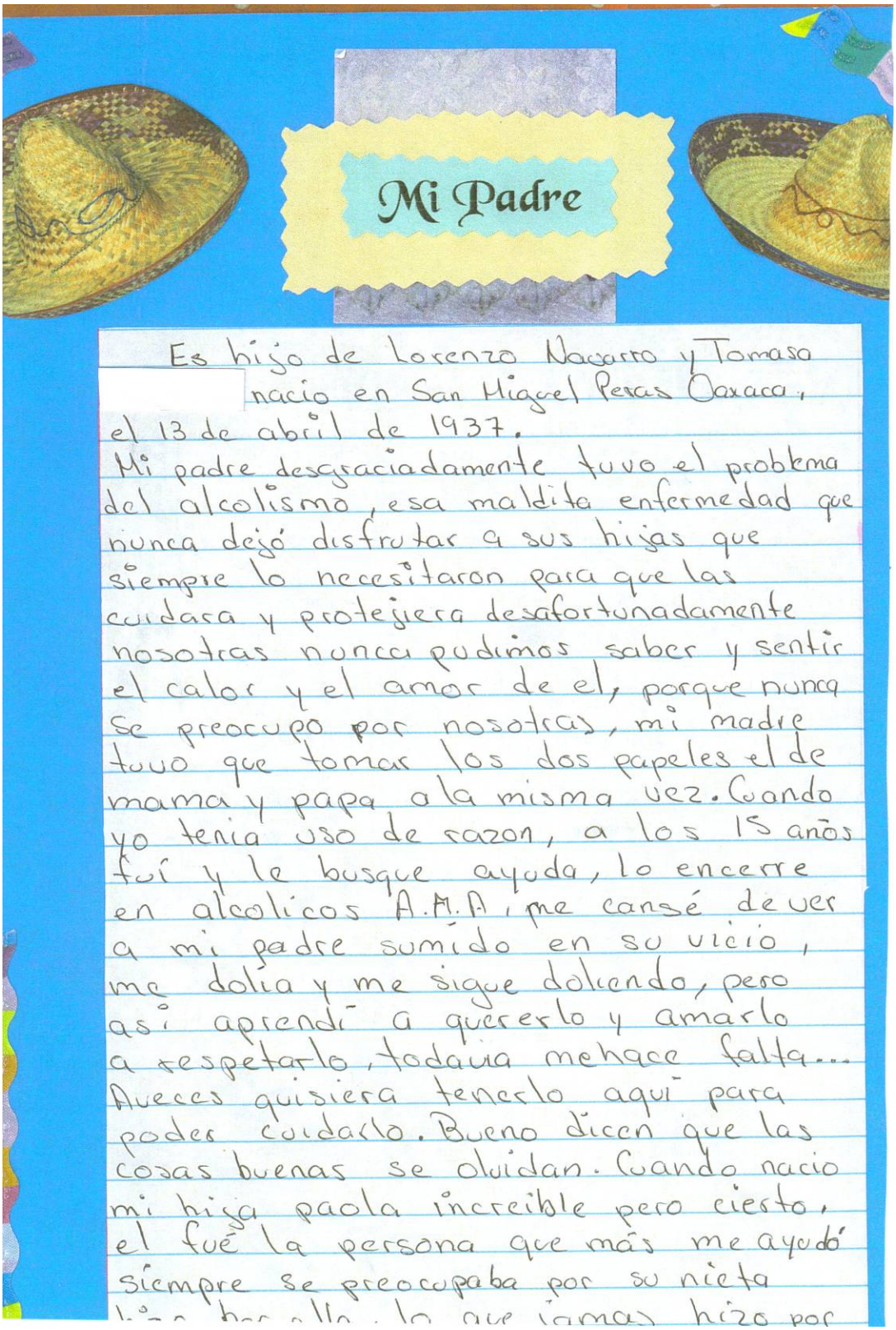
***Figure 7.8. Soy de…***

I am from San Juan de Abajo, Nayarit
I am from a ranch
I am from horses, cows, and chickens
I am from arroyos
I am from streets made from rocks
I am from the ocean and beaches
I am from coconut palms
I am from hammocks
I am from shrimp, fish, lobster, and squid
I am from enchiladas, mole, and taquitos
I am from passion fruit, mangos, guavas, tamarinds, guamuchiles, nancis, and papayas
I am from trips on boats
I m from sunny days
I am from ranchera music
I am from my mother
I am from my grandmother
I am from my husband
I am from my children
I am from the road that I travel
I am from the world
I am from God.
P.S. The best was saved for last.

Leandra Lopez

Leandra was one of the longest participating members of the Family Literacy Program; she has attended regularly since the program relocated to River View Elementary School in the fall of 2006. Leandra was born in Oaxaca, Mexico and immigrated to the United States with her new husband when she was twenty years old. Though she was nervous about moving away from her family, her husband assured her that there were opportunities in the United States and not to worry. He told her, “it’ll be good.” In Oaxaca, Leandra had left behind a devoted mother and an alcoholic father. During group discussions, Leandra shared that her father was a drunk and was living on the streets of Oaxaca. In a show of strength and determination, Leandra would wait for her mother to go to work and then she would go out and find him. She would bring him

fresh clothes and food. Leandra understood that her father had placed the family in an untenable situation; yet, she could not bear the thought of him alone and uncared for. Leandra remarked that these memories of her father were painful, even more so because her own husband had a drinking problem. Leandra does not recount the relationship with her husband in the pages of her Heritage Album. She does, however, write about her father (Figure 7.9). In this album entry, Leandra's inner strength and resiliency emerged as she explored her father's alcoholism.



# Mi Padre

Es hijo de Lorenzo Navarro y Tomasa
nacio en San Miguel Peras Oaxaca,
el 13 de abril de 1937.
Mi padre desgraciadamente tuvo el problema
del alcolismo, esa maldita enfermedad que
nunca dejó disfrutar a sus hijas que
siempre lo necesitaron para que las
cuidara y protejiera desafortunadamente
nosotras nunca pudimos saber y sentir
el calor y el amor de el, porque nunca
se preocupo por nosotras, mi madre
tuvo que tomar los dos papeles el de
mama y papa a la misma vez. Cuando
yo tenia uso de razon, a los 15 años
fuí y le busque ayuda, lo encerre
en alcolicos A.A.A, me cansé de ver
a mi padre sumido en su vicio,
me dolia y me sigue doliendo, pero
así aprendí a quererlo y amarlo
a respetarlo, todavia me hace falta...
Aveces quisiera tenerlo aquí para
poder cuidarlo. Bueno dicen que las
cosas buenas se olvidan. Cuando nacio
mi hija paola increible pero cierto,
el fué la persona que más me ayudó
siempre se preocupaba por su nieta
hasta hace poco, lo que jamas hizo por

***Figure 7.9. Mi padre.***

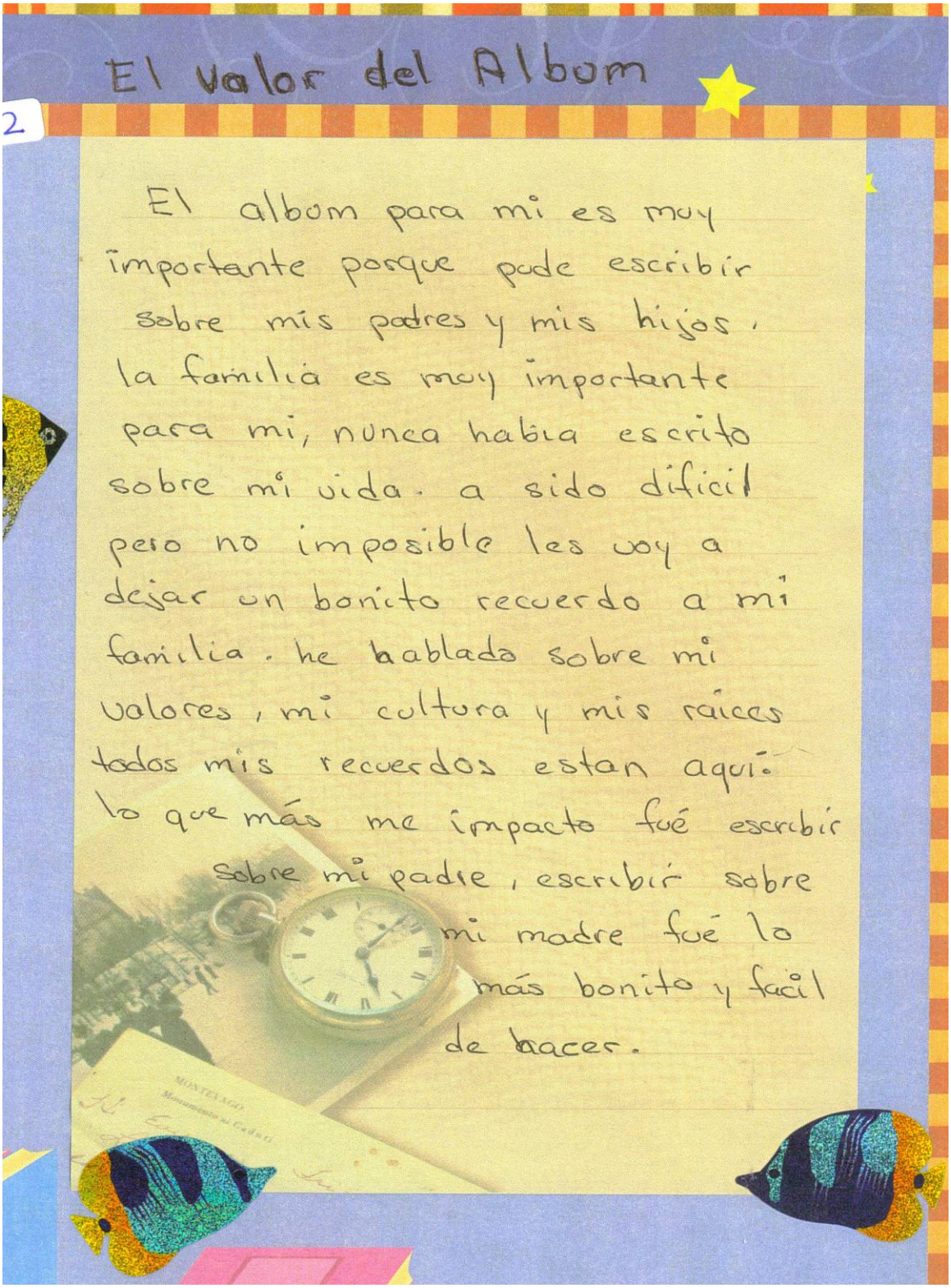
*Mi padre*

> Son of Lorenzo Navarro and Tomasa Sanchez, he was born in San Miguel Peras, Oaxaca on 13 April, 1937. Regrettably, my father had the problem of alcoholism, this damned illness that never allowed him to enjoy his daughters who needed his care and protection. We, unfortunately, never knew or felt his warmth and love because he never cared for us. My mother had to take on the two roles, that of a mother and a father at the same time. When I was mature enough, at age 15, I sought help, and I put him away in Alcoholics Anonymous A.A. I got tired of seeing my father submersed in his vice. It hurt then and still hurts now, but I learned to love and respect him like that. I still need him… sometimes I wish he were here so that I could look after him. Well, they say that good things are forgotten. When my daughter was born, incredible but true, he was the one person who helped me the most. He was always worrying for his granddaughter. He did for her what he never did for his children.

Leandra's father had a profound impact on her own identity as a wife and mother. In the United States, Leandra's husband quickly found employment and together, they began to have children and build a life together. Leandra recalled that for awhile, life was very good. But then her husband began to drink. Though he was never abusive towards her, his behavior was difficult and she did not want him to be around her children. Leandra thought back to her mother's disapproval of her marriage and wondered if her mother realized that her future husband had the potential to become an alcoholic. Regardless, Leandra summoned the courage to leave. She packed her clothes in a garbage bag and left with her children. Leandra found refuge in a shelter and from this safe haven, began to communicate with her husband. Leandra told him that while she loved and respected her mother, she would not live her mother's life. She set the conditions for her return and though she has had to threaten her husband from time to time, Leandra is proud that her five children live in a home with two parents.

Leandra possessed the inner strength and resiliency to problem-solve through this difficult situation. In fact, her mother was influential in that she provided a strong model

for what a wife and mother should be. Yet, Leandra's actions went beyond those of her mother; her determination and resiliency have led her to take advantage of the many educational opportunities available to parents in the River View community. She took a variety of parenting classes, computer classes, and because she wanted to improve her Spanish and English literacy skills, she faithfully attended the Family Literacy Program since its move to River View three years ago. Leandra shared that she looks forward to learning techniques to improve her personal writing. To that end, Leandra has embraced the Heritage Album; she views it as a vehicle for self-reflection as well as a way to make sense of her difficult childhood. In an entry titled, *El Valor del Album*, Leandra wrote about the importance of the album in her life (Figure 7.10) and alluded to the fact that the album has been therapeutic; writing has helped her to deal with her feelings for her father.



El Valor del Album

2

El album para mi es muy importante porque pude escribir sobre mis padres y mis hijos. la familia es muy importante para mi, nunca habia escrito sobre mi vida. a sido dificil pero no imposible les voy a dejar un bonito recuerdo a mi familia. he hablado sobre mi valores, mi cultura y mis raices todos mis recuerdos estan aqui. lo que más me impacto fué escribir sobre mi padre, escribir sobre mi madre fué lo más bonito y facil de hacer.

***Figure 7.10. El valor del album.***

## The Value of the Album

> The album for me is very important because I was able to write about my parents and my children. Family is very important for me. I had never written about my life. It's been difficult but not impossible. I'm going to leave a beautiful memory to my family. I have written about my values, my culture and my roots. All my memories are here. The most shocking experience was to write about my father. Writing about my mother was the most beautiful and easiest thing to do.

Leandra's participation in the Family Literacy Program has been important and influential. She is a role model for the other younger mothers; her stories that detailed her personal struggles and accomplishments have helped other mothers to make sense of their lives. More importantly, however, her consistent attendance and dedication to the Heritage Album has supported Leandra as she has grown in her personal literacy skills.

## Elisa Castro

Elisa Castro is one of the oldest mothers who participated in the Family Literacy Program. She was in her late 40s and had three children who ranged in age from 20 to six. Elisa was born on a ranch near the village of Chihuahua, Mexico. The oldest girl of 10 surviving children, Elisa was responsible for a variety of chores as well as the care of her younger brothers and sisters. This heavy load proved to be problematic for Elisa when she began attending school. Elisa reported that she had little time for homework and like Anna, there was really no one to help her with her lessons. To that end, Elisa failed to make progress in school. She repeated several grades and when she was 13, she announced that she no longer wanted to attend school.

Elisa blamed work and her siblings for her abysmal experiences in school. In truth, Elisa had dealt with negative influences in her life. Primarily, she was raised by an abusive, alcoholic father and she revealed that she rarely felt safe when she was at home.

When Elisa was 14, she was sent to live with her grandmother in Chihuahua. She enrolled in technical school and soon realized that she had an analytical mind; she enjoyed problem-solving activities. When Elisa completed technical school, she had a decision to make. She did not want to return to her parents' ranch but she could no longer live with her grandmother. Because she was the oldest girl in the family, her mother encouraged her to become a nun. Elisa gave it a try; she entered a monastery and remained for three months. Again faced with the disappointment of failure, she fled to Monterrey to be near her oldest brother, Juan. Juan served a similar function as Cárdenas' father (2004). He became a positive influence, a profound source of support, and a role model for perseverance. Juan was the third oldest of Elisa's brothers. He finished elementary and secondary school, earned advanced degrees, and is currently a practicing psychologist in Chihuahua.

Juan encouraged Elisa to find a job and to enroll in night school. Again, Elisa realized that she was smart and had the potential to excel academically. Her time with her brother, however, was short-lived. The strain of working all day and studying at night took its toll and Elisa dropped out of school one semester short of completing her high school education. Juan remains influential in Elisa's life. His intelligence and personal resiliency enabled him to lift himself out of an abusive childhood and he was able to offer support to his siblings. Elisa credits Juan with helping her to come to terms with her childhood as well as helping her to become self-reliant and introspective. In her Heritage Album, Elisa wrote about her oldest brother in terms of his struggles and successes. From her descriptive album entry, it is clear to see that Juan has had a profound impact on

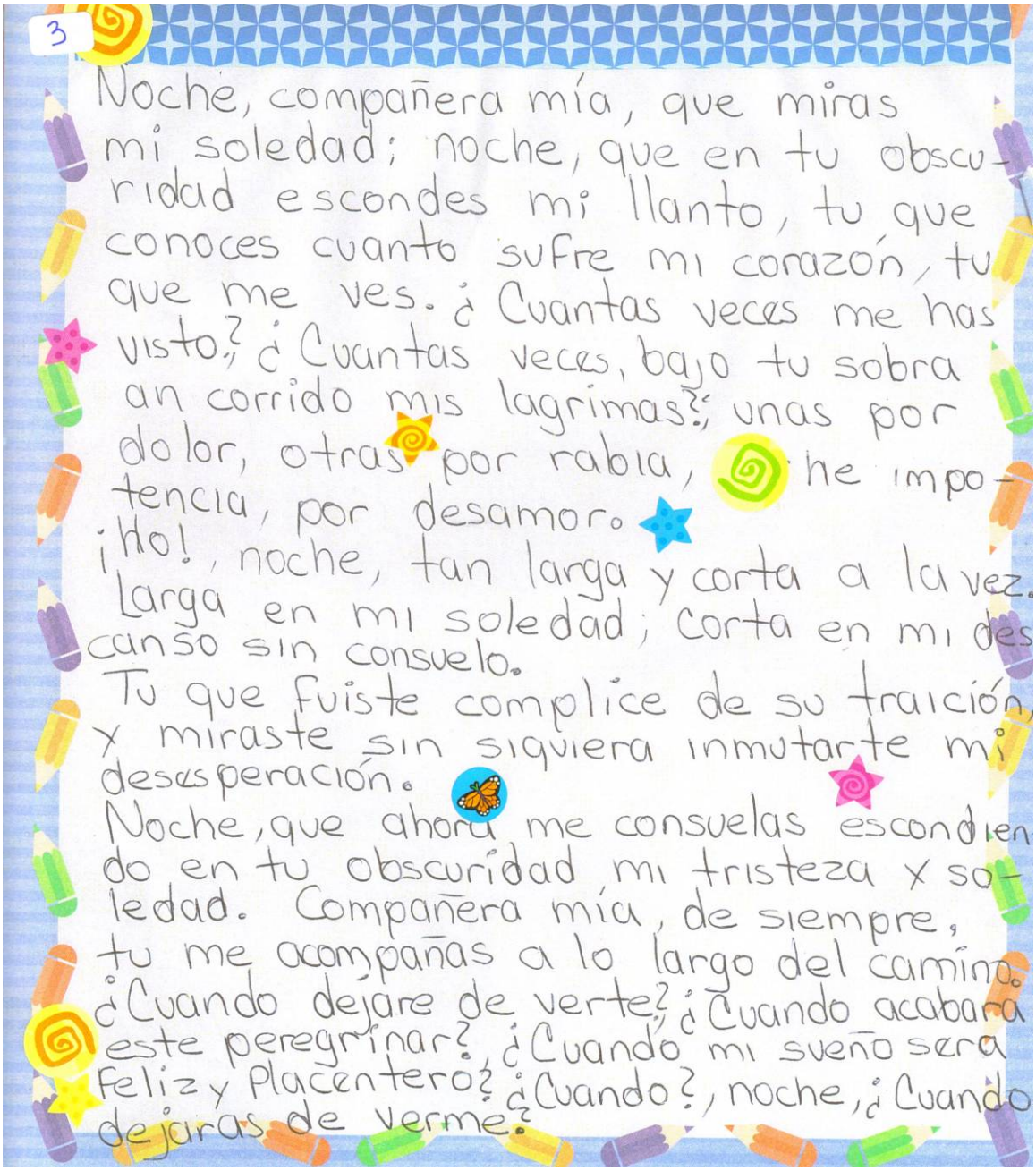
Elisa's identity. Elisa remains close to her brother; she reported that she talks to him often and that he visits whenever possible.

While Elisa was living in Monterrey, she met her future husband, married, and moved with him to the United States; they have three children and have lived in Albuquerque's south valley for 14 years. Though Elisa enjoyed her success in school, she felt that it was important to stay home and raise her children but once they entered school, she began to find her way back to the classroom.

Like Leandra, Elisa has attended the Family Literacy Program for three years. In addition to the Family Literacy Program, Elisa has also attended a variety of parenting classes and workshops at River View. She particularly enjoyed attending a workshop that highlighted communication and young children. While participating in this class, Elisa realized that she rarely talked with her children; she had no idea what they liked or who they were as people. Shelly Walters, the school's parent coordinator, noted that Elisa was an enthusiastic participant in this workshop. The workshop highlighted a variety of videotapes that examined the ways in which parents talk to their children and Elisa saw herself as a mother who spoke to her children by using commands. In short, she told her children what to do and rarely constructed opportunities for them to make choices and experience natural consequences. In an interesting instance of transcultural repositioning (Guerra, 2004), Elisa began to incorporate selected new parenting practices with her children. For example, she engaged her older sons in a variety of conversations and cultivated decision-making opportunities for her youngest daughter. All in all, she began to view her role in her children's life differently.

The Heritage Album project was an important vehicle for Elisa's literate identity construction. The original intent of the album was to provide mothers with a culturally relevant and authentic means of developing literacy skills. More often than not, mothers used the albums to recover memories of their lives; they wrote about their families, a hated chore, or a favorite custom. Early in the project, however, Elisa's Heritage Album began to take on a different character. Elisa, more so than others, began writing as a means of creative self-expression. She interrogated her inner-most feelings, thought about persistent feelings of loneliness, and contemplated complicated relationships with friends and family.

In interviews, Elisa described herself as introverted. This was verified when she attended meetings as she often sat separate from the other mothers. This self-imposed distance set her apart from the mothers in more than a physical sense. In fact, she rarely visited with mothers or joined in whole group discussions. One notable exception happened when the mothers were complaining that because of their children and household chores, there was no time to write in their Heritage Albums. Elisa used this opportunity to contribute to the conversation. She shared that she had to find time for herself, and that this time was often late at night when everyone was asleep. This was the time when ideas came into her head. Writing late at night became a flagship entry in Elisa's Heritage Album (Figure 7.11); in this entry she employed the literary device of *personification* and captured the attention of everyone in the room.



3

Noche, compañera mía, que miras
mi soledad; noche, que en tu obscu-
ridad escondes mi llanto, tu que
conoces cuanto sufre mi corazón, tu
que me ves. ¿Cuantas veces me has
visto? ¿Cuantas veces, bajo tu sobra
an corrido mis lagrimas?; unas por
dolor, otras por rabia, he impo-
tencia, por desamor.
¡Ho!, noche, tan larga y corta a la vez.
Larga en mi soledad; Corta en mi des
canso sin consuelo.
Tu que fuiste complice de su traición,
y miraste sin siquiera inmutarte mi
desesperación.
Noche, que ahora me consuelas escondien
do en tu obscuridad mi tristeza y so-
ledad. Compañera mía, de siempre,
tu me acompañas a lo largo del camino.
¿Cuando dejare de verte? ¿Cuando acabara
este peregrinar? ¿Cuando mi sueño sera
Feliz y Placentero? ¿Cuando?, noche, ¿Cuando
dejaras de verme?

***Figure 7.11. Noche, compañera mía…***

Night. My companion. You watch my loneliness. Night, in your darkness you hide my crying. You know how much my heart suffers. You that see me. How many times have you seen me? How many times under your shadow have teardrops fallen? Some for pain; some for rage; and some for helplessness of not being loved. Oh, night! So long and short at the same time. Long in my loneliness, short in my rest without consolation/ without relief. You, accomplice of his betrayal, looked unperturbed at my despair. Night, now you comfort me,

> hiding in your darkness my sadness and loneliness. My companion of all times. You're with me all along the way. When would I stop seeing you? When would this pilgrimage stop? When would my dream be happy and pleasant? When, Night? When will you stop seeing me?

This album entry represented a shift for Elisa, both in her personal writing as well as how she was perceived by the other participants in the program. When Elisa first began attending the Family Literacy Program, she was not well-received by the group. Elisa tended to be distant with bouts of overt behavior; during discussions, she sometimes became argumentative, even confrontational. On one occasion, she expressed her opinion on a topic, picked up her belongings, and walked out of the room. When she returned the next week, she sat at a table alone. Nelda remarked that Elisa demanded attention and that the other mothers grew weary of her. The dynamics changed, however, in the fall of the program's third year when a moment of humility helped Elisa to establish her membership in the group.

Once Elisa was accepted by the other mothers, she began to feel comfortable enough to take risks with her writing. Early on, it became evident that Elisa had a flair for writing. She was able to choose a topic and write descriptively; this was a skill with which the other mothers struggled. Her creative ability established her as a leader in the group and as Elisa began to relax, she began to share more about her life. She used writing as a means of self-exploration and self-expression and her Heritage Album entries began to take on a confessional character. She wrote about the imperfectness of her family, their struggles, and how she was learning to be assertive. Through her writing, Elisa divulged information about her husband; she described his over-bearing tendencies but admitted that he was the love of her life.

Elisa's heritage album is unique in that she accomplished a high degree of intimacy and introspection in her album. Though the other mothers certainly interrogated their inner-most feelings, Elisa's album illustrates the traits of a gifted writer. Her use of planning techniques (i.e., webbing and brainstorming), descriptive writing, and literary devices confirm the impact that the Family Literacy Program has had on the creation of Elisa's literate identity. Elisa's confidence in her literacy skills have risen dramatically since joining the program. At the end of the program's third year, Elisa approached me and asked me if I had any materials that she could use for a daycare 'school' that she was starting. Elisa shared that in addition to Silvia (her daughter), there were several other young children who lived in her neighborhood. She often watched them during the summer and wanted to work with them on reading and writing activities. I provided her with writing and construction paper, scissors, glue, pencils, crayons, and markers and the following fall, Elisa reported that her school had been a resounding success. She felt that these young children were well-prepared for school. In fact, Silvia entered kindergarten with those emergent literacy skills that are traditionally honored by classroom teachers. Silvia had a firm grasp of sound-letter relationships, understood how books worked, and had a well-developed sense of numbers; these skills made Silvia stand out in the kindergarten classroom and later in first grade and paved the way for entrance into the school's gifted program.

Prior to her involvement in the Family Literacy Program, Elisa struggled with school-based literacy activities. She lacked confidence and did not think of herself as a reader or a writer. As she began to participate in the Family Literacy Program, however, Elisa began to overcome barriers which had been erected in her life. She identified

negative and positive influences (her father and her older brother), and explored changing relationships with her children. Perhaps most importantly, participation in the Family Literacy Program granted access to skill development and helped her to develop an identity that cemented her membership in a literate community.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I examined the experiences of four women who participated in the Family Literacy Program. These women, of different ages and from different backgrounds, were similar in that they all confronted a variety of barriers within social structures; each one, however, possessed the perseverance and resiliency to overcome these barriers, resist stereotypes, participate in the practice of transcultural repositioning (Guerra, 2004), and ultimately construct new identities.

Trueba (2002) writes that individuals' survival and success is contingent upon the capacity to persevere and "define their identity in different ways" (p. 8) in order to operate effectively in a variety of settings. By this definition, the women represented in this chapter demonstrated their ability to reposition themselves according to need and circumstance. Each one was able to construct identities that carried them from home to school, to the Army, as they immigrated to the United States, and finally to the Family Literacy Program where their construction of their Heritage Albums facilitated the creation of literate identities.

# CHAPTER 8

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A recent newspaper article in the Albuquerque Journal reported that despite wide-sweeping legislative changes and teacher professional development directed at improving the education of minority and linguistically diverse students, the achievement gap continues to persist. As in years past, New Mexico ranks 48th in the nation in graduation rates and the gap between low-income, non-white students and their white peers holds steady at between 22 and 28 percent (Venegas, June 17, 2009). Though the newspaper article did not specifically address literacy learning, it seems safe to suggest that the failure to decode, evaluate, question, and manipulate a wide variety of modes of literacy has a detrimental effect on an individual's ability to graduate from high school.

Dorothy Strickland wrote the Forward to Taylor's (1983) book about the literacy habits of young children learning to read and write within the family context. In the Forward, Strickland suggests that language is intimately linked to cognitive thought and reason and mediates all learning and that "for this reason, the importance of the development of language and literacy in children is considered the first and most fundamental responsibility of the school" (Taylor, 1983, n.p.). In the literature, parents are often characterized as having a profound impact on their children's earliest learning experiences (Morrow, 1995) and are charged with constructing a stable home environment that anticipates the rigors of mainstream classroom practices. To that end, it makes sense to suggest that this fundamental responsibility of learning early literacy skills begins well before children enter the elementary school classroom and therefore,

that parents should have access to and choices in early, high-quality family literacy programs.

The position that parents have a profound impact on their children's success in school is reflected in social programs developed by the Federal Government. The 1960s saw the creation of Project Head Start, a program that has its roots in the concept that illiteracy is passed from generation to generation and conversely, that parents who are literate will raise literate children. Over the past forty years, Head Start has grown into a massive social program that has served over 13,000,000 children in the United States (Kassebaum, 1994). Though there is considerable discussion concerning the long-term benefits of participation in Head Start, there is evidence that suggests that children who participate in Head Start programs have increased odds of attending high school and have the potential of earning higher salaries than those students who do not finish high school (Garces, Thomas, & Curie, 2002). Like Project Head Start, the Even Start Family Literacy Program is a large, federally-funded program that provides three foundational skills to participants: adult education, early childhood education, and parenting education. Unlike Head Start, Even Start is traditionally managed by school districts who work with the community to meet the parent education component. To that end, participating parents, many of whom have had negative schooling experiences, cultivate rich contacts with schools and their children's teachers and families report that these contacts are helpful in supporting the literacy development of their children (Tadros, 1997).

A major criticism of Project Head Start, Even Start, and other large, well-funded family literacy programs is that they are mired in the deficit perspective; parents are viewed as disadvantaged, disinterested, as lacking essential literacy skills, and are

therefore fundamentally unable to provide satisfactory literacy models (Auerbach, 1995). To that end, parents are unable to "transmit the culture of school literacy through the vehicle of the family" (Neuman, Celano, & Fischer, 1996, p. 500). To combat these deficit-stance programs, family literacy programs began to appear that intentionally resisted replacing existing literacies with the literacies of the dominant or mainstream culture. These programs listed as their primary goal to support parents as they build literacy skills and promote literacy development in their children and were grounded in a social constructivist perspective. Understanding the community which the program serves is of profound importance when considering family literacy content. Literacy is more than an isolated set of neutral objectives and skills; in order to be liberating, literacy must be situated in the lives of the people and in the way they make sense of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to learn about the university's College of Education Family Literacy Program, a family literacy program that was grounded in the participants' culture, knowledge, interests, and needs. This study examined how the Family Literacy Program was structured, the underlying tenets of the program, and how the program attempted to meet the diverse needs of the families who participated. Additionally, I also investigated the experiences of the families, specifically a select group of mothers, who attended the Family Literacy Program. I examined how the mothers' participation in the program impacted their children's academic experiences and sought links between the program and mothers' literacy development. Finally, I studied whether or not participation in the Family Literacy Program impacted mothers' involvement in the larger community. Through the process of data collection and coding,

several themes emerged which will inform the Family Literacy Program as well suggest important directions for other independent programs that profess to be socioculturally grounded within the community they serve. The thematic patterns that emerged revolved around the importance of building a strong sense of community within the program, constructing a program that has the potential to serve as a vehicle for empowerment, and the phenomenon of identity construction through participation in a range of culturally-grounded literacy activities. Inherent in these themes are the concepts of social networks and individual agency and the ways in which these concepts intersected to impact the participants' engagement in the Family Literacy Program as well as in the larger community.

## Social Networks and The Family Literacy Program

Social networks and the related term *funds of knowledge*, is an overarching concept that addresses "the strategic and cultural resources…that households contain" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 313) and are able to mobilize in order to function effectively in the community. In early research, sharing funds of knowledge was conceived of as phenomenon that occurred as families responded to "changing circumstances and contexts" (p. 317). The authors argue that social networks in which funds of knowledge were embedded illuminated the high degree of creativity and adaptation contained in immigrant populations and that through understanding and utilizing the complexity of these resources embedded in the cultural systems of U.S. and Mexican-born children, have the potential to be "important and useful assets in the classroom" (p. 313). This is a profound viewpoint in that the schools traditionally ascribe to the notion that minority children enter school without useful assets, their experiences

are viewed as deficient and academic failure is an anticipated and expected outcome. To combat this position of deficiency, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) posit that households are rich with a variety of cultural resources and that in order for Mexican children to experience success, U.S. educational policy must shift in order to cultivate and maximize the rich resources inherent in households and therefore available to children. Though Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) do not specifically address the notion of parental involvement or family literacy programs, characteristics inherent in their policy suggestions readily translate to these family-based educational theaters.

Building on the educational premises set forth by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, Auerbach (1989) writes that the key to designing successful family literacy programs is to abandon the idea that family literacy programs are charged with transmitting school practices and instead concentrate on the assumption that literacy learning involves more than a limited set of predetermined activities and skills; rather, "literacy is a tool for shaping…social context" (p. 177). Auerbach suggests that this relevant social context is uncovered by engaging families in conversations about their lives, their work, and their children and that language and literacy becomes participatory and extends around these identified themes. To that end, Auerbach (1989) poses the question, "how can we draw on parents' knowledge and experience to inform instruction?" (p. 177). The implication is that by drawing on parents' knowledge and experience, social networks are awakened and funds of knowledge are exchanged between families as well as the larger school community.

## Critical Roles of Social Networking

The Family Literacy Program was firmly grounded in the position that participating families entered the program with an "intellectually credible history, culture, and language" (Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2008, p. 459) and personal agency needed to operate successfully in society. To that end, the participant-driven content that constituted the curriculum of the Family Literacy Program was obtained through the process of constructing a social network that was influential in shaping the participants' attitudes within the school and larger community. This social network provided mothers with a safe place to uncover and practice literacy skills and to think and discuss what practicing these skills might look like with their children. Though mothers attended family literacy meetings to satisfy policy requirements and for educational reasons (a requirement of the school's Even Start program, to learn how to assist their children in school, and to improve their own level of literacy), they created and participated in social networks that operated on several different levels, all of which were governed by the principles of "dense exchange" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 318).

Participating families who consistently attended brought with them divergent histories and a wide variety of experiences; some mothers were long-time U.S. citizens while others were recent immigrants who routinely moved or hop-scotched (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) across the border between the United States and Mexico. Additionally, most had encountered a variety of obstacles and barriers that had interrupted their literacy and general education. All entered the program, however, with the intent of supporting their children in school through the improvement of their personal literacy skills. These histories and experiences converged at the Family Literacy

Program and functioned as an “extensive kinship network” (p. 316) for a routine exchange of information that supported families in the educational institution.

At the most basic level, the Family Literacy Program served as the arena for a weekly social gathering during which time mothers chatted and informally exchanged and clarified information on topics that ranged from school events and field-trips to personal dilemmas and child-care. The driving force behind these exchanges was consistency in meeting times which enabled participants to construct and maintain close social contact. As relationships were formed, mothers went to considerable lengths to be present at weekly meetings as demonstrated by their consistent attendance which was a phenomenon that took on a high-degree of importance (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

Once solid relationships were formed, mothers engaged in social networking through active participation in whole group discussions. During discussions, mothers exchanged information on individual issues such as spousal abuse, alcoholism, sexuality, extended family dynamics, and issues related to school and highlighted the collective trials that these families routinely faced. For example, when Leandra shared that her husband spent his wages on alcohol, Sofia projected her friend’s experiences and anticipated a similar fate. She confronted her husband who had previously demonstrated an affinity for gambling and demanded that she be in charge of the household budget. Summoning the personal agency to garner control of the home finances afforded Sofia a sense of security which in turn supported her as she negotiated for control in other areas such as in employment and her extended hospital stay during her fourth pregnancy. Whole group discussions were also instrumental in the sharing of knowledge as it related

to child-rearing practices. Through conversations, mothers shared information on sexuality and how familial and cultural practices intersected to place their daughters at high-risk for teen pregnancy. These are examples of the many ways in which social networking and the exchange of information afforded participants the opportunity to marshal the necessary agency to respond to an ever-widening set of circumstances. It is important to note, however, that the venue for the exchange of information was of paramount importance in that these exchanges occurred at family literacy meetings as a result of the construction of "thick, multiple relationships" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 325).

Social networking and the exchange of funds of knowledge was perhaps most visible as they pertained to the education and academic performance of the participating children. In fact, when questioned, all of the family literacy mothers expressed a desire for their children to succeed in school and displayed an understanding that success in this institution maximized chances for success in the larger community. To that end, much of the social networking that occurred at family literacy meetings revolved around the topics of literacy development and success in school. This exchange of information occurred not only through literacy-based activities planned and presented by the family literacy staff, though these instances were powerful and provided important linguistic support for the participating mothers. The exchange of information authentically occurred as mothers shared their Heritage Albums, an ongoing literacy activity, during weekly family literacy meetings.

At each meeting, mothers read entries inspired by whole group discussions as well as their individual experiences. Through their entries, mothers shared their

knowledge on topics such as their family's history, cultural traditions, and herbal remedies. Though sharing of content was important, equally valuable was the transfer of literacy skills. Through the act of composing and sharing album entries, mothers learned the mechanics as well as the intricacies of written language embedded in what Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to as culturally relevant pedagogy. In a safe, constructive environment, mothers had multiple opportunities to write narratives in which skills were practiced, secured, and eventually shared with their children. The influence that they exerted on each other's writing was visible as mothers experimented with reflective writing, descriptive language, and poetic devices. Though certainly divergent from more traditional funds of knowledge such as ranch economy, masonry, veterinary medicine, and carpentry (Moll, 1992), sharing knowledge of these literacy skills in an authentic socially-constructed context produced feelings of efficacy within mothers which would most assuredly transfer to the next generation (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

Though the content offered through the Family Literacy Program was situated in meaningful contexts, it would be inaccurate to imply that the program's instructors were not concerned with or intentionally avoided transmitting important school practices. In another example of social networking, the program's instructors spent a fair amount of time discussing the importance of replicating classroom practices at home and engaging participants in conversations rooted in the importance of school-linked education. Lena and Nelda discussed text structures, comprehension strategies, and writing conventions while the children's instructors linked reader-response activities to selections of high-quality multicultural literature. The reality is that, in order to succeed in school, all students require some degree of explicit instruction. Delpit (1995) posits that while there

is conflict, to withhold instruction that addresses skill development while students find their voice runs the risk of maintaining the existing conditions that contribute to the persistent educational gap between White and minority, low-income students. It is also important to remember that Lena and Nelda gathered important information regarding parents' lived experiences and their reasons for attending; without exception, parents responded that they wanted their children to do well in school and they wanted to learn ways to help their children achieve this goal. To that end, the Family Literacy Program made a conscious effort to embed information that addressed classroom practices within socially-constructed, participant-driven content that made full use of the cultural resources imbued within each individual.

This interchange among mothers, participation in large group discussions, collaborative work on skill development, and construction of Heritage Albums proved to be a ready resource for their children's learning and over time, the participating mothers came to believe that they had diverse skills that would positively influence their children's performance in school. Moreover, through participation in the Family Literacy Program, mothers also found ways to influence the community outside of their children's elementary school. This was observed when participants found employment, customized a hospital stay, and advocated for their children in diverse educational settings.

In most cases, children whose mothers participated in the Family Literacy Program did well in school. Children arrived to school on time, consistently completed homework, and demonstrated literacy and math skills that were proficient or advanced for their specific grade levels. This information was obtained through casual conversations with classroom teachers based on their informal observations of the

children in their classes. At times, classroom teachers used district test data to substantiate their opinions; that test data was not a part of this study.

Focal mothers were an important source of information concerning their children's progress in school. All four focal mothers reported that they had a more complete understanding of how their children were doing in school and that they discussed their children's progress with teachers regularly instead of waiting until parent-teacher conferences. Leandra and Elisa noted that they had developed close relationships with their children's teachers and Elisa and her daughter's teacher had entered into an informal partnership to maximize Silvia's chances of qualifying for the school's gifted program. Additionally, mothers reported that they were spending more time at home with their children around school-like tasks and activities. They stated that they read to their children, not only books from the Family Literacy Program but also books that they had acquired from other sources. For example, Sofia used her discretionary household money to buy books for her children as well as herself. This information was substantiated when on a home visit, I observed several popular children's books lying on the floor in the front room where the children regularly played. Anna also noted that she had begun a nightly reading ritual with her two young daughters and that she saw, first hand, the progress her daughters were making in learning to read. Finally, all focal mothers reported that they had participated in literacy-based projects at home. Though some of these projects certainly involved homework completion, mothers had also reported that they involved their children in more authentic literacy routines such as meal preparations that required following recipes, letter writing, and the construction of the Heritage Albums.

Finally, the children themselves provided information concerning their preparedness and progress in school juxtaposed against their mothers' participation in the Family Literacy Program. They shared how their mothers read to them and assisted them with homework assignments. A third grade girl remarked that her mother asked her about homework every day and assisted her with classroom projects. In another case, a fifth grade girl shared that her mother routinely read to her and helped her 'web' writing assignments; webbing was a writing skill explicitly taught during family literacy meetings.

Not all of the children whose mothers participated in the Family Literacy Program did well in school. During one meeting, mothers reported the number of minutes they read to their children every week; some mothers read to their children as little as twenty minutes per week and at the other end, as much as one hour per day. Again, in casual conversations with classroom teachers, children who struggled with literacy development were generally read to only minimally at home. This anecdotal evidence suggests that children who are involved in story-book reading build skills that are helpful in school (such as vocabulary development, comprehension, and inference skills) though more data collection is needed to substantiate this conjecture.

It is important to understand that school failure is a complex issue that goes far beyond the role that parents play in their children's learning, i.e., most certainly it was multiple issues that led to these children's academic difficulties. These issues encompass topics such as learning disabilities, motivation, stressful home situations, and poor classroom instruction (Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). To that end, it is certainly possible that the children who were not read to or who were only read to twenty minutes

per week struggled in school due to a combination of factors; to uncover those factors would require additional research. The act of reporting minutes, however, proved to be important in that as mothers became aware of how some mothers were sharing books with their children at home, they began changing their home literacy reading habits. This became evident when the mothers were informally surveyed two weeks later and many reported that they had increased the time spent reading books to their children. In this example of how participation in this social network influenced and shaped mothers' behavior, it is important to note that while Lena and Nelda had often discussed the benefits of home reading, it was the mothers who validated this information for each other.

## Agency and Changing Identities

Unlike more traditional intergenerational programs that are often charged with transmitting school practices, the Family Literacy Program supported mothers through the construction of culturally authentic literacy activities in which they developed the agentive behavior required to engage in "deep, participatory learning" (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 19) where individuals construct new identities to accompany new knowledge as well as the skills to be fully recognized for possessing that knowledge. Agentive behavior, the act of exerting power over personal circumstances, is not nurtured in isolation; rather it is conceptualized in sociocultural literature as a dialogic process (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004; Wertsch, 1998) in which there is interplay between the individual (the agent) and the "mediational means and cultural tools" which are, "in general …powerless without an agent who uses them" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004, p. 293). This broad application where individuals garner power over systems is central to

sociocultural theory and subsequent discussions of empowerment, but theorists also agree that agentive behavior exists on a smaller scale (Wertsch, 1998) in which personal narratives (the lived experience) are highlighted. To that end, though the participants of the Family Literacy Program marshaled the collective agency to alter the landscape of the elementary school, they also exchanged information, ideas, and opinions (i.e., they engaged in dialogic behavior) that nurtured them on a creative and emotional level which evoked feelings of power and control over their personal literacy resources.

An example of developing the agentive behavior to engage in deep, participatory learning was Elisa, her highly-reflective narratives that served as a literary model for other mothers, and her subsequent launching of a summer pre-school to serve her daughter and other youngsters in the neighborhood. Through her participation at the Family Literacy Program, Elisa learned the literacy skills to produce creative and introspective narratives. But, in the process of conceiving and implementing an informal pre-school, she demonstrated that she had developed the agency to be recognized for her literacy skills. In other words, Elisa envisioned herself as capable and of possessing the skills necessary to organize a pre-school. In this case, Elisa was the "author" of her own identity (Gee, 2001, p. 112). Likewise, Leandra learned about advocacy through her participation in a multitude of parental involvement classes. At family literacy meetings, she shared her challenging personal history and counseled other mothers who faced similar dilemmas, but she practiced advocacy when she actively sought to enroll her daughter in a charter school. Both of these examples required a high degree of learning that was coupled with the agency to create an identity or a way of "being at a given time and place" (Gee, 2001, p. 99). This agency and identity construction was nurtured by the

Family Literacy Program; the driving force of the program was grounded in the acknowledgement of the appealing notion that all families have profound resources that have the potential to positively effect their children's literacy development.

The Family Literacy Program's venue for uncovering these rich resources was through discussions, participant-driven literacy activities, and the construction of the Heritage Albums. The Heritage Album project stretched over two years and was truly transformational for many of the family literacy participants. Through the Heritage Album, mothers interrogated their lived experiences and used writing about these experiences to practice and apply skills within the context of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and ultimately to be recognized as a certain kind of person (Gee, 2001), a person who was confident and knowledgeable about the institution known as school and therefore able to effect change on behalf of children. This opportunity to develop and apply skills contributed positively to mothers' learning, their sense of agency, and therefore to the construction of new identities. Overwhelmingly, mothers reported that they felt more able to help their children, form relationships with classroom teachers, and participate in the school community with a high degree of efficacy. Additionally, some mothers also reported that they felt more confident to advocate for themselves in the larger community. It is important to remember that though the actual narratives were authored by individuals, the framework within which the narratives were created was dialogical; numerous encounters during family literacy meetings influenced participants as they reauthored their lives (Rapund & Moore, 2002) and constructed complementary identities that were persistent, resilient, and better able to adjust to and participate in a variety of cultural contexts.

## Overcoming Obstacles: Recommendations and Final Thoughts

As the Family Literacy Program enters its fifth year, it has occurred to me that it is still a program in its infancy and structures that have endured for four years will certainly change. An important factor is that the Family Literacy Program is coming to the end of its funding. Donations that were meant to last for three years have been stretched to four and unless additional funding is secured, the program will be unable to provide families with the same high level of literacy support. Securing adequate funding has been problematic in that the philosophical stance that guides the Family Literacy Program is neither honored nor valued by government funding institutions. For example, large-scale funding agencies contain rigorous overarching guidelines that specifically require fidelity to researched-based reading programs and include explicit criteria that direct adult, parent, and child education components including the explicit teaching of English. These styles of programs are often mired in traditional pedagogical approaches and ignore cultures that have adopted a humane learning style grounded in multiple attempts to practice new skills free from the fear of embarrassment or punishment (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Though the Family Literacy Program works closely with the university's development office with the intent of seeking donations from local, private businesses, it continues to attempt to secure grants from well-endowed government sources.

Lack of sufficient funding is particularly concerning in that the question of the program's impact on children's academic achievement has yet to have been fully addressed. Though children's teachers were not included in the present study, I did have several occasions to engage in casual conversations with teachers who taught children

whose mothers participated in the Family Literacy Program. Almost without exception, teachers reported that children of participating mothers did better academically than their same-aged peers. Children who were consistently read to, who received assistance with homework, and whose parents were involved in adult education demonstrated literacy skills (e.g., decoding, comprehending, and the grade-level mechanics of writing) in the advanced range as determined by district-mandated standardized testing. While anecdotal evidence points to the outcome that children of participating parents perform better academically, more rigorous research is needed. Specifically, children's progress should be followed over time qualitatively (interviews with teachers, students, and parents; classroom observations; examination of student-generated work) as well as quantitatively through the collection and analysis of district-mandated and teacher-created assessments. Generated results would provide reliable evidence as to the degree of measurable impact participation in a community-based family literacy program has on students' academic achievement. The results of the present study, however, add substantial evidence to the notion of the importance of parental involvement; to that end, classroom teachers can take note of the progress that children make when parents are involved in educational opportunities that are situated within culturally-relevant pedagogy and advocate for parental involvement opportunities that develop and heighten human and social capital.

In order to secure adequate and reliable funding, it is also vital for the decision makers of the Family Literacy Program to substantiate, through the process of well-planned and executed research, the societal and educational goals upon which the program rests. At the very least, these goals should avoid the deficit perspective by acknowledging families' strengths and being committed to the notion that all families

care for their children and possess unique abilities and skills; educational institutions are charged with linking these abilities and skills to classroom practices. This link can be created by continuing to position the Family Literacy Program in a social constructivist perspective recognizing that we learn through social interaction and that we learn best when content is "socially contextual" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 165) and acknowledging that the Family Literacy Program reached this goal by creating a community in which participants exercised considerable control, through acceptance and resistance, over relevant pedagogy.

An additional challenge facing the Family Literacy Program involves the evolution of a strong infrastructure. Presently, the program's content and curriculum is administered by university faculty who are involved in other, time-consuming projects. This is concerning in that the planning and coordination of family literacy meetings is extensive. Weekly, there is curriculum to plan, materials to obtain, and accompanying literature to be chosen. Additionally, shopping for the food that is given out at each meeting is a monumental task. Though there are several volunteers who assist when they can, the weekly logistics of running this community-based family literacy program fall on a very small group of individuals and the work-load is profound. Presently, only two to three people are responsible for these fundamental tasks and this is in addition to already over-extended work schedules. Therefore, it is important to recognize that in order for this community-based family literacy program, and others like it, to endure, consideration must be given to allow those in charge considerable discretionary time in order to adequately plan and implement the components of the program. To that end, I recommend that the person who assumes primary responsibility for the various

components of the program advocates for an accompanying work schedule that honors the considerable efforts that is necessary to administrate a successful family literacy program.

In closing, I recognize that the true success of the Family Literacy Program lies not with the institution but with the participating families who came together for the purpose of improving their children's academic performance. Through their participation in the Family Literacy Program, parents affirmed their commitment and gave credence to the conjecture that they are able to organize and marshal the creative energy necessary to promote meaningful and successful learning encounters with their children and in essence, acknowledge that families are powerful mediums for literacy learning.

# AFTERWARD

## The Researcher: Finding My Place in the Study

> Sharing the same ethnic background as the participants does not necessarily make the researcher more knowledgeable about the meanings of the participants' feelings, values, and practices. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993, p. 391)

I concur with Delgado-Gaitan (1993) and her assertion that sharing ethnicity does not imbue the researcher with knowledge and insight though I would suggest that it does minimize resistance when attempting to enter an ethnically homogeneous group. Without the allegiance of ethnicity, I entered a research arena and was charged with the task of constructing pathways to ensure my acceptance by a group of Mexican immigrant women. Initially, I did this several ways. First and foremost, I attended all family literacy meetings. Consistent attendance meant that that I was recognized even though interactions (because of my lack of fluency in Spanish) rarely went beyond simple, perfunctory greetings. While at meetings, I assisted instructors by locating materials and passing out supplies, trying to anticipate their needs based on my experience as a classroom teacher. This meant that I rifled through cabinets, desks, and drawers, constantly searching for paper and pencils in an unfamiliar classroom environment. Finally, I assisted mothers, primarily by holding fussy babies, so that they would be free from their infants' frequent cries for attention. As innocuous as this may seem, ministering to their infants helped to cement my membership within this group of mothers. I knew my position was secure when I received an invitation to attend a toddler's first birthday celebration.

Though I eventually became recognized, even accepted, as a mainstay at family literacy meetings, I began to face a dilemma that would profoundly impact my proposed research, i.e., I was a monolingual English speaker and the language of the program was Spanish. Frequent conversations with my dissertation chair centered on how I would construct meaning when I did not comprehend the language of the participants. We agreed that it was critical that I create frequent opportunities for member-checking in order to increase my comprehension, improve accuracy, and ensure credibility. In hindsight, I have come to believe that my lack of Spanish proficiency required that I become a better researcher. First and foremost, I had to consciously suspend judgment and make use of a variety of contextual clues such as facial expressions, body language, and exchanged glances between participants in order to understand the phenomenon in context. Coupled with frequent, circuitous member-checking, I was able to construct multiple pathways that ensured my comprehension and helped me to establish meaningful relationships with family literacy participants. Even mothers who were not focal participants understood that I needed support and all readily complied when I appealed for language assistance. I do not mean to imply, however, that all of the mothers came to know and accept me. There were some who remained distant, even after I had attended family literacy meetings for three years. I cannot begin to hypothesize the reasons for their reserve, only that we failed to connect on a meaningful level. I never felt, however, that my presence precluded their participation or silenced their voices.

The topic that remains to be addressed is how I have changed as a result of my participation in the Family Literacy Program. Without a doubt, I am more empathetic to the diaspora of Mexican immigrants who have settled in this community. Though I

remain a cultural outsider and can never understand their experiences, I am more sensitive to their collective needs because I have listened to their stories and shared in their challenges and accomplishments. Within these stories, I have identified commonalities that connect us as learners, as mothers, and as women. In fact, conversations that took place during meetings were little different than the exchanges I have had with my mainstream, female friends; as women, we experience the trials of life on a universal level and we are unified by our gender. In spite of a deep sense of empathy, however, it would be presumptuous of me to suggest that their experiences parallel mine. These immigrant women struggle against pervasive poverty and discrimination, issues that will remain their constant companion and with which I, simply due to virtue of birth, will most likely never have to contend. To imply that participating in a family literacy program will ease these struggles is to further the notion that "…the people least responsible for and least able to struggle against the systematic inequalities" are most responsible for changing mainstream, dominant culture (Taylor, 1997, p. 2).

Beyond the label of researcher, I am also a teacher and that label implies that I understand education through my own experiences as a learner as well as through the context in which I teach. To that end, my research has enriched my abilities to meet the needs of minority students, many of whom are second language learners. I have experienced first-hand the divisiveness of language and have felt linguistically unable to participate in even the most fundamental conversations, much less learn content on a meaningful level. In my study, I interviewed participants who participated in poorly designed ESL programs that unintentionally (though effectively) marginalized them to the point that education became an unattainable goal. Conversely, I have developed a

deep appreciation for those teachers who embrace cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and who routinely employ effective classroom strategies (i.e., scaffolding techniques) that maximize comprehension and support students as they learn critical content while concurrently learning English.

Presently, my interactions with minority students and their families are channeled through relationships with pre-service and established classroom teachers. I routinely challenge both groups to view students and their families in terms of their *assets* while teaching them what they need to know in order to function effectively in our educational system. I invite teachers to discuss their students in terms of their *strengths* and the skills that they bring to the learning environment. Finally, I ask teachers to consider that if students leave their classroom without learning essential literacy skills that will support them as they negotiate and manipulate a wide variety of communication media (Gee, 2007), that they have failed in their essential responsibility to vigorously teach to all of their students, not just the ones who enter with a sophisticated support system and literacy experiences that are aligned to their classrooms.

In retrospect, I did not conduct the perfect study. I missed numerous deadlines and I spent a fair amount of time second-guessing the wisdom of my choice of research. Lack of Spanish proficiency was an on-going, exhaustive struggle and though my language skills improved significantly over the course of the study, there were countless times during family literacy meetings when I felt marginalized because I could not participate in discussions in any meaningful way. But directing this challenging research study eclipsed my discomfort because I found that I looked forward to attending family literacy meetings. I formed relationships with the women and became attached to their

children. I enjoyed being a part of this tight-knit community and above all, I deepened my understanding of the importance of (and am better able to advocate for) engaging children and families in educative activities that are culturally relevant and responsive to the personal struggles and changing situations of their lives.

## APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: PROGRAM LEADERS

University of New Mexico
The UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program:
Exploring the Literacy Experiences of Latino Families

My name is Rosemary Fessinger and I am a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. I am a graduate student in the department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and I am conducting a research study on how families use literacy in their lives. You were selected as a possible participant in the study because you are a program leader in the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and describe the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program, the experiences of the families who are participating in the family literacy program, and the meaning they are making from these experiences. The results of this study, my dissertation and subsequent published articles, will help to bridge the numerous perspectives (programs vs. interventions vs. personal style of literacy) on family literacy and will support teachers who are experiencing shifts in student population, both culturally and linguistically, to offer curriculum that recognizes home literacy practices.

If you consent to participate in this study, I will conduct one interview with you; this interview will last about one hour and will be tape-recorded. I will ask you questions about the structure of the family literacy program, the lessons and activities that you present, and your perceptions of the participating families. I will also observe you as you work and interact with parents and will ask you questions about these interactions.

There are minimal risks associated with this research study. There may, however, be some discomforts and inconveniences. For example, you may become nervous or uncomfortable when I ask you questions about your instructional practices or your perceptions of families. Also, you may find it inconvenient to meet with me; for example, I may ask you to stay after the Family Literacy Program has ended. Be assured, I will work with you to find convenient times for us to meet. Remember, you may refuse to answer interview questions and may also discontinue participation in this study at any time; should you choose to discontinue participation, it will not affect your participation in the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will tape-record our interview (or take notes of the interview, if you prefer), write observation notes, and make copies of lesson plans and other documents associated with the program. I am the only person who will have access to this information and I will keep it in a safe and locked location. You may also choose to use a different name so that your identity is protected. I will keep all of the

information that I collect, the audio tapes and observation notes, until I graduate from UNM. At that time, I will erase the audio tapes and shred the observation notes.

I hope that you will consent to participate in this study. However, there is no pressure to do so. Your decision will not have any impact on your involvement in the Family Literacy Program. The information that I learn will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with you. If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Betsy Noll. Her phone number is 277-9610 and her office is in Travelstead Hall, Room 104 at the University of New Mexico. If you have other concerns or complaints, contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, 1717 Roma NE, Room 205, Albuquerque, NM 87131, (505) 277-2257, or toll free at 1-866-844-9018.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to provide informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: MOTHERS

University of New Mexico
The UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program:
Exploring the Literacy Experiences of Latino Families

My name is Rosemary Fessinger and I am a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. I am a graduate student in the department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and I am conducting research on how families spend time talking, reading, and writing together. I am inviting you to participate in my study because you regularly attend the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

I am interested in literacy and how families use literacy in their lives. This purpose of this study is to investigate the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program and to learn about the literacy experiences of the families who are participating in the program. The information that I learn will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with you and your children.

If you decide to participate in this study, I will meet with you and interview you three times, twice at River View Elementary School and once in your home. Each interview will last about an hour. I will ask you questions about why you are participating in the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program, what you are learning, and how you and your family use reading and writing. I will also ask you about how you work with your children on reading and writing. I will observe you when you attend the family literacy program and I will listen as you work in small groups and as you interact with the other parents. Finally, I will look at the writing that you do while you are at meetings as well as homework that you have completed for instructors at the Family Literacy Program.

There are minimal risks associated with this research study. You may experiences some discomforts and inconveniences. For example, you may become nervous and feel uncomfortable when I ask you questions about how you use reading and writing in your life. Also, you may find it inconvenient to meet with me; for example, I may ask you to stay after the family literacy program has ended. Remember, you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to answer and I will work with you to find convenient times for us to meet. Also, you can withdraw from the study at any time. You will have the opportunity to express your views on literacy and how you are raising your children. Having these opportunities may lead to feelings of pride and satisfaction as you come to recognize the different ways that you and your family use literacy in your lives.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will tape-record our interviews (or take notes of the interview, if you prefer), write observation notes, and make copies of the writing that you do at the family literacy program as well as homework that you complete for the program. However, there is no pressure to do so. Your decision will not have any impact on your involvement in the Family Literacy Program. I am the only person who

will have access to this information and I will keep this information in a safe and locked location. You may also choose to use a different name so that your identity is protected. I will keep all of the information that I collect, the audio tapes and observation notes, until I graduate from UNM. At that time, I will erase the audiotapes and shred the observation notes.

I hope that you will consent to participate in this study. The information that I learn will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with you and your children. If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Betsy Noll. Her phone number is 277-9610 and her office is in Travelstead Hall, Room 104 at the University of New Mexico. If you have other concerns or complaints, contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, 1717 Roma NE, Room 205, Albuquerque, NM 87131, (505) 277-2257, or toll free at 1-866-844-9018.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to provide informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF MINORS**

University of New Mexico
The UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program:
Exploring the Literacy Experiences of Latino Families

My name is Rosemary Fessinger and I am a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. I am a graduate student in the department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and I am conducting research on how families spend time talking, reading, and writing together. I am inviting your child to participate in my study because your child is regularly attending the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

I am interested in literacy and how families use literacy in their lives. The purpose of this study is to investigate the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program and to learn about the literacy experiences of the families who are participating in the program. The information that I learn will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with you and your children.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this study, I will interview your child one time for about thirty minutes. I will ask your child questions about the family literacy program, what he/she is learning at the program, and how your child and your family use reading and writing at home. This interview will be audio-taped (or I will take notes of the interview, if you prefer) and, if you like, you may be present. I will also observe your child as he/she takes part in activities at the family literacy program. Finally, I will look at the writing your child does while at meetings as well as completed homework that has been assigned by instructors at the Family Literacy Program.

There are minimal risks associated with this research study. There may, however, be some discomforts. For example, your child may become nervous when I ask questions about how reading and writing is used in his/her life. Your child has been informed that he/she may refuse to answer any questions and may drop out of the study at any time and no one will be upset.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, I will tape-record our interview and write observation notes. I am the only person who will have access to this information and I will keep it in a safe and locked location. Your child may choose a different name to protect his/her identity. I will keep all of the information that I collect, the audio tapes and observation notes, until I graduate from UNM. At that time, I will erase the audio tapes and shred the observation notes.

I hope that you will consent to allow your child to participate in this study. However, there is no pressure to do so. Your decision will not have any impact on your or your child's involvement in the Family Literacy Program. The information that I learn

will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with your child. If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Betsy Noll. Her phone number is 277-9610 and her office is in Travelstead Hall, Room 104 at the University of New Mexico. If you have other concerns or complaints about your child's rights, contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, 1717 Roma NE, Room 205, Albuquerque, NM 87131, (505) 277-2257, or toll free at 1-866-844-9018.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____ _____

Name of Participant (please print) Name of Child (please print)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to provide informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

## ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

University of New Mexico
The UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program:
Exploring the Literacy Experiences of Latino Families

My name is Rosemary Fessinger and I am a student at the University of New Mexico. I would like for you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how you and your family spend time talking, reading, and writing together. If you agree to be in this study, I will sit with you for about thirty minutes and ask you questions about reading, writing, and how you and your family spend time together. To help me remember, I will tape-record or take notes of our conversation.

You may also enjoy answering the questions that I will ask. You will get to talk to me about the books that you read and the ways that you and your family spend time together. You may feel important because you are helping me to understand how you and your family use reading and writing in your lives.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if your parents say "yes," you can still decide not to do this.

If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at 883-5296 or ask me the next time that you see me.

Signing your name at the bottom of this paper means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

_____
Name of Child (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of Child Date

_____
Name of Investigator (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: INSTRUCTORS

University of New Mexico
The UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program:
Exploring the Literacy Experiences of Latino Families

My name is Rosemary Fessinger and I am a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. I am a graduate student in the department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and I am conducting a research study on how families use literacy in their lives. You were selected as a possible participant in the study because you are an instructor in the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and describe the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program, the experiences of the families who are participating in the family literacy program, and the meaning they are making from these experiences. The results of this study, my dissertation and subsequent published articles, will help to bridge the numerous perspectives (programs vs. interventions vs. personal style of literacy) on family literacy and will support teachers who are experiencing shifts in student population, both culturally and linguistically, to offer curriculum that recognizes home literacy practices.

If you consent to participate in this study, I will conduct one interview with you; this interview will last about one hour and will be tape-recorded. I will ask you questions about the structure of the family literacy program, the lessons and activities that you present, and your perceptions of the participating families. I will also observe you as you work and interact with parents and will ask you questions about these interactions.

There are minimal risks associated with this research study. There may, however, be some discomforts and inconveniences. For example, you may become nervous or uncomfortable when I ask you questions about your instructional practices or your perceptions of families. Also, you may find it inconvenient to meet with me; for example, I may ask you to stay after the Family Literacy Program has ended. Be assured, I will work with you to find convenient times for us to meet. Remember, you may refuse to answer interview questions and may also discontinue participation in this study at any time; should you choose to discontinue participation, it will not affect your participation in the UNM College of Education Family Literacy Program.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will tape-record our interview (or takes notes of the interview, if you prefer), write observation notes, and make copies of lesson plans and other documents associated with the program. I am the only person who will have access to this information and I will keep it in a safe and locked location. You may also choose to use a different name so that your identity is protected. I will keep all of the information that I collect, the audio tapes and observation notes, until I graduate from UNM. At that time, I will erase the audio tapes and shred the observation notes.

I hope that you will consent to participate in this study. However, there is no pressure to do so. Your decision will not have any impact on your involvement in the Family Literacy Program. The information that I learn will help educators understand how families use literacy in their lives. I look forward to working with you. If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Betsy Noll. Her phone number is 277-9610 and her office is in Travelstead Hall, Room 104 at the University of New Mexico. If you have other concerns or complaints, contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, 1717 Roma NE, Room 205, Albuquerque, NM 87131, (505 277-2257, or toll free at 1-866-844-9018.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

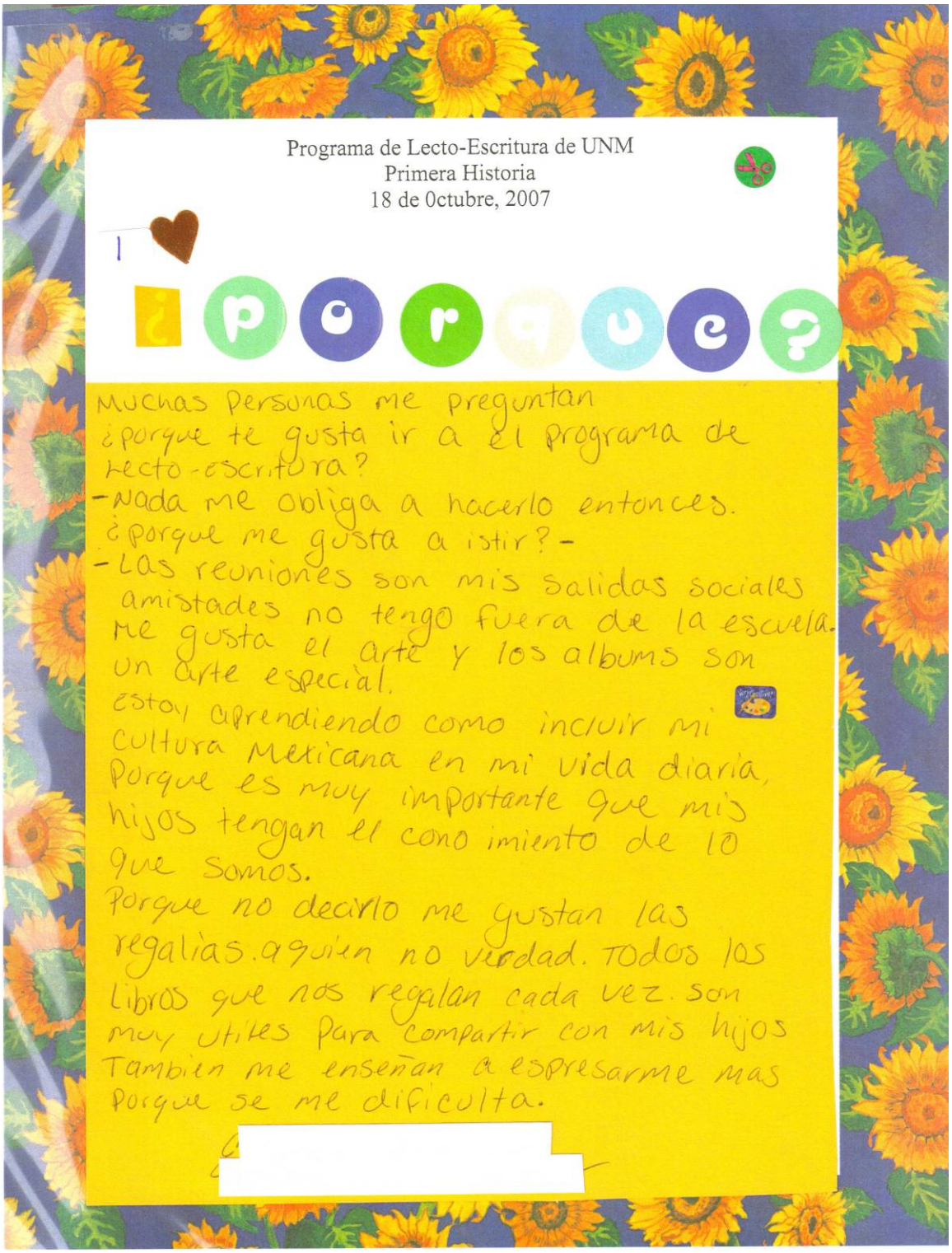
SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to provide informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

## APPENDIX B: SELECTIONS FROM SOFIA ORTEGA'S HERITAGE ALBUM



Programa de Lecto-Escritura de UNM
Primera Historia
18 de 0ctubre, 2007

¿porque?

Muchas personas me preguntan
¿porque te gusta ir a el programa de
Lecto-escritura?
-Nada me obliga a hacerlo entonces.
¿porque me gusta a istir?-
-Las reuniones son mis salidas sociales
amistades no tengo fuera de la escuela.
Me gusta el arte y los albums son
un arte especial.
estoy aprendiendo como incluir mi
cultura Mexicana en mi vida diaria,
Porque es muy importante que mis
hijos tengan el cono imiento de lo
que Somos.
Porque no decirlo me gustan las
regalias.a quien no verdad. Todos los
Libros que nos regalan cada vez. son
muy utiles para compartir con mis hijos
Tambien me enseñan a espresarme mas
Porque se me dificulta.

# EL PRIVILEJIO DE SER MAMA

2

El Poder ser mamá es un Privilejio Para mi porque cuando tenia 17 años me diacnosticaron quistes en los ovarios, Me puse a investigar mucho y la mayoria de las mujeres no podian tener hijos Gracias a Dios mis quistes no eran canserosos y se desicieron.

3

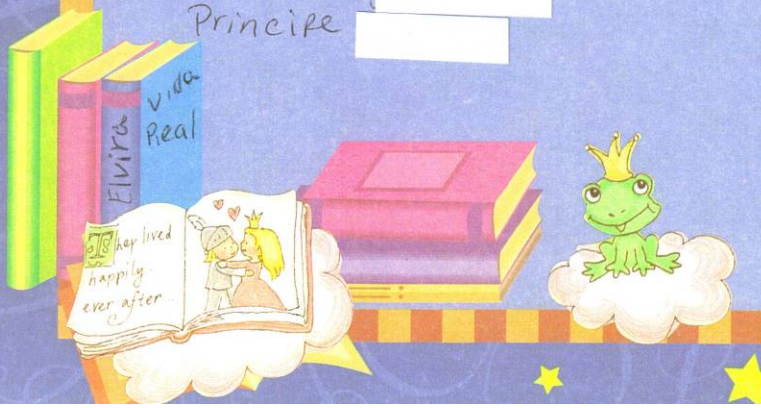
El dar a luz a mis hijos a sido un placer, porque dolor de parto como las mujeres me cuentan yo no e sentido. El dolor que me da a cuando tenia los quistes era insoportable, Pero en Juarez me dieron un medicamento para controlarlo.

5

Vivia en un mundo de fantacia de adas y dragones y esperava encontrar a mi principe azul.
Mi vida no a sido como lo que en un cuento lei, porque no encontre a un principe azul.
La realidad de la vida es totalmente diferente y es dificil acimilar todo derepente. yo aprendi a vivir en la realidad aceptando que todos tenemos defectos y virtudes, pero nadie es perfecto.
Es posible un final feliz pero nos tenemos que ganar ese gran final.
Muchos veces las barreras que se nos presentan en la vida parecen inquebrables (unbreakable).
Cuando hai AMOR en nuestro corazon todo hasta lo inposible es muy posible Amores.

-ustedes son en mi vida de la realesa-

Princessa [redacted]
Princessa [redacted]
Principe [redacted]



12

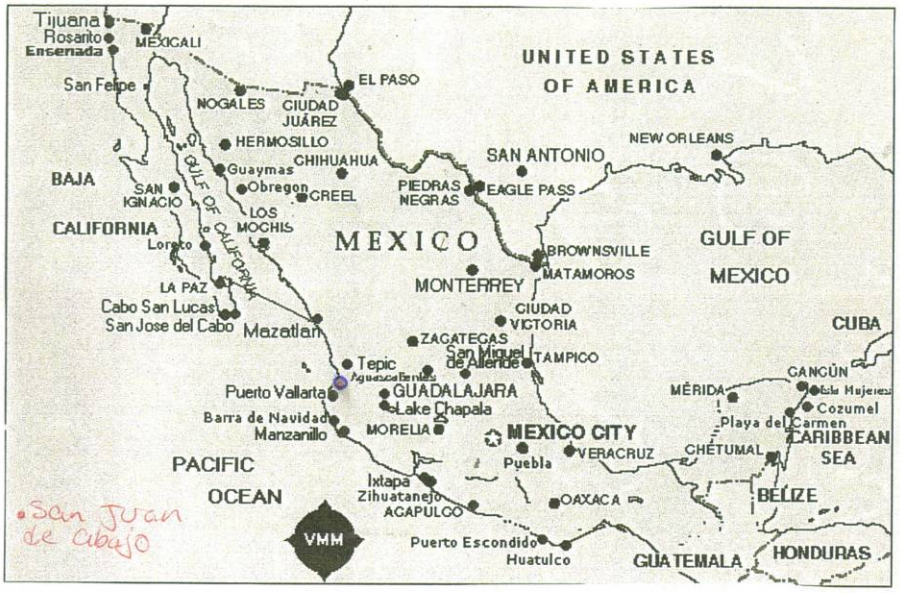
# Un Trabajo Odiado

El Trabajo que odio hacer es Planchar. me gusta empezar la semana planchando por eso plancho los lunes para tener el resto de la semana todo planchado. cuando plancho me da mucha calor y el calor me hace sentirme mariada.

Lo que detesto mas de planchar son las camisas, camisetas y blusas porque entre mas bueltas les doy mas arrugadas las miro.

20

# SOMOS DE ...



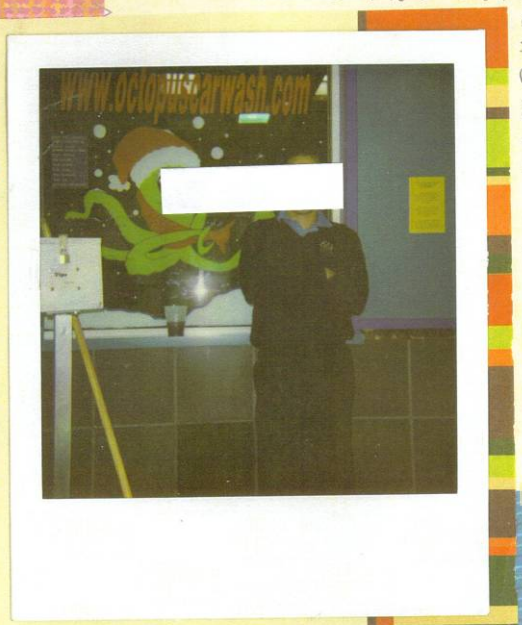

San Juan de abajo

yo soy de San Juan de abajo Nayarit
me criaron en en rancho que se
llama Las Glorias. El rancho esta rodeado
de arroyos en los que Feliz nos ivamos
a bañar cuando niña. Todo el año esta
verde es como una selva. una hora de
camino y llegavamos a el mar las playas
de Nayarit: Platanitos
Tambien playas de Jalisco en puerto
vallarta: Punta Negra.
Lo que mas me gustaba de ir a la
playa era buscar conchas en la
arena tambien ver los cangrejos.

23

# Mi Esposo

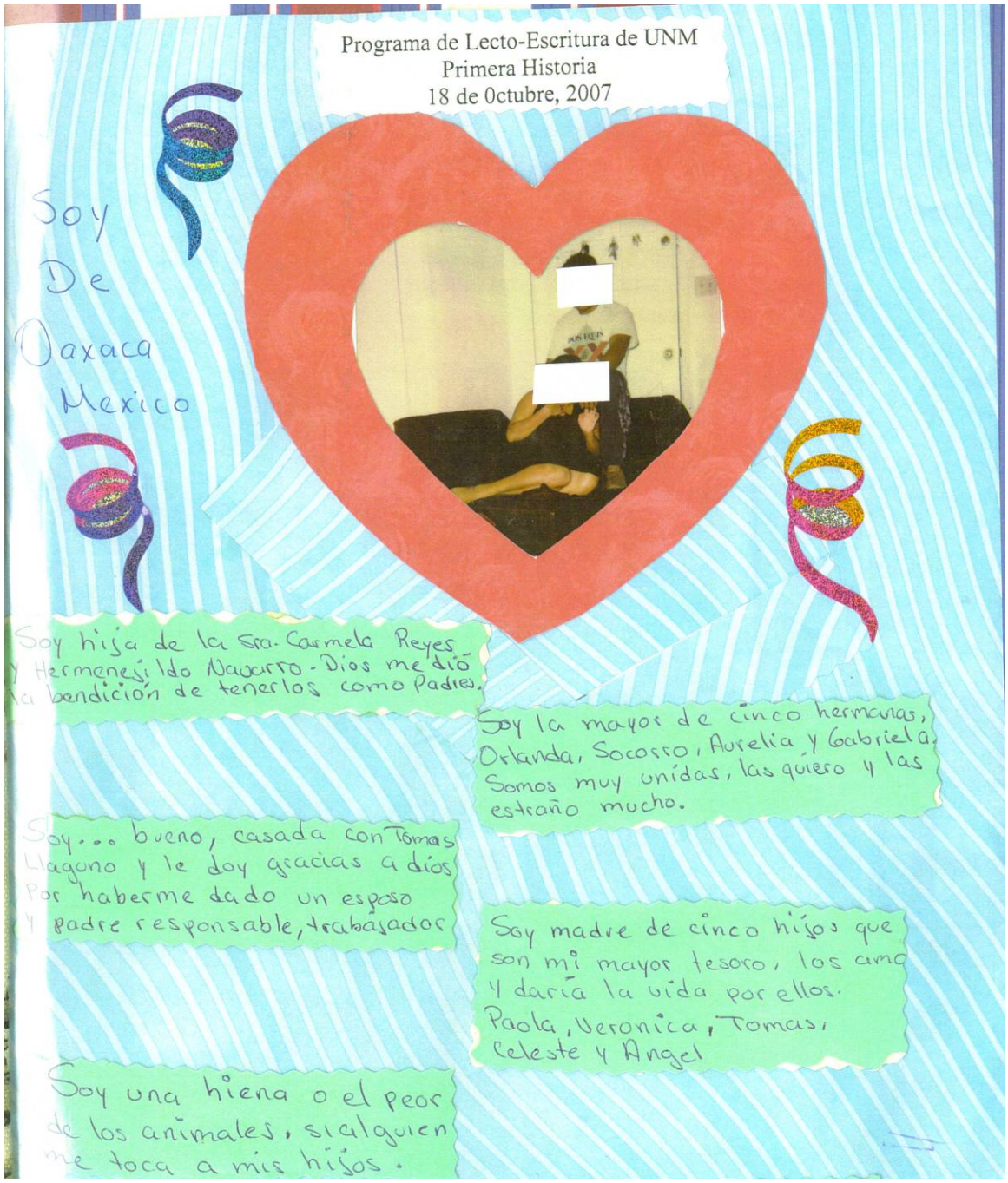
Nacio en Guerrero Chihuahua el 20 de febrero del 84 a las 3:00 de la mañana.
Cresio en Chihuahua, Chihuahua a los 6 años de edad el ya andava en las calles trabajando de empacador en una soriana, haciendo mandados a las becinas de la colonia en que vivia. a todas las señoras les gustava que el les trajiera el mandado porque el les traia de lo mejor.
Llego a lavar los vidrios de los carros.
Trabajo con un señor haciendo esponjas (estropajos) luego las bendia casa por casa por ultimo trabajo con un señor haciendo tamales, despues de hacerlos los ivan a bender.
Aqui en Los estados Unidos tomava un camion en la esquina de Blake y coors para llegar a su trabajo en el carwash de Alameda y coors donde todavia trabaja de eso hace 10 años ya. El cuenta como en el invierno llegaba con las manos conjeladas de el frio que hacia porque aveces tenia que usar una bicicleta para transportarse como en los domingos que no pasaba el camion o cuando salia mas tarde.

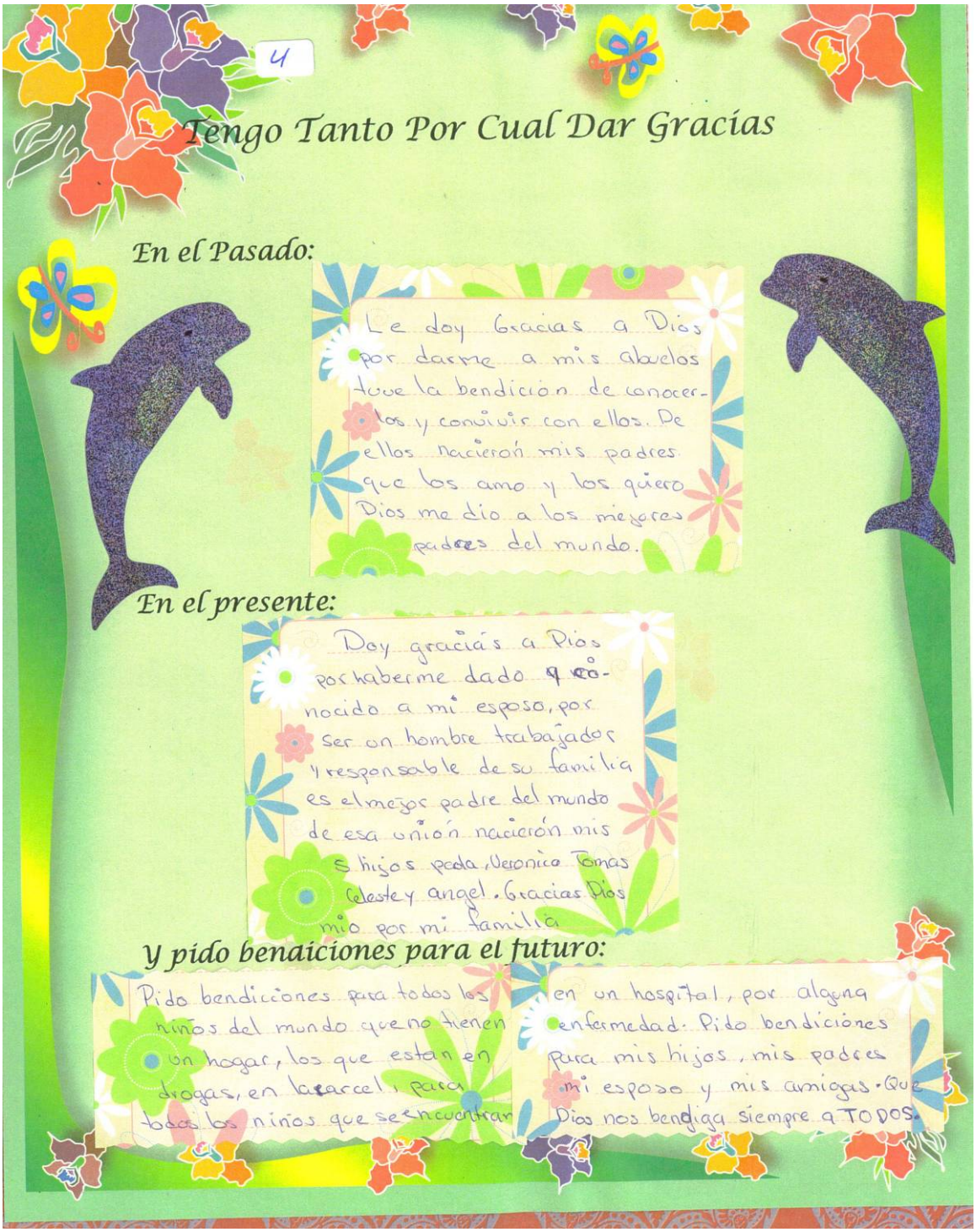


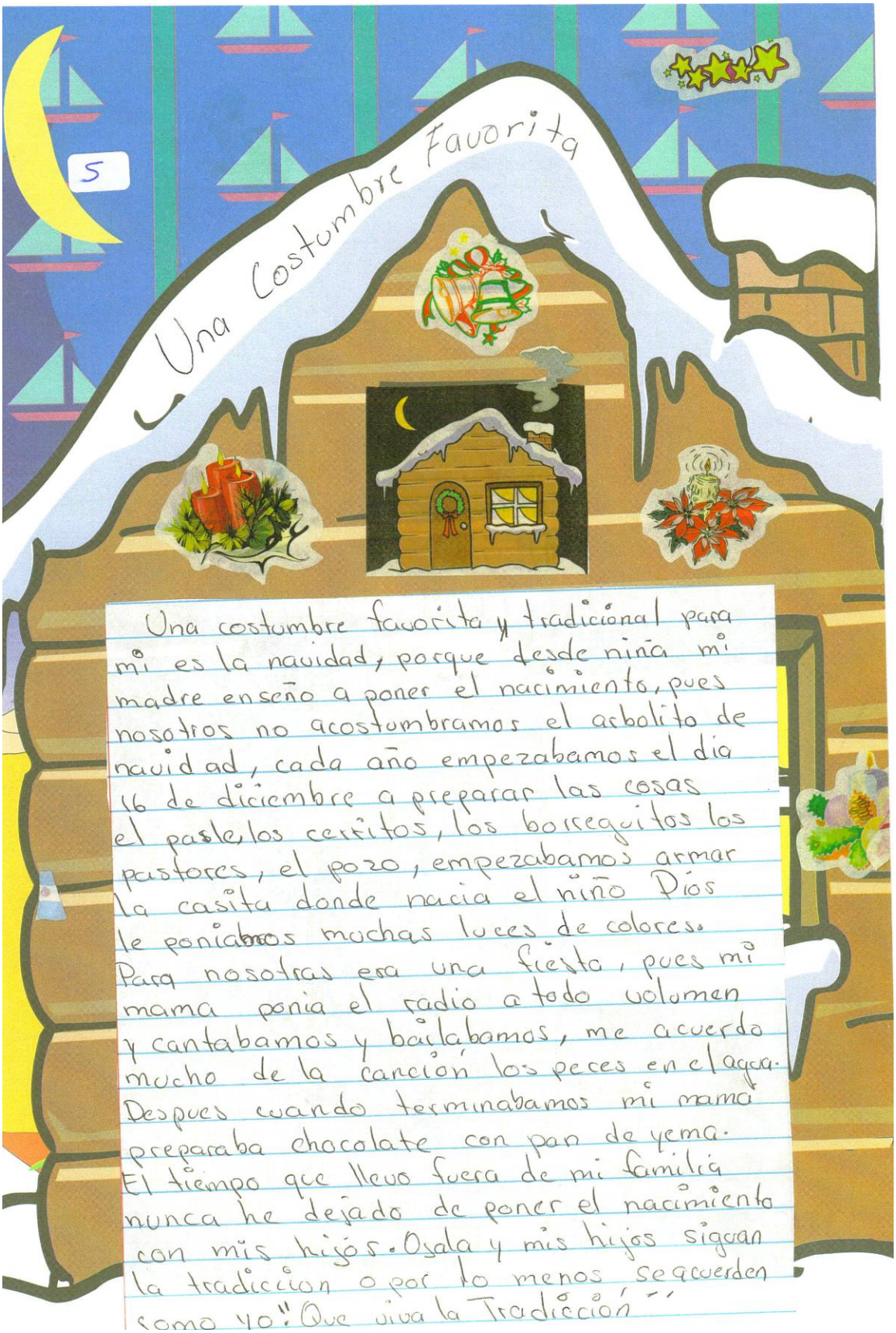

El cuenta como unos compañeros se burlavan de el porque era muy chico y tenia que mover unos botes llenos de basura y aveces el no podia moverlos. El demostro mucho empeño y un manejador le enseño todo lo que el tenia que saber y asi el llego a ser un Assistente de Manejador.

—Tengo el orgullo de decir que mi esposo es muy trabajador y que jamas se a quejado de lo cansado que aveces llega.—

## APPENDIX C: SELECTIONS FROM LEANDRA LOPEZ' HERITAGE ALBUM




4
Tengo Tanto Por Cual Dar Gracias
En el Pasado:
Le doy Gracias a Dios por darme a mis abuelos tuve la bendición de conocer-los y convivir con ellos. De ellos nacieron mis padres que los amo y los quiero Dios me dio a los mejores padres del mundo.
En el presente:
Doy gracias a Dios por haberme dado a conocido a mi esposo, por ser un hombre trabajador y responsable de su familia es el mejor padre del mundo de esa unión nacieron mis 5 hijos pada, Veronica Tomas Celeste y angel. Gracias Dios mio por mi familia
Y pido benaiciones para el futuro:
Pido bendiciones para todos los niños del mundo que no tienen un hogar, los que estan en drogas, en la carcel, para todos los niños que se encuentran en un hospital, por alguna enfermedad. Pido bendiciones para mis hijos, mis padres mi esposo y mis amigas. Que Dios nos bendiga siempre a TODOS.



5

# Una Costumbre Favorita

Una costumbre favorita y tradicional para mi es la navidad, porque desde niña mi madre enseño a poner el nacimiento, pues nosotros no acostumbramos el arbolito de navidad, cada año empezabamos el dia 16 de diciembre a preparar las cosas el pastel, los cerritos, los borreguitos los pastores, el pozo, empezabamos armar la casita donde nacia el niño Dios le poniamos muchas luces de colores. Para nosotras era una fiesta, pues mi mama ponia el radio a todo volumen y cantabamos y bailabamos, me acuerdo mucho de la cancion los peces en el agua. Despues cuando terminabamos mi mama preparaba chocolate con pan de yema. El tiempo que lleuo fuera de mi familia nunca he dejado de poner el nacimiento con mis hijos. Ojala y mis hijos siguan la tradicion o por lo menos se acuerden como yo". Que viva la Tradicion"

7.

# Un Trabajo Odiado

Un trabajo odiado para mi es la cosina, porque nunca puedes dejar de acerlo, en la mañana, a medio dia y por la noche. los trastes siempre estan allí. otra cosa que no me gusta hacer es lavar, nunca pero nunca puedes acabar. a otra cosita más la basura como sale basura. Mi mamá decia "si así como ay basura hubiera dinero fuera millonario"

8.

# Amistad

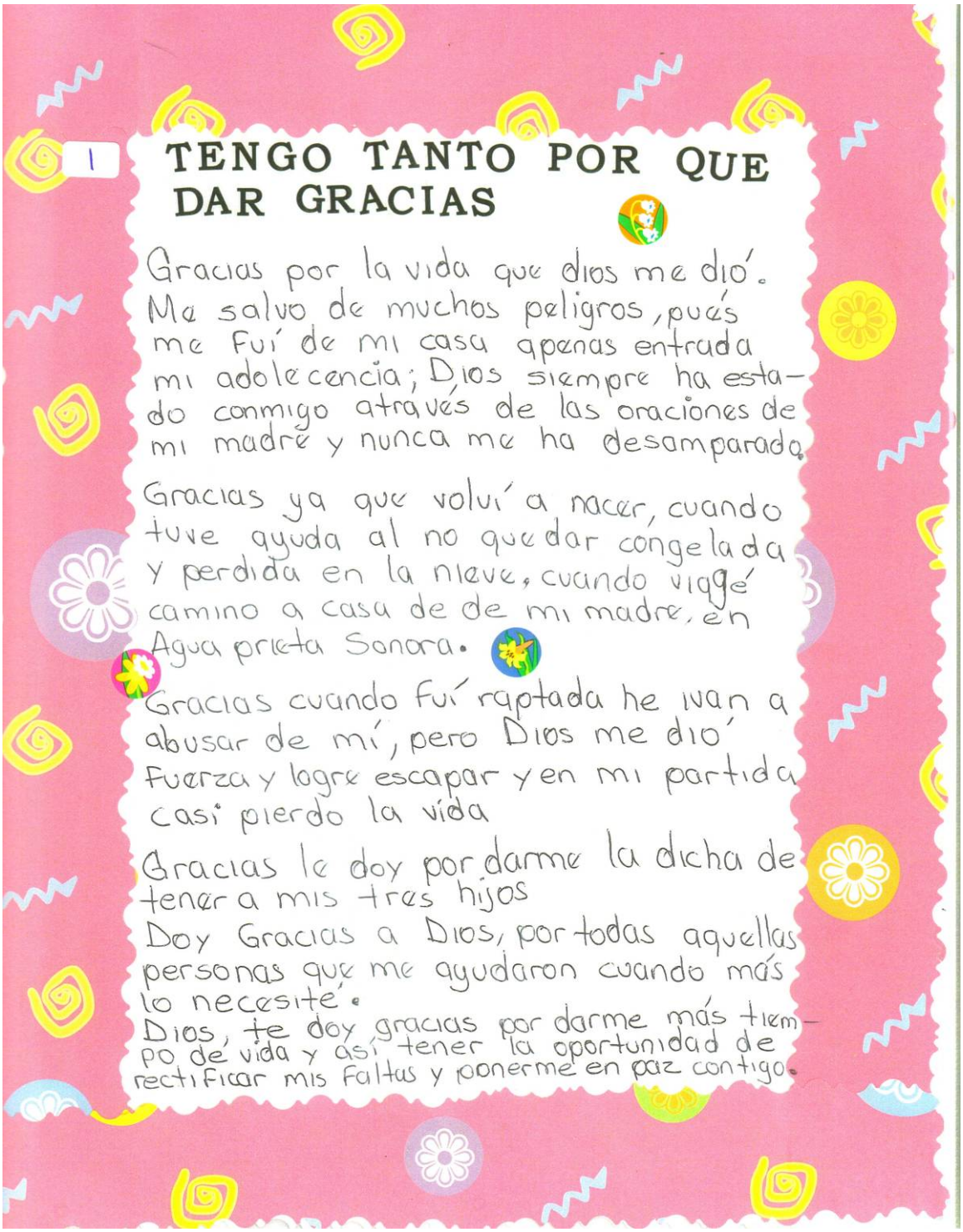
La amistad para mi es muy importante siempre que la ofresco es sincera y limpia, tal vez algunas personas no me conocen por eso aveces se atreven a jusgarme, pero yo misma y con el tiempo se dan cuenta que cuando ofresco mi amista es sincera. Yo tengo tres amigas que puedo contar con su amista y ellas con la mia. somos como hermanas. compartimos muchas cosas y sobre todo no hay hipocrecias entre las tres. mis mejores amigas se llaman Mari[redacted] Selg[redacted]ta ahora ya son más que tres.

13

# Un chiste

Fué un muchacho a la farmacia a comprar condones y le dice al Dr. Quiero unos condones y el Dr. le dice para soltero o para casado el muchacho le dice cual es la diferencia entonces el Dr. dice el de soltero tiene 7 y el de casado 12. entones el muchacho le pregunta la diferencia y el Dr. dice el de soltero es para Lunes, martes, miercoles, Jueves, Viernes Sobado y Domingo y el de casado es para, Enero febrero, Marzo abril osea uno para cada mes, Entonces el muchacho le dice a mí meda el de 365 dias y el Dr. le dice se los ~~enbuelbo~~ en buelbo o se los enmarco.

## APPENDIX D: SELECTIONS FROM ELISA CASTRO'S HERITAGE ALBUM



1

TENGO TANTO POR QUE DAR GRACIAS

Gracias por la vida que dios me dió. Me salvo de muchos peligros, pués me Fuí de mi casa apenas entrada mi adolecencia; Dios siempre ha estado conmigo através de las oraciones de mi madre y nunca me ha desamparada.

Gracias ya que volví a nacer, cuando tuve ayuda al no quedar congelada y perdida en la nieve, cuando viaggé camino a casa de de mi madre, en Agua prieta Sonora.

Gracias cuando Fuí raptada he iban a abusar de mí, pero Dios me dió Fuerza y logre escapar y en mi partida casi pierdo la vida

Gracias le doy por darme la dicha de tener a mis tres hijos

Doy Gracias a Dios, por todas aquellas personas que me ayudaron cuando más lo necesité.

Dios, te doy gracias por darme más tiempo de vida y así tener la oportunidad de rectificar mis Faltas y ponerme en paz contigo.

9

# Amistad

¿Quien éres?, ¿Qué eres tú?
¿De dónde vienes?, ¿Eres quizá un senti-
miento, un hola, un hasta luego, ¿eres,
algo efímero o duradero?, ¿algo sin sen-
tido, sin principio ni final?. Eres la
confianza misma, voto que juras
sin jurar, sin contrato ni condición,
y tal vez, por eso es que así como
comienza puede terminar. En donde
da cabida a la verdad y la mentira,
donde hay traición y envidia.

Pero tambien, amor, compañerismo,
confianza, ayuda mútua.
Así como animas, desanimas, puedes
hacer que muchos seres convivan en
algarabía.

Tambien cambiar el rumbo de muchos
caminos, para bien o para mal.

¡Hay, amistad!, tienes dos caras:,
una que asusta y otra que da confianza.
Pero, es mí decisión, solo mía; escoger,
cual de las dos quisiera tener.

Observaría en cada rostro para
talvez tratar de adivinar, cual de tus
caras está ahí, pero no lo sabría,
hasta que yo no haya descubierto

9 cont

primero tu cara en mí. Y tal vez
te encuentre bondadosa, buena, donde
pueda refugiar todas mis tristezas y
mis alegrias. Donde quizá, sin de-
cirme nada, me escuches y con solo
tu presencia me lo digas todo.
Sabes, eres alguien indispensable,
sin tí nadie puede vivir, puedes
ser mucho o poco, pero, siempre estas
presente.

¡Hasta tienes un día en que casí
todos te dan pleitecia!, por que en
verdad, eres grande. Eres tan gran-
de, que puedes mover a dos sentimientos
tan poderosos como lo son el amor
y el odio, a tu antojo y voluntad.
Pero hay seres en los que aún no te
has detenido siquiera a mirar, en sus
caminos solo hay amargura y dolor.
Sus vidas son ermitañas, donde no
existe la convivencia, seres que se han
encerrado en sí mismos poniendo barre-
ras que aún para tí son dificiles de pasar.
Pero hay otros que quisieran tenerte y no
saben como encontrarte. ¡Oh! amistad,
engañoza y traicionera, puedes ser amorosa y
dar consuelo. Eres pequeña y enorme, te das a
conocer y haces felices e infelices a muchos
seres. Pero en fin... existes, y pienso que....

**ES BUENO TU EXISTIR**

11

# Alusión al 14 de febrero

Love

Vas como cualquier otro dia al baile con tus amigas, escuchando música miras a los lados muy discretamente, como en ocasiones anteriores, tomas un sorbo de tu refresco, derrepente volteas y se detiene tu mirada al chocar con otra.

Lo miras aproximarse y te volteas como que no lo viste, transcurren unos segundos cuando escuchas su petición a bailar — ¡Pero que te pasa! —¡Controlate!, tomas su mano y te guia a la pista. Empiezan a bailar, al levantar tu rostro tropiezas con esos encantadores ojos; Algo te pasa, tu corazón da un vuelco y no sabes por qué, pero te incomoda. Tus manos empiezan a sudar; El trata de sacar conversación y tu no puedes controlar lo que estas sintiendo, empiezas a tartamudear — ¡Santo cielo!, — ¿Pero que me sucede?, —¡Que boba!. Te refugias en su pecho cierras los ojos y escuchas la melodía!, —¡ho!, ¡ho!, alarma, no solo eso escuchas, también escuchas el tintineo de tu corazón, que sin saber por qué; se a acelerado más de lo normal y sin pensar ni darte cuenta, te encuentras con que lo estas mirando y esa mirada profunda, te atrapa, te envuelve, sientes tu mano aprisionada; tu pudor de mujer recatada, te dice que reacciones, pero no puedes, la delicia de ese apretón es mas fuerte y sigues bailando.

AMOR

Ninguno de los dos se ha per-
catado que la melodía termino
y el bullicio de la gente los des-
pierta del hechizo. Sin buscarlo llego a tí, cru-
zó tu camino sin pedir permiso.
En esos instantes te sientes perdida, sin saber
que decir o hacer; Al final del baile te des-
pides con un, -hasta luego.
Ya cuando estás en tu casa, tratas de conven-
certe que no es nada, — Eres una tonta, ¿Que
te paso?. Al día siguiente, ¡ allí estái, el tele-
fono suena, — ¡Por dios, es él! y tu corazón
late tan fuerte, que piensas que to-
dos los que estan a tu alrededor lo
escuchan, contestas apresuradamente,
pero, ¡que torpe!, se te calló la bocina
y la tomas presurosa, al contestar lo unico
que logras decir es un, — ¡hola!, y cuando
vas a su encuentro, miras a lo lejos y está
junto a una banca recargado en el árbol.
Pero algo te pasa, tu corazón vuelve a latir
y ahora es con más fuerza, tanto que tienes
dificultad para respirar, tu estomago se
comprime, te falta fuerza en tus piernas,
batallas para caminar, te detienes al ver
que viene a tu encuentro y cuando estira su
mano para tomar la tuya, sientes el
roce de sus dedos a los tuyos, se
estremece todo tu ser, como si fuera
un shock eléctrico,

AMOR

se te congela el habla, no puedes articular palabra, te volteas discretamente respirando profundo; platicas tratando de sonar tranquila y recatada. Cuando velves a tu casa entras sin mirar ni saludar a nadie, solo deceas estar sola, vas a tu cuarto cierras la puerta tras de tí, instintivamente llevas tu mano al rostro; percibiendo su aroma y vuelves a esos momentos vividos, sin pensar te da una ricita de complicidad contigo misma. ¡Ho, no te fijaste, que tu hermana te observaba incredula y reaccionas cuando ella te pregunta —¿Que te pasa? Se enciende tu cara y sientes que se te botan los ojos y oídos —¿Que verguenza? y sin decir nada te alejas.

Al dia siguiente esperas ansia su llamada y cuando ésta llega, sientes una emoción incontrolable. Al llegar a su encuentro, tu corazón casí sale de tu pecho, te falta el aire, no puedes siquiera dar un paso más. llega a tu lado y te refugias en su pecho ya que no puedes sostenerte más. Tu corazón late con más fuerza, en el abrazo sientes el latir de su corazón y lo abrazas con fuerza, levantas tu rostro para encontrarte con esa mirada, esos ojos tan brillantes te cautivan he imnotizan y embelesa.

LOVE

en eso su boca se posa en tus labios y cierras tus ojos por que todo te da vueltas, sientes como si flotaras, nada existe ya solo ese momento, es tan tierno he inocente, que te embriaga, sientes que te duele el pecho de tan fuerte que late tu corazón.

No se an percatado de la lluvia y se estan mojando, reaccionan cuando un coche chapotea el agua al pasar y se miran riendo como dos niños que juegan inocentemente y sin importar el agua se abraza y caminan, no importa nada, solo el que estan allí ¡juntos ¡camino a tu casa.

Cuando llegan te besa de nuevo con una ternura infinita suavemente, temiendo lastimarte, te apriciona en sus brazos tan lento que sientes flotar.

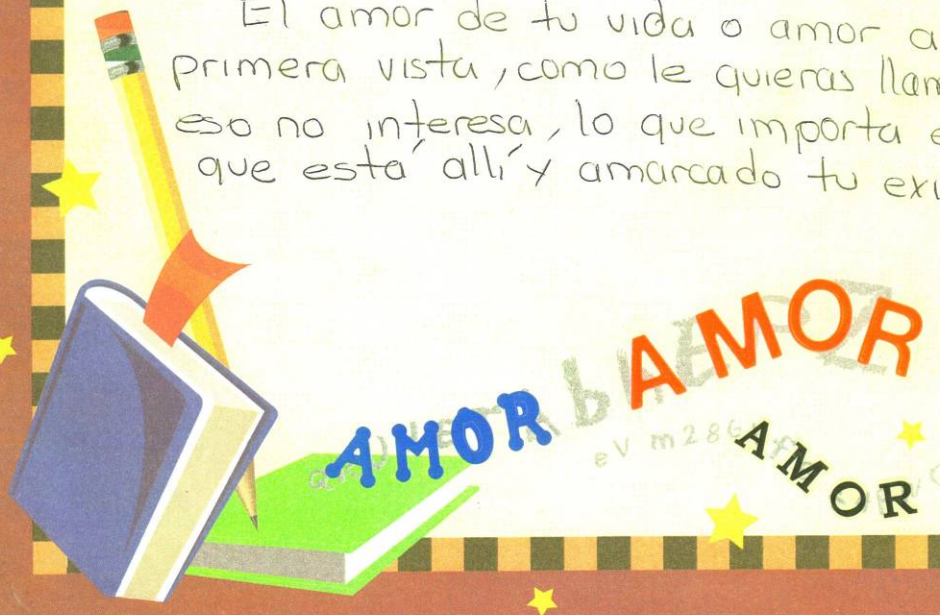
Hay amor sentimiento que corrompe tu alma, dolor, placer, delicia que no puedes dominar, que nubla tus sentidos; No sabes si reir o llorar, correr o brincar, ¡gritar! eso quieren ¡Pero que locura!, haces cosas en tu proceder que quiza para los demas sean tontas y ridículas.

¿A caso, el amor llego? ¡Si! pero no solo a tu corazón, sino a tu alma y lo hizo para quedarse, marcando tu destino.

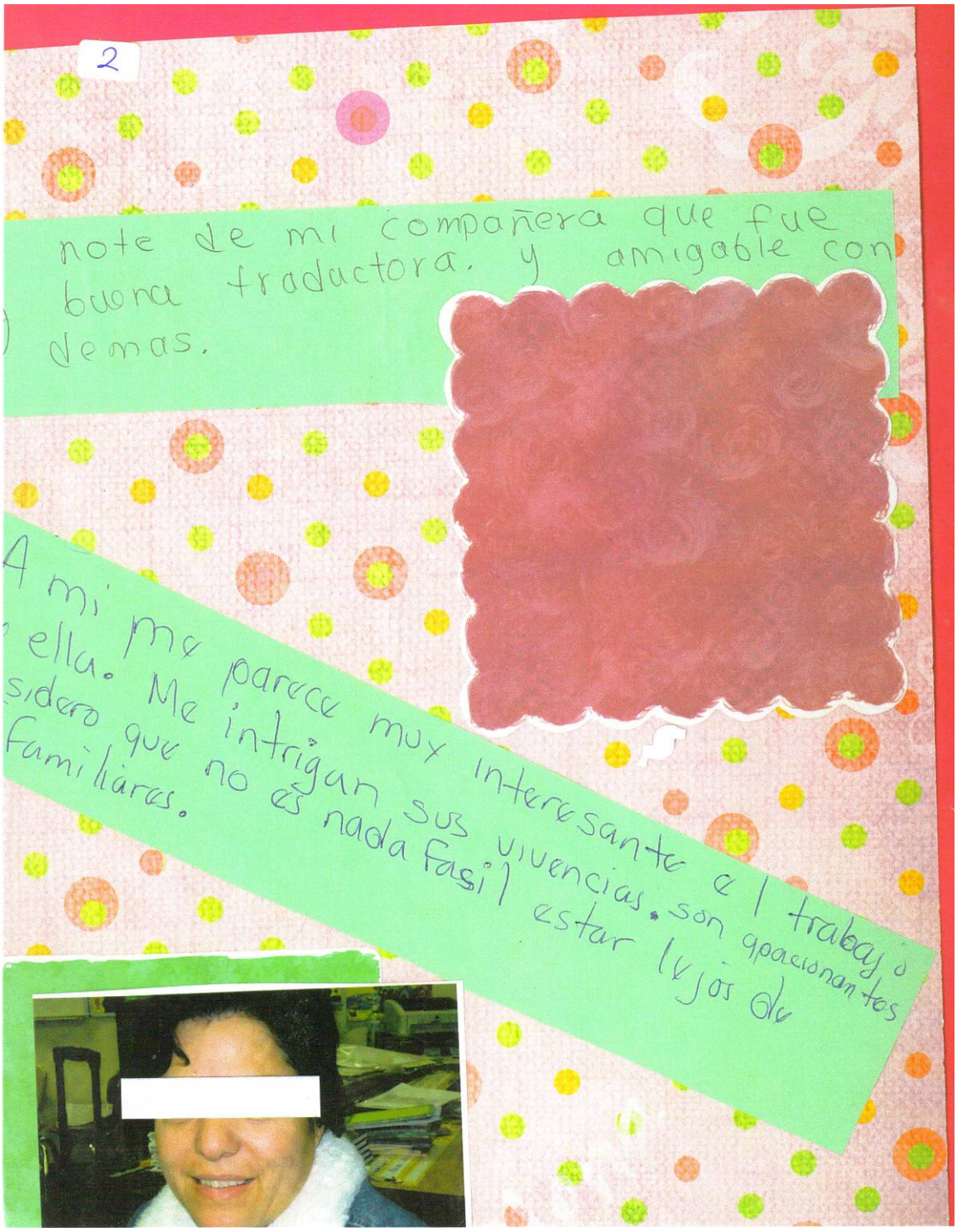
Sentimiento que lastima, que hiere y a la vez es balsamo para tu existir.
Quizá no todas las personas hallan esperimentado algo así, incluso algunas ni siquiera saben que existe.
Solo se han dejado llevar por el gusto y el placer, confundiendolo con el amor.

Amor, es lo mas puro he inocente, sentimiento, sin mancha ni pecado, que con solo beber el nectar de los labios del ser amado lo entregas todo.
Su mirada te llama y al contacto de su piel, te duele el corazón, te sudan las manos, la sangre inunda tu cerebro.

El amor de tu vida o amor a primera vista, como le quieras llamar eso no interesa, lo que importa es que está allí y amarcado tu existir.



## APPENDIX E: SELECTIONS FROM ANNA LEÓN'S HERITAGE ALBUM

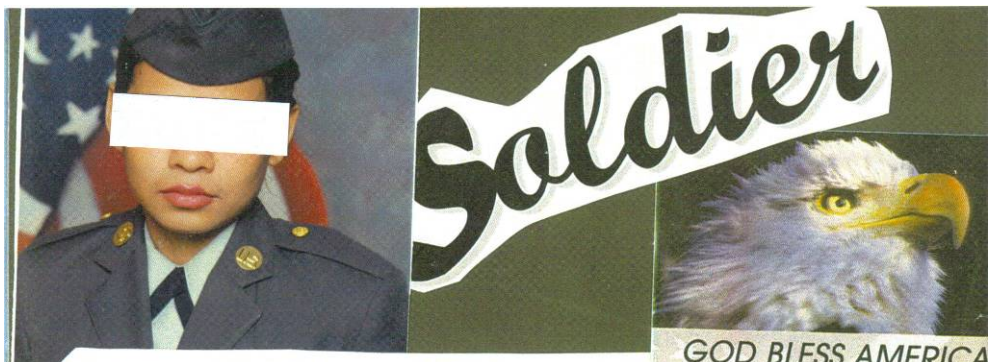


Yo conocí a mi esposo en los últimos días de Agosto de 1997. El estaba en el Army, trabaja como operador de generadores para la luz, en Fort Drum, Nueva York. Yo apenas había llegado a Fort Drum, pues también estaba en el Army y trabajaba como administradora de la unidad de la cual los dos éramos parte.

Recuerdo la primera vez que lo vi., era una mañana fresca, y acabábamos de terminar de correr con el batallón y el iba platicando con un compañero de trabajo, SPC Moreno. Axial, que cuando lo vi., caminando con el uniforme de educación física, todo sudado, me gusto mucho. Pensé, "Damn, he's cute!", y sigue caminando. Caminaba cerca de ellos y SPC Moreno, me dijo, "Mira te presento a Pvt Puente, es nueva en la unidad y es mexicana", el nadamas me saludo y me dijo "Bienvenida". Y siguió su camino con SPC Moreno. Después ese mismo DIA, ya con nuestros uniforme de trabajo, teníamos una formación para una promoción, y el estaba allí, recargado a la pared con esa sonrisa hermosa y yo no le quitaba la mirada de encima. Estaba enamorándome. Me acuerdo que la persona que estaba teniendo la promoción, le daba las gracias a mi esposo, por haberlo ayudado. Yo, con la baba cayendo. Esa mismo DIA en la noche, su compañero de cuarto, yo no sabia que el era el compañero de cuarto, axial que para mi, me invito a su cuarto para ver unos CDs. Para mi sorpresa, mi esposo iba entrando, muy alegre, con un traje de vestir y una caja de cerveza. Su compañero de cuarto me introdujo, y le dijo el que ya me había saludado, y se cambio de ropa y se fue con su amigo a tomar a el cuarto de el.

Su compañero de cuarto me había dicho que los acompañara para WA, D.C. yo les decía que no, porque yo apenas los conocía. Recuerdo que esa misma noche soñé con mi esposo que me tocaba la ventana y me decía que fuéramos a D.C. En ese mismo instante me desperté porque me estaban tocando la puerta, era su compañero de cuarto diciéndome que agarrara una cuanta ropa para que me fuera con ellos. Axial, que me fui con ellos. Íbamos con una amiga Maria Cosme, quien ahora es mi comadre, a la casa de sus papas. Axial que me sentaron en medio de mi esposo y su compañero de cuarto. Mi esposo estaba crudo, axial que me iba bebiendo, recuerdo que paramos a echar gasolina, y el compro un gatorate, y se iba tomando, y me iba salpicando. Y el me sonriente me dice, "disculpa, tengo un agujerito aquí" y se apunta a lado de su boca. A mi se me hizo muy gracioso.

Llegamos a D.C. y fuimos a un parque acuático de diversiones. Recuerdo muy bien ese DIA, fue cuando la Princesa Diana tuvo un accidente y murió. Me acuerdo que yo andaba en la piscina de olas, muy cómoda acostada en una llanta, y de repente, mi esposo, se agarra de la llanta y dice, "me ahogo" y cuando acuerdo me esta besando. Esa noche, estábamos en el cuarto, y mi amiga y yo dormíamos en un sillón cama. Ellos estaban durmiendo en el suelo. Yo y [illegible]tábamos platicando y nos damos unos besos pero que no se enteraran nuestro compañero y en eso, las noticias anunciaban el accidente de la Princesa Diana. Aquí es donde empezó nuestro amor.




At the beginning of March 1997, I dropped off from the University of Texas because I was tired of attending school. Although, the real reason why is because I was failing my classes, I really didn't have anyone to help me out with my classes since English was my second language.

So, I found myself desperate looking for a job, one day, I received a call from an Army Recruiter, SGT Mujica, who offered me a job right away. I remember I went to Weslaco to take a test, my parents didn't know that I was taking this entire test to join the Army. So, I passed my entire test and they told me that I had to go to MEPS in San Antonio, TX for my physical. And that's when I decided to tell me family that I had sign up into the Army. I remember my Mom, didn't like the idea, and was really hurt. She didn't want me to join; I told her that it was too late since I had already signed the contract. I remember I told her that I had to go otherwise I'll go to jail.

I was so petite that I remember my recruiter gave me some bananas to eat on my way to San Antonio, Tx. He also told me to eat all my breakfast that morning and to drink a lot of water before they did my physical. I pass my physical and they gave me a waiver for being under weight, I only weight 92 lbs. Probably less then that since I ate a lot of Bananas the day before, ate most of my breakfast and drunk a lot of water. At MEPS I was offered me different jobs, I want it something with computers and I didn't want it to join for no more than three years. So, they gave me a choice of Petroleum fueler or Personnel Information System. They told me that Petroleum fueler, can join for three years but I had to work outside most of the time and Pers Info. System was four years but I work in an office. So, I picked Pers Info System, I didn't want to be outside. At that point I didn't know anything about part time Soldier, National Guard or Reserve, so, I ended up joining the Active duty and signed a contract for four years.

All this happen so fast, I think it only took like no more then three weeks to get my entire contract and everything ready. I remember the Recruiter told me, well, you said you want a job as soon as possible. So, by April 3rd 1997 I was on a plane to Ft Jackson, SC for my Basic training. It was my first time I ever got in the plane; I really enjoyed the ride though.

During my Basic Training was really though, it was hard for me because I was so, petite. Also, my English was not that good, so, it was hard for me to communicate with the rest. My English was so bad that sometimes they'd make fun of me but I didn't care.

had to get up so early get ready [illegible] drills were screaming at us all the time. During the meals we didn't talk, we just had so little time to eat everything, they we keep us so busy. We couldn't go out of our area and we have to use our uniform all the time. And the Drill Sergeant will take us to the little store in base and watch us. We could buy any candy or sodas or things like that, it was just your personal hygiene and uniforms. The phones were off limits until the Drill Sergeant will tell us we can use. Also we can only used the phone for a few minutes to talk to our family since we were more then 100 and only three phones. I remember I cried once when I call my family, I'd also write to them and tell them how much I missed home and how awful I felt in that place. Before I joined the Army my niece Adriana used to say that when ever she completes her High School she will join the Army. But After I didn't and I told her how was it, she was crying because she though that I joined the Army because she kept telling me to join it.

It was so many of us, that showers were shorts and some of us didn't even sleep on our beds because we didn't want it to mess up. Sunday, was the only day that was a little bit of freedom, we had to do our laundry and clean our barracks and some were allow to attend Mass. This is the time that start going to the Catholic Church, I like and also they will give you cookies at the end. That was the only time I could eat something sweet. I remember one time during Mother's Day, at church they pick me to take a crown of roses to the Virgin Marie. I was nerves since it was not my religion, I didn't know how to act. I think I did a good job since they gave this rosary for doing it. Just before the end of this training we have to do a road march and an obstacle course. I was tired of the road march, I had little step and I had to keep up with them. I did enjoy the obstacle course; I had a little help from the other Soldiers on some of them. I was so short on some of them that the other Soldier had to help me reach some obstacles.

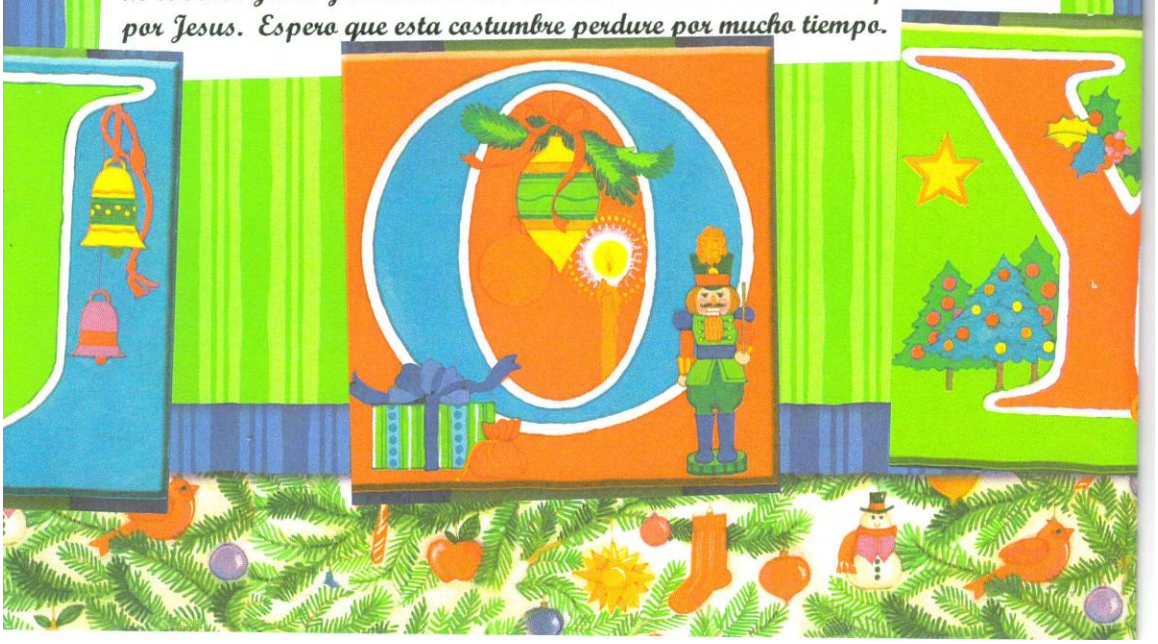
The day after our graduation from Basic which no one from my family attended, we got on this bus and we cross the street to our new home. I remember it was the first week of July; we were assigning to this barracks to star our AIT, Army Individual Training, which was the training for the job we were going to do, Personnel Info. Syst.

AIT was a little relaxing from Basic; still strict but not like Basic, at least here we could drink cokes and eat sweets. We were also allowed to go out of base the last two weeks from our training. At this point, I still didn't know where I supposed to go to after my training for my permanent duty. I found out almost at the end of the class, they told me that I was going to Ft Drum NY. There were some prior service there and they told me that Ft Drum was really ugly, especially because it was a post where they go for deployment a lot. So, the student that were prior service were telling nice that it was nice, the place and the weather. During my graduation no one from my family showed up to congratulate me, well, what I shouldn't act surprise, since they really didn't care much. So, once I graduate from AIT I cam home for a couple of weeks before moving to Ft Drum, NY. I was able to stay one more week for leave because I did some hometown recruiter. Although I didn't recruiter anyone but I get to stay another week home.

# Una Costumbre Favorita

## NAVIDAD: Cumpleaños de Jesús

Una costumbre muy favorita de nuestra familia es la Navidad, cuando Jesús nació. Lo que hacemos ese DIA es festejar el nacimiento de Jesús. La familia se reúne en la casa de mis cunada, mi suegros o en la casa mía, cada ano le toca a alguien. La familia viaja de diferentes lugares para reunimos todos y cocinamos ricos tamales, buñuelos, frijoles charros, un pavo frito, arroz, calentitos, bueno mucha comida. Después de cocinar y arreglar la casa vamos a misa a festejar el nacimiento de Jesús. Después regresamos, comemos y hacemos una posada en la casa seguido por una oración para bendecir toda la familia. Y luego viene la piñata para los niños y también algunos no niños, nos divertimos mucho. A la media noche intercambiamos los regalos. Nos encanta ver los niños abrir sus regalos por que se emocionan tanto. Esta costumbre es una de las mas favoritas para mi familia no solo por los regalos, la comida y nuestra familia sino que porque estamos festejando el cumpleaños de el señor Jesús y estamos todos reunidos como una verdadera familia unida por Jesus. Espero que esta costumbre perdure por mucho tiempo.



Querido Diario,

Yo me acuerdo que cuando nos movimos de mexico a Estados Unidos fue casi lo mismo que paso con la niña del Libro. Me acuerdo que tenia como ocho, nueve años y mis padres decidieron moverse a McAllen, Tx. Realmente no fue muy dificil el cambio porque todavia ibamos a Reynosa los fines de semana. Pero la escuela si fue un poco dificil, pues yo no sabia ingles. ~~Por~~ Estuve solo por un año en la escuela y despues nos tuvimos que mover de regreso a Reynosa. La niña en el libro se ve precupada por el cambio que va hacer. Para mi era como sus hermanos, muy contenta de moverme. Pues, en los Estados Unidos se vivia mejor. Te dan de comer en la escuela y se ve que la escuela es mas divertida. Asi que el cambio no me afecto mucho.

Cuando me movi para N.Y. tenia mucho miedo pues era para ir a un lugar donde no conocia a [illegible] tambien iba ha estar sola.

Esta reflexión fue inspirada
Una persona muy amable, sincera, con un corazo
bonito, es una mujer muy luchadora, una persona muy amigable.

Reflexiones

Perdí un juguete que me acompaño en mi infancia... pero gane el recuerdo del amor de quien me hizo ese regalo.

Perdí mis privilegios y ganancias de niño... pero gane la oportunidad de creer y vivir libremente.

Perdí a mucha gente que quise y que amo todavia... pero gane el cariño y el ejemplo de sus vidas.

Perdí momentos únicos en la vida porque lloraba en vez de sonreír... pero descubrí que es el sembrado como se cosecha amor.

Perdí muchas veces y muchas cosas en mi vida... pero junto a ese "perder" hoy tengo el valor de "ganar"... porque siempre es posible luchar por lo que amamos y porque siempre hay tiempo para empezar algo de nuevo

No importa en que momento te cansaste. Lo que importa, es que siempre es necesario recomenzar. Recomenzar es darse una nueva oportunidad, es renovar esperanzas en la vida y lo más importante es... **Creer en ti mismo**.

¿Sufriste mucho? Fue aprendizaje.
¿Lloraste mucho? Fue limpieza del alma.
¿Sentiste rencor? Fue para aprender a perdonar.
¿Estuviste solitario en algún momento? Fue porque cerraste la puerta.
¿Te sentiste sola? Mira alrededor y encontraras mucha gente esperando tu sonrisa para acercarse mas a ti.

Hoy es un excelente día para comenzar un nuevo proyecto de vida.
Mira alto, sueña alto, anhela lo mejor de lo mejor, anhela todo lo buen
la vida nos trae lo que anhelamos.
Si pensamos pequeño, lo pequeño nos vendrá.

Si pensamos firmemente, en lo mejor, en lo positivo...
hamos para alcanzarlo, va a venir a nuestra vid

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