Chapter 2
Storying History Through Family Literacy

Elizabeth P. Quintero

Where we're going to get to eventually is looking at all the stories that haven't been told.
(character Aaron Burr in Hamilton, the play)
(Miranda, 2015)

Abstract At the close of 2020, we hear screams and cries for a moral reckoning. How can we hear the stories that haven't been told? This chapter is a glimpse of the history of two small, participant-led intergenerational family biliteracy projects in which parents and children participated together. The parents, children, and teachers (many with recent or intergenerational experiences with migration) all had hard-earned expertise in education, human rights, and risk-taking. They tackled complicated learning situations and learned to listen to each other's stories. These stories informed their varied journeys and could inform our journeys to consider educational leadership promoting new types of participatory projects in different contexts in a world as we hope to "build back better" in the coming years. In addition, the information leads to the dramatic ways in 2020–2021 that history, both in the United States and around the world, has influenced the fissures in our social thread that we depend upon for sustenance and well-being.

At the close of 2020, we hear screams and cries for a moral reckoning. How can we hear the stories that haven't been told? This is much more complex than any stop-gap, short-term policy can alleviate. The field of education is itself overwhelmingly complex as it touches all aspects of human life. So, where does that leave us to offer hope for better learning, better living, better dreaming, and most importantly, better caring for each other?

This chapter is a glimpse of the history of two small, participant-led intergenerational family biliteracy projects in early childhood. The parents, children, and teachers (many with recent or intergenerational experiences with migration) all had hard-earned expertise in education, human rights, and risk-taking. They tackled complicated learning situations and learned to listen to each other's stories. These stories informed their varied journeys and could inform our journey to consider early childhood leadership promoting new angles of participatory projects in different

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2021

E. P. Quintero et al., *Making Space for Storied Leadership in Higher Education*,
Rethinking Higher Education, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4157-2_2

contexts in a world as we hope to "build back better" in the coming years. In addition, the information leads to the dramatic ways in 2020-2021 that history, both in the United States and around the world, has influenced the fissures in our social thread that we depend upon for sustenance.

Barad (2014), who interweaves stories within different times, explains in a journal:

> This paper starts out in the middle by going forward to the past – not in order to recount what once was, but by way of re-turning, turning it over and over again, tasting the rich soil from which ideas spring, and opening up again to the uncountable gifts given that still give, to proceed to the place from which we never left/leave (pp. 168).

Of course, now we are urgently focused on public health, racial justice, accessibility, equity, and human migrations and survival. Hopefully, by listening *with* (Parnell, 2011), the families, children, and teachers, who are responsible for early childhood leadership, will be inspired to make brave choices in their work. What can concretely be done, collaboratively and collectively? And to Congressman John Lewis, may we be able to get into "Good Trouble" following his lead.

The research questions asked and the wisdom shared by these co-researchers are addressed by two categories of findings mentioned at the end of Chap. 1:

- How do we as citizens of the world support the people and their children during and after migration to critically address their needs? How can we learn about ways that "Place" tells stories of local and regional politics that are sensitive to the particularities of where people actually live?
- How, as scholars, can we observe and participate in cultures different from our own? How can we observe the layers of power relations, culture, access, and possibility while maintaining respect in all situations? How do we promote activism and avoid voyeurism?

2.1 Sydney, Australia, 2018 December, Australian Association for Research in Education

I was invited to participate in this conference and at the book launch *of Research Through, With and As Storying* (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). I was asked to speak briefly about my small contribution to the new book. I began by thanking the parents and children who participated with me in bilingual family literacy projects years ago in the 1980s and 1990s. Those families taught me about storying, authentic documentation of personal history, and activism. I said that I learned much in those years, from the participants and their wisdom, about storying, research, teaching, and hope for the future, that carries me forward in inspiration, research, and practice to this day. I went into a few specifics and did elaborate on who the participants were in those projects in order to hopefully make some connections with the international audience in the room, in particular with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and scholars present.

After the short presentations, the meeting was adjourned, and a woman walked up from the last row of seats in the back of the room. She asked, “You wrote about this, right?” I was a little surprised, but answered, yes, and then I listened as she explained why she asked. She told me that she did her dissertation research four years ago (decades after I wrote about these family literacy projects) with Aboriginal children and their families, who spoke their home language as well as English, in the outback regions of Australia. She said:

> I looked and looked for research and documentation of projects like this to use as a guide for my work and I had such trouble. I found almost none. But I found your writing and I can’t believe I’m hearing you talk about it. Honestly, I couldn’t remember your name, but when you started telling one of the stories, I knew. I thank you so much. Your work helped me with mine all the way over here. (A. Kirra,[1] personal communication, 2018)

Recounting this still brings tears to my eyes. It was a treasured moment for a teacher educator.

2.2 The Dance Between Past and Present

Moss (2019) leads our current theoretical stances to embrace perspectives that include postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, posthumanism, and other dimensions that share similar positions and collaborate with different co-researchers through various lenses. Moss (2019) explains, “…postfoundationalism relativises, because there can be no one objectively right answer in a social world of multiple perspectives—but this should not be confused with anything goes…. For we must take responsibility for this process and for our choices…” (p. 38).

For years, in life and professional work, choices always present themselves—sometimes subtly and sometimes screaming at us. Building upon critical theory (Freire 1985), I am inspired by diffracting (Barad, 2007) intergenerational connections of collaboration. Moss’s commitment reflects our intentions that “…both politics and ethics are first practice (2019, p. 55).” He explains:

> …. the ethical subject in the ethics of care is a protagonist who must grapple with context, complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty to decide when and how best to relate...in a caring way, applying the qualities of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness to decide when and how best to practice acts of caring (p. 59).

The present disturbing sociopolitical climate demands ethical practice that leads to immediate action. Despite talk and commitment to “social justice,” what are we really *doing*—especially in the cases of oppression, migrating families, children, and planet caring? Barad (2007) reminds us:

> Justice, which entails acknowledgment, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice

[1] Names changed to protect privacy.

> of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly (pp. x–xi).

This relates to Moss's (2019) concrete ask of, "Can the educator respect the otherness of the children with whom she works, resisting the temptation to grasp that alterity by 'pigeon-holing them in her own mental schema?'" (p. 62).

I ask your patience as I jump from present to past and back again through time and layers of story. My experiences working, in often dramatic circumstances, with early childhood staff, children, and parents have influenced me profoundly. At my first job teaching preschool, there was the screaming, crying argument between Stella, a three-year-old, and Lennie, a four-year-old. I was the newest employee at the preschool so I had the task of welcoming the "early arrivals" for some of the working parents. It was a rainy December morning in north Florida as I parked my bicycle under a tree, I heard the ruckus, saw the worried looks on the two mothers' faces. I took both children by the hand to go inside after I assured both their mothers that we'd make some peanut butter sandwiches and sort this out. We went into the kitchen and got out the peanut butter and bread, and I took Stella in my arms and sat down so that I was also at the eye level with Lennie's glares. I asked what happened. Stella said, as she sobbed, "Lennie said Santa isn't Black." I asked Lennie if that was right. He nodded. (Both children were African American.) I remember asking Stella what her mama said. Stella answered, "She said Santa is Black." (I didn't know what I was doing.) Then I asked Lennie what his mama had said. He answered, "She said Santa is White." (I still didn't know what I was doing.) I thought immediately about the two things I knew to be absolutely true at that moment—every child believes her/his mama is the wisest person in the universe and most children at this age are fluent speakers of and believers in the confluence of fantasy and reality. I don't remember exactly what I said, but it was something simple that said mamas are always right and Santa, as far as I understand, is sort of magic, so it must be that he (or she?) could sometimes be Black and sometimes White. By then, the children had finished their sandwiches and headed off (calmly, and friends again) to ride tricycles in the playroom. I still didn't know what I should have said, but I did certainly know that children are smart, observant, and tenacious about learning deep meaning in their worlds.

Over the years, some of the contexts which stand out the most clearly to me have been in family literacy projects serving families in multilingual communities in which people's life experiences, struggles, and resilience come from multiple histories. The two intergenerational literacy projects that I worked with over two decades were projects in two different geographical locations with two different cultural and linguistic groups with a wide variation of family histories. For these projects, we used a framework based on critical theory's tenets of participation, multiple sources of knowledge, and transformative action. I offer selected examples of stories from these family literacy projects relating to educators today and that may offer new avenues for moral reckoning even as we take small, but determined, steps.

From the beginning of my career, I had the opportunity to work in early education programs with parents of young children who were often struggling with economics, work (with and without legal documentation), language issues, and difficulties with "codes of power" (Delpit, 1988). Some parents had had some years of formal education and many had had no formal education at all. Yet, I never met a parent who was not passionate about supporting the learning of her or his children. Also, I never met a parent who was not generous to share knowledge from lived experience with all of us. When the children, the parents, and their cultures and lives were valued, great leaps in learning, literacy, and biliteracy occurred. This chapter brings in glimpses of the two intergenerational, bilingual family literacy projects.

As is often the case as we are immersed in complex, inspiring, and difficult work, there is often no time or energy to reflect. At the close of my involvement in the projects, I began work in New York City and I began to realize the powerful stories that had been given were invaluable trajectories to keep me "keepin' on". My first month at New York University in my new job entangled my own story with jewels of stories (some reflected in this chapter) that would continue to catapult me forward. Mary Catherine Bateson had no idea how her entering my humble personal story gave me hope and confidence. Here's that part of the story.

Mary Catherine Bateson died recently on January 2, 2021. She is rightfully famous for multiple reasons. In 1989, she wrote a seminally stunning book, feminist and family-focused at the same time, *Composing a Life*. She was a renowned scholar (who spoke more than seven languages) across the world encompassing linguistics, cultures, family traditions, and her brilliant writing. She was also the daughter of anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. And to me, she lives in a special place in my heart. I met her just once.

I had recently joined the faculty at New York University in 2001 and I was invited to be on a panel at an event that explored education, language, and literacy as they reflect and support multilingual learners and their families. I was honored and sort of terrified; the other people on the panel were from famous universities known for impeccable scholarship. I tried to hide my discomfort and agreed to join the panel. Right before our presentation, we were asked in what order we would like to speak. I quickly said, "I would like to be last." (I had a million stories in my head but wasn't sure what would be appropriate—especially in this crowd.). As the other panelists gave their presentations I forgot about my fear, and by listening to each of them, I realized I had a story to tell from my work with children and families that related to each of the topics addressed. So, when it was my turn to speak, I was able to sincerely thank the other panelists and offered a few brief stories from my muses and friends (many involving the bilingual family literacy projects) over the years that seemed to me to support what the others were emphasizing.

The Dean held a small reception for the presenters and a few guests. I knew no one, as I accepted a glass of wine, I turned to "mingle". A woman immediately walked over to me and introduced herself to me. She was Mary Catherine Bateson. I was so stunned to be in her presence that I almost missed what she said. She said, "I wanted to thank you so much for your stories about real people. Those stories put

all the issues in perspective and show the strengths of the people you were talking about. That was the most important part of the day for me."

Oh, my goodness, I told myself, I am so thankful for the stories I've been entrusted with.

2.3 Respecting Our Collaborators and Co-researchers

Going back again in time to the 1980s and 1990s, I was becoming more certain that through story and narratives, personal and communal, we find new meanings. Furthermore, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the critical theorists and supporters of Freire's work and "cultural circles" of participatory literacy learning worked with adults. As I was beginning to study critical theory and critical literacy, I immediately saw how it was relevant to adult English language learners whom I was working with—parents and other adults. But from the beginning, I saw the children whom I worked with as expert critical theorists and experts at using multilingual communication, reliance on the arts, and the synergy of fantasy and reality for transformative action. It was truly a no-brainer for me. You can imagine my surprise when I said this out loud among intellectuals and activists, whether in El Paso, Chicago, New York City, or Minnesota, people looked at me as if I had lost my mind. I'd try to explain that I had evidence of this. I told them stories about the children I'd listened to over the years (Stella and Lennie, mentioned earlier and many more). Sometimes scholars thought this was an interesting idea, but they weren't convinced. Some wouldn't listen at all. I do remember that I approached an editor from Peter Lang Publishing at my first AERA national conference. He listened to me thoughtfully and asked me difficult questions that I couldn't answer very well. Yet, that short discussion helped me formulate my passion for this truth (of children and family members being critical theorists) in my practice and my research.

These experiences convinced me that children, their parents, and their early childhood teacher guides would provide leadership in critical, participatory literacy programs (and other programs) focusing on story. This is in part because teachers are then able to see what is not always obvious; parents and children can show strengths and needs that sometimes aren't apparent in the regular school contexts. In terms of literacies and languages, we have known for decades that children who have an opportunity to learn in their native language, while learning a second language, reach full cognitive development in two languages and enjoy cognitive advances over monolinguals (Cognitive Neuroscience Society, 2013; Collier, 1989; Garcia-Sierra et al., 2016). Students and their families who speak languages other than English can, and should, continue to nurture their home languages while their English acquisition (or that of a different target language) is in progress (Anzaldúa 1999; Cognitive Neuroscience Society, 2013; Reyes, 2011). The languages and literacies enrich each other; they do not prohibit the learners from becoming fluent and literate in English. More recent studies suggest that bilinguals surpass monolinguals in tasks of memory and memory flexibility (Blom et al., 2014; Brito & Barr, 2014). Luk and Bialystok

(2013) found that bilingualism is multi-faceted. Hoff (2018) found that bilingual children's competencies reflect the quantity and quality of their exposure to each language. This, in hindsight, is more evidence of the advantage of learning situations with multilingual and intergenerational students together.

I've wondered during the past year if we had more experience under our belts of co-teaching and co-researching with multilingual and intergenerational members of our students' families, would we have been better able to support the navigation of online schooling that has been necessary? Would the families have been better equipped to support the children as they struggled with the task of it all? Would the web designers and software developers have been better able to help teachers create multidimensional experiences? Would the local, state, and federal agencies have been better able to finance the endeavors?

2.4 Intergenerational, Multilingual Family Literacy

The family literacy groups I was involved with most were closely organized according to a model designed to provide participatory, critical literacy, and biliteracy opportunities for families and young children (together) in communities of migration. One family literacy project was for Mexican and Mexican American families in El Paso, Texas, and continued for years led by activist parents and teachers. The other project, Poj Niam Thiab Meyuam (Mother/Child School) was in Duluth, Minnesota, for Hmong women and their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Both projects continued with adaptations according to community needs for many years after the pilot projects.

In El Paso, Texas, a pilot project, The Intergenerational Family Literacy Project and the expanded larger project, Project FIEL: Family Initiative for English Literacy, involved Mexican, Mexican American, and Latino parents and their children. The El Paso Community College administration believed that the newly funded literacy center could provide literacy classes for adults who were interested in learning English and improving their literacy for employment or citizenship access purposes. They learned from entrance interviews that many adults (over 90%) who came for tutoring said that their first, most important reason to improve their literacy skills was to help their children with reading and schoolwork.

This statistic from the interviews led to a woman who I hadn't met standing outside my child development class as it ended early one morning. I had a class of 30, mostly bilingual adults studying child development; of course, we always ended our classes telling stories and laughing. I immediately thought we had disturbed the woman with our noise. But she smiled and said the class sounded engaging. Then she introduced herself and told me about the literacy center and the new information they had from the interviews. She asked me, "Could you design and implement literacy classes with parents and children together?" I said yes and explained that I was finishing my dissertation in a bilingual Head Start classroom with a strong parent involvement

component. Therefore, in 1987, we designed and implemented the Intergenerational Literacy Model Project as a pilot project.

The instructional model was designed with the current research at the time about both emergent literacy in young children and the confluence of bilingualism as related to literacy acquisition. While the Intergenerational Literacy Model Project was funded by an operational grant from Texas Education Agency rather than a research grant, the curriculum designers strongly felt that responsible teaching practice must consider the interrelationships between teaching practice, theory, and research. And it should be noted that the two of us who designed and implemented the pilot project were experienced teachers of both children and parents. We both were certain that our radical idea of holding classes with parents and children together could be effective. We knew and had learned in our professional experience that children's learning flourishes when they have the opportunity to work with a parent. And we were also certain about the positive dynamic of conducting the classes in the home languages of the families when at all possible.

2.4.1 What We Learned Together

I have always believed that the most important function of bilingual, participatory family literacy projects is the service (which can take many forms) provided for the participating families. It can, and usually does, support the efforts and activities of existing educational programs in terms of academics. In addition, the activity of participatory biliteracy in an intergenerational format offers information to the family participants about literacy and codes of power (Delpit, 1988; Reyes, 2011) in the United States in a context where participants are able to explore the relationship that this information (both the literacy and the political aspects) has on their own lives. Furthermore, this participatory literacy setting also used the background knowledge of the participants in a valued, active situation and provided teachers and staff with concrete examples of sociocultural information and factual information that is necessary for any educational setting—information that is often not available in books or teacher education class content. We can learn from parents about sleeping routines and family roles as we engaged in conversation about storytelling and storybook reading. And most importantly, we learned about what parents know their children know and what their strengths are. As a result, the participants of the Pilot Project really influenced the two subsequent bilingual family literacy projects over the following 15 years.

One parent said, "*I want to read. I want to help my kids so they don't have to go through what I did. It's a hard world out there, and if you can't read, it's awful.*" Another parent asked, "*Are you sure this will help* my *daughter? If you're sure, we'll do it. I don't know, really, if anything will help me* (Quintero, 1990, p. 5).

Parents' comments revealed the feelings and the situations of many participants in the Intergenerational Literacy Model Project. All the parents were conscientious and caring adults, some of whom lacked basic literacy skills, but at that time wanted

to catch up with and surpass their children in these skills. They wanted to help their children with the tough challenges that come later in school and later in life.

The participating children also gave us primary source information from their perspectives about literacy acquisition and language. The children, ranging from 2 to 11 years of age, from English-speaking families and Spanish-speaking families, gave us all the hope to keep trying. Almost instinctively, certainly intuitively, the children thrived on what the experts at the time called the "roots of literacy" (Goodman, 1985). The children loved to communicate with gestures, by talking, by singing, by drawing, and by playing. As active learners, they enjoyed studying with their parents. Some even tried to protect and compensate for the lack of skills on their parents' part. A few children responded to our interviews:

Child 1: *I like to draw. I tell my baby sister stories about my pictures.*

Child 2: *I do puzzles good.*

Child 3: *My Mom doesn't have to read that. I'll do it for you, Mom.*

Child 4: *I like to talk.* (Quintero, 1990, p. 5).

2.4.2 Results of the El Paso Pilot Project

To say that the parents and their children improved their literacy skills by a certain percentage during the pilot project would be a drastic oversimplification of what happened. What did happen was a complex combination of expected and unexpected events in a human drama of literacy learning. For example, many researchers and teachers had acknowledged for decades that social context is intricately involved with children's academic learning. The social context issues were obvious in the way the adults related to each other, to their children, to the instructors, and to the learning events. It became obvious early in the project that it would be useless to consider methodology, curriculum, or assessment without taking into consideration the effects of social context. I would argue that these decades later, these truths are still self-evident. And I state the obvious when I wonder whether or not if those of us working with newcomer and migrating families as we fell into the pandemic of 2020 could have spent more time, effort, and funding exploring and supporting the myriad social issues that have become more and more horrific for learners as the times became more difficult?

In the El Paso project, probably the most devastating negative effect of social context upon literacy learning for adults was the embarrassment factor. Several parents were so ashamed of their lack of literacy skills that they were absolutely unwilling—perhaps unable—to take the necessary risks involved in learning a new skill. One example of this was seen in a mother of three. The woman was quite an articulate speaker of both Spanish and English. She seemed to be perceptive and was excellent at guiding her children through the "initial inquiry" (conversational) part of the lessons. Yet, because of her lack of schooling and her awareness of the social stigma of illiteracy she had never attempted any involvement with written language. When the language experience approach activities involving basic writing

were presented, this parent stared into space, looked away completely, or made comments such as *I don't read* (Quintero, 1990, p. 11).

Another example of social context in a slightly different sense negatively affecting the lessons was the great number of intense personal problems which many of the adults were experiencing. No amount of innovative teaching or self-motivation could compete with a spouse's threats to kidnap the children or a hungry family's survival on potatoes exclusively for the 10 days after the food stamps have run out. This was the late 1980s. Have we not learned in 2020 that no jobs, no financial support, no healthcare, and often no home to dwell in prevents children and families' learning and living?

2.4.3 The Unexpected

Many unexpected things occurred, but an issue with respect to adult learners and oral language seemed especially noteworthy to project staff. From a standpoint of early childhood education, the project designers were certain of the importance that oral language development plays in the whole literacy learning of children. It was because of this that such an emphasis was placed on oral language in the program—it seemed imperative that the parents realize this importance if they were going to learn to help their children in and out of school. What the project staff did not expect was the importance oral language seemed to have on the adults' learning. In all the classes for monolingual English speakers, Spanish speakers, and bilingual participants there were several levels of connections between the oral language and adults' evidence of literacy and biliteracy development. When a parent seemed to feel comfortable enough to take part in the conversations at the beginning of the class sessions, that parent had set an emotional climate of trust for herself or himself and seemed to be more willing to take the risks with written language in the language experience step of the lesson.

2.5 Project FIEL—A Title VII Demonstration Project

Two years after the pilot project was initiated, the college received three-years funding through the federal Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) to expand the project. Project FIEL (Family Initiative for English Literacy) began in August of 1988 as a demonstration family literacy project for multilingual families. Even though we were required by funders to put *English* literacy in the title, we chose to emphasize what Swadener and Lubeck (1995) promoted in their work with children and families "At Promise," which included respect for and inclusion of home language. Also, it gave us an expression of our hope for our learners that in Spanish FIEL (the acronym for our project) translates as *faithful* or *devoted*.

The literacy groups offered a bilingual setting where parents and children worked together using a flexible five-step instructional model which relied heavily on students' prior knowledge, using both home language and English language interactions and sociocultural strengths. Project FIEL brought parents and kindergarten children (and, as it happened, their siblings of all ages) together once a week after school in their neighborhoods for approximately two hours of activities. The goals of the family literacy project were:

(a) to enhance literacy and biliteracy knowledge and skills of both the parents and the children through a series of participatory intergenerational activities
(b) to provide information regarding the literacy and biliteracy development process in children to the parents and to provide a setting for the parents to utilize the information in a variety of ways
(c) to enhance parents' self-confidence to contribute to their children's literacy acquisition and learning through participatory group interaction; and
(d) to empower the participants to connect the literacy activities to their own social and cultural situations, thus encouraging their use of literacy for personal, family, and community purposes (Quintero & Rummel, 2003).

The FIEL project was implemented in 32 classrooms in seven schools in the El Paso area. The classes met after school and consisted of five to seven parents, their children, a teacher, and an assistant, one of whom was bilingual. The classes were conducted in Spanish and/or English, depending on the proficiencies and desires of the families in each class.

2.5.1 Instructional Model

The FIEL curriculum consisted of a series of generative lesson frameworks collaboratively written by staff with constant input by the participating parents and children (during parent meetings and informal conversations with children and parents). Each lesson revolved around a theme that guided the groups through the five steps of the instructional model. The themes were selected by the participants. The themes, for example, included Puppets (a popular art form in Mexico), T.V.: Good or Bad?, Families (including the extended family and/or different family configurations), Parenting on the Frontera, Recipes and Health Food/Junk Food (including Mexican food and dishes), Music (Mexican and American), Holidays (Mexican and American), Heroes, Cotton and plants (cotton fields surround two of our schools), the Library (where books are available in both Spanish and English), The School and You: Avenues for Advocacy and What's Worth Knowing?

The flexible, five-step instructional format was loosely structured as:

1. Initial Inquiry—an oral language activity that encouraged group dialogue (often in two languages)

2. Learning Activity—a concrete, hands-on experience activity done in family teams (small groups)
3. Language Experience Approach Activity—a writing activity, in either or both languages, done in family teams
4. Storybook Fun—storytime that encouraged interaction, in either or both languages
5. Home Activity Suggestion—activities for the whole family to do at home (materials included)

This curriculum was a confirmation of beliefs regarding effective and ethical ways literacy and biliteracy could be encouraged (Quintero, 1990, pp. 18–19).

Project FIEL embraced the theoretical perspectives of much of the parent involvement research available at the time, however, differed from expert opinion in certain aspects of theory and design. For example, we defined literacy as follows:

> Literacy is a process of constructing and critically using language (oral and written) as a means of expression, interpretation and/or transformation of our lives and the lives of those around us.

Those of us with study and experience working with young children could document that babies, toddlers, and young children are experts at communicating through babbling, intonations, songs, "invented" syllables and words, gestures, and facial expressions. We knew these were the roots of literacy as Yetta Goodman (1985) called them.

So, we extended this to all our learners saying that literacy begins as a process whereby children and adults acquire oral and written language skills that can be used for ongoing, generative critical living. Thus, a parent could be quite literate and quite capable of passing on useful education to her child even if that parent lacked the formal reading and writing skills or formal schooling. It had been our experience that when parents are provided with critically relevant educational information and encouragement to make connections between what is already being done at home in terms of positive parenting to other areas of education, and the skills are not so difficult to acquire.

First, Project FIEL as described above, was a literacy class for parents and their children. Parent engagement was an integral part of the project—not a "side effect" or a peripheral part of the project. The parents in Project FIEL were students; they participated in the lessons and did the optional home activities just as the children did. What was even more significant, however, was the fact that the parents were actually working together with their children during the program. They sat next to each other throughout the lessons as they discussed, drew, wrote, listened to stories, and did a myriad of other activities. This was in contrast to other literacy programs where, for example, the parents attend literacy classes in one room while the children listen to stories in another, or where the children attend classes during the day and the parents meet only during the last segment of the day or in the evening.

As parents and children worked together, they helped each other. While the child may have, for example, offered ideas to the parent for a particular drawing, it was

more often the child who asked for help from the parent than the reverse. This was particularly significant, as we were working with Latino families with varying abilities in Spanish and English in this project. It was significant because the parents, despite the fact that they put themselves in a learning situation with their children, they still had the opportunity to maintain themselves as role models or authority figures for their children. Even though both parents and children were in a learning situation, the children still looked up to their parents as they asked, for example, "How do you write banana?" or "Did I do this right?" or "Can you draw a circle for me?" or "Will you write firefighter for me?" This opportunity for the parent to participate as a role model while at the same time working cooperatively with the child, we felt, was important to the success of the project. As I retell this story in 2020, I wish I had had the foresight and support to provide online parent/child learning groups in these difficult times. Wouldn't this simple design have helped at least some of our students succeed?

The FIEL curriculum was implemented in many different groups each project year. Most schools had three or four classes being offered at once. The teachers were asked to use all five steps of the instructional model. We suggested that the teachers at one school choose (with input from their parents) the same theme to present on the same class day so that they could help and support each other with materials and ideas. Other than these two requirements the teachers were encouraged strongly to interpret the lessons personally according to their own teaching style and especially with attention to the needs and interests of the individual families in their classes (Quintero, 1990, p. 29).

There were always extra brothers and sisters popping in and out of the classroom. Some of these siblings added positively to the family and classroom dynamics. Some of these siblings bothered everyone involved. The classes were dynamic and different every day. Yet, of course, even with our wonderful intellectual teachers, there were always more questions than answers. Consequently, the hour-long weekly staff debriefing sessions which were held immediately after each class were invaluable. Sometimes the sessions seemed to "fix" everything. Often, they seemed only to generate more frustrating questions. Regardless, they provided a short time for tangible and intangible mutual support for professionals who themselves were in a growing process.

2.5.2 *Evolution of the Bilingual Model*

It eventually became evident in the day-to-day drama of the classes that we were witnessing many of the recent research findings regarding language transfer (Krashen and Biber, 1988) and biliteracy development (Barrera, 1983) which stated that knowledge about oral language and the reading and writing processes transfer from the native language to the second language and that literacy learning can occur among bilinguals through the use of two languages. Samples of parent comments from an evaluation survey follow.

> Yes, I can help my son better because I got more ideas on how to make him listen to what I read to him.
>
> Aprendí como se desenvuelve mi hija en clases y ahora tengo la oportunidad de enseñarle y ayudarle en los aspectos que ella necesita, dos de ellos es el inglés y la participacion en clase. (I learned how my child is developing in class and now I have the opportunity of teaching and helping her where she needs it, two of those areas are with English and class participation.)
>
> Me siento satisfecha, si puedo ayudar en algo provechoso. (I feel content, I can help with something worthwhile.)

2.5.3 Curriculum Evolution... Adjustments!

During the second project year, we made a conscious effort to revise our evolving curriculum to better reflect the needs and interests of the families. We felt we needed to provide more opportunities for parents and children to connect the literacy activities to their everyday lives of needs, hopes, frustrations, and joys. We talked to literally every parent in the project to get suggestions for additions and changes.

In other words, a lesson about "What's Worth Knowing?" could be addressed by both adult learners and child learners. The parents agreed. The children loved it (discussing the effectiveness of a school rule with adults present!). Some of the teachers were intrigued. Some were distressed. Some teachers had difficulty—more with the practice rather than the theory of our changes. They felt uncertain about orchestrating both groups of learners (parents and children) around themes of such profound meaning (Quintero, 1990).

There was the Ghostbuster incident in one class. The experienced and dedicated teacher was leading an "Initial Inquiry" discussion at the beginning of class focused on the theme of community helpers. She was good at involving and engaging both children and parents. I walked in as participants were giving their examples of what a community helper means, what one does. Vicente, aged 5, sat with his mother and raised his hand. He waited, then when the teacher acknowledged him to speak, he spoke eloquently about having a "Ghostbuster" in his house. Vicente's mother calmly smiled throughout his telling of the tale. The teacher was surprised that he wasn't talking about firefighters, doctors, nurses, sanitation workers, as some of the examples she had used in her introduction. It was just a few seconds before she used her authority to refocus the conversation by saying that she didn't think a Ghostbuster was a real community helper. Vicente didn't skip a beat and politely disagreed and explained that he shares a room with his baby sister who was afraid of the dark. He went on to explain that he always tells her that she will be protected in the dark by the Ghostbuster and then she would fall asleep. Just as the teacher was starting to say, "… but a ghostbuster isn't real…" I jumped in and quickly asked the assistant teacher to carry on with the group discussion because I had something to talk with the teacher about urgently. I went with her in the hallway and apologized for interrupting her teaching, but it was really important. I reminded her about our discussions about the pretend/reality fuzzy line for young children at this age and I had noticed how

proud Vicente was to tell his story and how proud Vicente's mother was about his participation. And I reminded her of our definition of literacy and asked her if she would please re-enter the class, the discussion, and continue as if a ghostbuster could be a community helper. I said I'd talk with her in more detail at our meeting after the class. I felt bad, knowing I'd violated her lead in the class. She was flustered but kept her composure. She didn't quit. She continued to be a strong and important part of the project. Most importantly, I was careful to see Vicente and his mother as they left the building and I said I really liked his story about the Ghostbuster. Then he showed me the picture and language experience story that he and his mother had drawn and written together during the Concrete Activity part of the class.

2.6 The Poj Niam Thiab Meyuam (Mother/Child School) Duluth, Minnesota

A decade after the inception of the El Paso project, in Duluth, Minnesota, we initiated a similar project involving Hmong parents (from Laos) and the second year added refugee parents from Somalia, their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The Poj Niam Thiab Meyuam (Mother/Child School) met at a community center, in a housing area where many new residents lived who were from recently closed refugee camps in Thailand where they had lived since the end of the war in Vietnam. The program was a collaboration of Head Start staff, early childhood family education staff, adult basic education/English as a second language staff, parents, children, and university faculty and student teachers. The goals of this project were similar to the goals of Project FIEL, with one added related goal, to provide a collaboration model of professional and paraprofessional staff working with immigrant families in education and social services in Minnesota.

I had moved to the Early Childhood faculty at the University of Minnesota Duluth and was immediately inspired by the community Head Start Early Childhood program, the Family Education program, and adult ESL program which were all collaborating to provide the most relevant, authentic support possible to all ages of newcomers, first Hmong families from Laos and Vietnam and later families from Somalia. I was granted an invitation to send teacher education students from undergraduate and Master's programs in Early Childhood and ESL programs of study to do fieldwork with the families and children at this community center.

On one of our first professional meetings with the Head Start staff, I showed some video documentation and told stories of the El Paso project (Project FIEL). The lead teacher of the Head Start in the county asked, "If what you say about multilingual literacy acquisition is supported by this type of project, could we do one here?" She went on, "I mean, I don't understand a lot of the Spanish in your videos, but I can see how the children and their parents are so engaged. Could we do this with Hmong families?" I was touched and excited. I answered that of course, I believed we could, but I certainly wasn't bilingual in Hmong (or Lao) and English. Yet, if

we could collaborate with some of the mothers who were multilingual because of living in refugee camps in Thailand for many years, they could be our co-teachers and co-researchers if they chose to. So, the second project, Poj Niam Thiab Meyuam (Mother/Child School) began in Duluth, Minnesota, for Hmong women and their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

The Poj Niam Thiab Meyuam project was implemented in a similar format as the El Paso Project FIEL. And it is important to relate that both projects continued with adaptations according to community needs for many years after the pilot projects. In this brief chapter, there are some examples from this work that show the collaboration of children, families, educators, and student teachers that tied together with the histories, very different journeys, and incredible strengths of the learners and the early childhood educators and other educators who worked together tirelessly.

2.7 Parent Advocacy

While the parents and children in both family literacy projects weren't always directly involved in what is traditionally thought of as "issues of power," they were respected and encouraged to read their "world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Often this resulted in their taking action in various ways that both improved something in their lives and informed us as staff. While many people define "transformative action" in different ways, most would agree that a prime example is a parent doing something, taking action, and making "good trouble" (as John Lewis said) to make a situation better for her child. Parent advocacy growing from family literacy could be seen in the El Paso project. For example, a family literacy lesson was developed on "School and You: Avenues for Advocacy," because several of the parents had inquired or expressed discontent with specific situations in their children's schools which they had encountered and were frustrated with. The class discussion focused on the different procedures they could use within the school systems to voice their complaints and advocate for change. Some of the guiding questions for the lesson were: "When you have a question about what is happening in your child's class at school, when and how can you talk to the teacher?" "If you are not happy with what the teacher tells you or if the teacher won't talk to you, what can you do then?" "What are all the avenues you can think of to be an advocate for your children?"

One parent during a class talked about her situation with her child's teacher. The teacher was treating the child in a disrespectful way, which the parent felt was damaging the child's self-confidence and inhibiting her learning. Her child had entered kindergarten, after the generally supportive context of Head Start, but day after day as she struggled with various writing tasks, her kindergarten teacher consistently reprimanded her for poor performance and often grabbed her paper, crumpled it up, and threw it in the trash in front of all the students. After discussing this situation with other parents in the family literacy class, the parent also found other parents outside the class who shared similar stories. They all decided they wanted to meet at

the school for a parent discussion group to brainstorm how they could deal with "children's abuse by teachers." The parents began to meet regularly together with each other, sometimes with their school administration, and sometimes attended school board meetings to make their concerns known (Quintero and Macias, 1995). They often informed staff about community and family information that they otherwise wouldn't have known.

Another example showing transformative action came from Hmong parents who had recently arrived in the United States from refugee camps in Thailand. In one of the first family literacy classes in Duluth, Minnesota, parents came to class with a critical question. The question was "Why doesn't the elementary school (where their older children attended) tell us about parent conferences, send us notifications in our language, or provide an interpreter at meetings?" With the interpreter at the family literacy class and the literacy facilitator taking part in the discussion, the women discussed at length how angry they felt when they heard of the teachers' comments about how the Hmong parents just didn't care about their children's education. The staff at the elementary school reportedly said this because the Hmong parents never come to parent conferences, PTA meetings, or other school functions. However, the women explained that they had been able to be active in Head Start, in part because the staff always made the effort to provide interpreters at meetings, provide information in their language, and respectfully talked to parents about questions regarding their children. After comparing the two situations (Head Start and the elementary school), they decided to take action. They wrote the following letter:

Tus saib xyuas nyob rau hauv tsev kawm ntawv.

Dear Principal,

> Peb yog cov ua niam ua txiv muaj me nyuam tuaj kawn ntawv hauv tsev kawn ntawv School. Peb xav thov kom nej muab cov ntawv xa los tsev txhais ua ntawv Hmoob. Thaum twg nej muaj tej yam uas tseem ceeb nyob rau hauv tsev kawm ntawv los peb thiaj paub tias yog ntawv tseem ceeb thiab.
>
> Ua tsaug ntau koj muab koj lub sij haum los twm peb tsab ntawv no. (Quintero & Rummel, 2003, p. 126).

To paraphrase the letter, the parents asked the principal why they were not notified of school information or conferences regarding their children in their language. They stated that they are active parents who care deeply about their children's education, but when information is illegible to them, they cannot participate.

The principal responded with a letter, written in Hmong, a week later. Interpreters were provided at all school functions in which the parents participated, and school notices were translated into Hmong ever since this incident. And participation by the Hmong parents in school activities rose to over 90%.

2.8 Promising Realities

In another case, of Andre and Ms. Mora, we saw a parenting style quite consistent with the practices and assumptions of the family literacy project. Working with Andre and his mother caused us to challenge another myth. Some researchers believed that a mother must have a formal education in order to be supportive of her children's academic development. Andre, age five, and his mother, Ms. Mora, attended Project FIEL activities in central El Paso for two semesters. Andre lived with his mother, father, 10-year-old brother, 19-year-old sister, and 21-year-old sister. Ms. Mora had only six years of formal schooling in Mexico. Yet, her biblioteca (library) in her home, her literacy practices with her children, as well as her own habits showed no lack of academic support. Furthermore, the academic success of all four children—those in elementary school and those in high school and the university—contradicted the myth that unless mothers obtain a high school diploma, the children will not succeed in school.

Ms. Mora's comments about being an avid reader herself indicated that while she was a monolingual Spanish speaker, she was quite literate in her native language. Videotaped interactions of her and her son during the FIEL classes further showed that she was indeed proficient in literacy behaviors as well. That is to say, she calmly and consistently prompted and encouraged Andre and appropriately explained things to him in Spanish. Andre often then explained to the class the issue or story in perfect English (usually his writing was in English). Thus, while Ms. Mora didn't consider herself bilingual or biliterate she was an effective leader of this bilingual, biliterate family team. Examples from field notes and videotaped class sessions showed mother/son interactions which revealed her leadership on both a literacy development level and a social context level. Consequently, Andre at age five was proficiently bilingual and on his way to becoming biliterate. (Quintero & Rummel, 2003).

I still think of Ms. Mora all these years later. As I was thinking of and missing my new friends from Syria and Libya in the school where they were studying in kindergarten and I was volunteering in 2020, I know that Ms. Mora could have, and would have, helped the parents and the children so much. How many talented and dedicated leaders have not been recognized nor recruited to help?

Likewise, the children in the Minnesota project spoke in two languages—Hmong and English. Some families also spoke Lao giving the children the richness of three languages. With their mothers joining them, they often sang and "showed off" their English with the storybook reading in one breath, and then turned to their mothers to elaborate on the description begun about polar bears, in Hmong, in a private conversation. Pae, age four, on one occasion turned to one of the teachers and asked in English, "If polar bear fights brown bear who wins?" His cognitive flexibility is not slowing down at all while his two languages develop.

The Hmong children in the family literacy project in Minnesota showed complex cognitive processing in spite of language differences. For example, Tong was a child who attended the Head Start classroom in the morning where the teaching was done

primarily in English, with a multicultural group of children consisting of American Indians, African Americans, Spanish-speaking children, English-speaking children, and Hmong children. In the afternoon, Tong attended family literacy class and extended his learning from the morning with the assistance of a Hmong-speaking assistant. He spoke Hmong with his buddies and relatives, sang, drew, and wrote about what he'd learned about whales, the moon, fish and sea life, and dinosaurs. He also read folktales from Africa, Thailand, Laos, and England. In 1995, Hmong families in bilingual family literacy classes created books, in Hmong and English, with stories of family histories. They created audio tapes of the stories in Hmong and English.

These stories should poke at our conscience in 2020–2021 amidst our schooling difficulties. Who should be deciding and declaring what are "promising practices" and in which contexts?

Intergenerational Family Literacy Programs are complex by their very nature, and they differ according to participants' needs and strengths. Yet, it's been my experience that these programs offer more than most parent education programs and more than many student tutorial or parent education programs. And as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I see these projects foreshadowing many of our challenges and possibilities in 2020 and 2021, especially in terms of early childhood leadership. The following chapters will address aspects of our learnings in these projects relate to our current need to urgently focus on public health, racial justice, accessibility, equity and human migrations, and survival. Hopefully, by listening *with* (Parnell, 2011) the families, children, and teachers we will be inspired to make brave choices in our work of "building back better".

References

Anzaldúa, G. (1999). *Borderlands/La Frontera.* Aunt Lute Books.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2014). Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *Parallax, 20*(3), 168–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623

Blom, E., Küntay, A. C., Messer, M., Verhagen, J., & Leseman, P. (2014). The benefits of being bilingual: Working memory in bilingual Turkish-Dutch children. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 128*, 105–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2014.06.007

Brito, N., & Barr, R. (2014). Flexible memory retrieval in bilingual 6-month-old infants. *Developmental Psychobiology*, *56*, 1156–1163. https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.21188.

Collier, V. P. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly, 23*(3), 509–531. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586923

Cognitive Neuroscience Society. (2013). *Decoding how babies learn language: Q&A with Patricia Kuhl*. https://www.cogneurosociety.org/cns-2014-blog-coverage/.

de la Luz Reyes, M. (2011). *Words were all we had: Becoming biliterate against the odds.* Teachers College Press.

Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, *58*(3), 280–298. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.3.c43481778r528qw4.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the worl*d. Bergin & Garvey.
Garcia-Sierra, A., Ramírez-Esparza, N. & Kuhl, P. (2016). Relationships between quantity of language input and brain responses in bilingual and monolingual infants. *International Journal of Psychophysiology, 11*0(2016), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2016.10.004
Goodman, Y. M. (1985). Kidwatching: Observing children in the classroom. In A. Jaggar & M. T. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the Language Learner* (pp. 9–18). International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English.
Hoff, E. (2018). Lessons from the study of input effects on bilingual development. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 24*, 62–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006918768370
Luk, G., & Bialystok, E. (2013). Bilingualism is not a categorical variable: Interaction between language proficiency and usage. *Journal of Cognitive Psychology, 25*, 605–621. https://doi.org/10.1080/20445911.2013.795574
Moss, P. (2019). *Alternative narratives in early childhood: An introduction for students and practitioners.* Routledge.
Parnell, W. (2011). Revealing the experience of children and teachers even in their absence: Documenting in the early childhood studio. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 9*(3), 291–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718x10397903
Phillips, L. G., & Bunda, T. (2018). *Research through, with and as storying*. Routledge.
Quintero, E. P. (1990). *Project FIEL: Family initiative for English literacy handbook*. Unpublished manuscript.
Quintero, E. P. (2015). *Storying learning in early childhood: When children lead participatory curriculum design, implementation, and assessment*. Peter Lang.
Quintero, E. & Macias, A. H. (1995). To participate, to speak out…: A story from San Elizario Texas. In Martin, R. (Ed.) *On equal terms: Addressing issues of race, class and gender in higher education.* State University of New York.
Quintero, E. P., & Rummel, M. K. (2003). *Becoming a teacher in the new society: Bringing communities and classrooms together.* Peter Lang.
Swadener, B., & Lubeck, S. (1995). *Children and families "at promise": Deconstructing the discourse of risk.* State University of New York Press.