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Building Safe Community Spaces for Immigrant Families, One Library at a Time

Max Vázquez-Domínguez, Denise Dávila, and Silvia Noguero-Liu

In today's political climate, supporting the needs of young children from Latinx immigrant families has become increasingly difficult at the community, institutional, state, and federal levels. This essay is about a group of Latinx families who participated in an innovative early literacy program at a county public library branch in the migration setting of the U.S. Southeast known as the New Latino Diaspora (Hamann, Wortham, Murillo, 2015). We describe the program and its role in building a safe and welcoming environment for Latinx students and their families. We include the voices of the librarian and parents who had never before participated in a family literacy series for Spanish-speaking immigrants. We conclude with a discussion about factors that foster an inclusive community space for educational experiences.

Creating Space Within the Public Commons

We, Denise, Max, and Silvia acknowledge the key role of the public library in building a healthy community (Cabello & Butler, 2017) as it tries to meet many of the needs of the individuals in the region (Morris, 2011). We view the library as a public common in which community members dwell in its communal spaces, share materials, and access a range of services (Didakis & Phillips, 2013). We agree with Cabello and Butler (2017) who argue that libraries can strengthen communities by connecting with individuals and families. As Latinx scholars of educational theory and practice, we collaborated with the main public library in our community of northern Georgia. With the support of the children's library staff, we initiated a bilingual family literacy program to create an inviting atmosphere at the library in which immigrant families might choose to spend time.

In the process of developing our family literacy program, *Cuentos para la familia* (Stories for the Family), we took an architectural stance toward building a safe, home-like learning environment that involved both material components (e.g., bodies, tables, books) and expressive components (e.g., language, symbols, gestures, postures) (De Landa, 2006). To try and help the library feel like a home, we thought through possible additive interactions that could build experiences between families and the architectural space so that the library could become “an extension of the inhabitant, absorbing preferences, customs and

rituals” (Heidegger, 1975 as cited by Didakis & Phillips, 2013, p. 308). Our objective was not simply to house a program for families but to foster an environment in which immigrant families might feel as though the library was an extension of their homes.

Building a Welcoming Environment at the Public Library

As residents and members of the local community, we learned there were few literacy programs serving Spanish-speaking immigrant families in our region of the state (Dávila, Noguerón, & Vázquez-Domínguez, 2017). We were disappointed for the families in our community. We knew that the recognition and inclusion of immigrants’ funds of knowledge and home and community experiences in institutional spaces like schools and libraries provide a solid foundation for scaffolding children’s learning (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Johnson, 2014; Zentella, 2005). We were aware that community engagement in immigrant children’s formal and informal learning experiences has been essential to helping children to maintain their heritage languages (Rowe & Fain, 2013) and to cultivating a sense of community cultural wealth in the U.S. (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, the exclusion of immigrant families’ cultural repertoires of practice in learning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) has proven to have negative effects on children’s social development (Gill, 2014).

Nevertheless, we also understood that educational researchers have long advocated for increased school and library resources for immigrant families (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubiaga, 2012) and for enhanced cultural awareness training for public school teachers of the U.S. Southeast (Wainer, 2004). We recognized that the paucity of publicly accessible resources for Spanish-speaking families was not exclusive to our region, but reflected the realities of the increasing diversification of the population in the U.S. Southeast (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2015). Thus, we appreciated the opportunity to cultivate an early literacy program for immigrant families within the public commons of an institutional space in the New Latino Diaspora (NLD).

Within the sociopolitical landscape of the NLD, we endeavored to foster a safe informal learning environment in the institutional public commons. We tried to create a program that not only valued immigrant families’ contributions to the local economy, but that helped advance multilingualism and multiculturalism as pillars of public education in a competitive global society (Skorton & Altschuler, 2012). We wanted families’ funds of knowledge and repertoires of cultural practices to be so integral to the library space that participants in our program would feel immediately comfortable.

Cuentos began when Denise and Max became the first bilingual facilitators for the national Prime Time Family Reading Time ® (PTFRT) initiative. The PTFRT program was originated by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) and was locally subsidized by the library branch and the Georgia Public Library Services. The six-week program for families with children aged 6-10 provided participants with free transportation to and from the library, a healthy dinner, and childcare for younger siblings. To solicit participants for the PTFRT program, library staff asked local elementary schools to invite Spanish-bilingual families in which their primary grade children (K-3) were identified as being “at risk,” struggling readers.

The school and library staff suggested to these “at risk” families that the PTFRT program was an extension of the children’s school-based reading instruction and would improve their English language skills. In other words, they positioned the children and their parents as being deviant in comparison to other students and families. In truth, the local school district did not promote the kinds of pedagogical approaches that foster multilingualism and multiculturalism and help immigrant children and their families. Instead of providing bilingual instruction, immigrant children in need of linguistic assistance received “push-in” English Language Development services in which a para-educator supported them during regular classroom instructional time. The maintenance of the children’s heritage languages was cast as an informal, familial activity outside the realm of public education. It was not valued for its significance to the children’s emergent biliteracy development (Reyes, 2012). Although we were disappointed and dismayed, we were not surprised that the school and library staff promoted the PTFRT program as a remedial endeavor for immigrant children and their families.

The basic, six-week PTFRT program featured a weekly gathering, inclusive of complementary transportation, meal, and childcare in the library’s large conference room, located in a corridor adjacent to the building entrance and reference/check-out area. Prior to each weekly gathering, families received a set of two picture books to take home and read together. During the library sessions, families participated in an interactive read-aloud of the picture books (Sipe, 2000) followed by a Socratic discussion intended to prompt open-ended, intergenerational conversations about the narratives and illustrations of the books.

After completing the first PTFRT six-week series, we recognized that while engaging, the PTFRT protocol did not yield the home-like environment we had envisioned for immigrant families. We knew we had to shift the physical space, change the books and stories we presented, and develop new activities in order to facilitate the kinds of experiences that build affection, meaning, and emotion

between the families and the library space, services, and materials (Didakis & Phillips, 2013). Our first step was to coordinate with the library staff to invite families into the heart of the library where the children's collection and activity room were located. We all agreed that the conference rooms, while more spacious, were impersonal and disconnected from the library's materials and services for families. We committed to arriving early each week to transform the activity room, which had glass windows and a view of the children's area, into an inviting space for family dining, activities, and discussions.

Second, Denise began to renovate the PTFRT program, materials, and activities to cultivate a more welcoming, home-like experience for children and adults at all levels of literacy and language proficiency. Having observed that some of the picture books provided in the PTFRT kit and some of the discussion prompts in the manual were neither inclusive nor responsive to immigrant families' experiences, Denise secured outside grant funding. She substituted many of the book sets with more culturally and linguistically relevant Latinx picture books in both Spanish and English. For example, in place of the PTFRT selection, *The Widow's Broom* (Van Allsburg, 1992), she purchased *Playing Loteria / El juego de la lotería* (Lainez, 2005). Denise paired this book with *The Upside Down Boy / El niño de cabeza* (Herrera, 2000) for one of the library sessions. As we have described elsewhere:

In *The Upside Down Boy*, Herrera remembers his childhood experience of feeling marginalized as a linguistic/cultural outsider in a monolingual, English-speaking U.S. classroom. By contrast, in *Playing Loteria*, Láinez depicts an English-dominant boy's travel to Mexico to visit his grandmother, who also happens to be the announcer for a weekly game of Lotería. In the story, the un-named protagonist must mediate his feelings of segregation from his heritage language and culture when he visits his grandmother.

The pairing of the two books provided a platform for the children to make visible their linguistic knowledge and resources and for the adults to discuss with their families and each other the significance of their language heritage. To help facilitate the conversation, we asked the children and parents to write a note to each of the boys in the stories and to offer some advice based on personal experience (Dávila, Noguerón, & Vázquez-Domínguez, 2017, p. 38).

In addition to replacing several of the PTFRT books and activities, Denise invited another bilingual colleague, Silvia, to join the team as one of the *Cuentos* facilitators. Denise garnered the help of local vendors and service providers to support other elements of the newly revised program. She met frequently with community members who valued the library's services and wanted to assist in fostering a welcoming experience to immigrant families.

The owner of the bus service offered a discount to Denise to accommodate her grant budget in providing families' transportation to and from the library. At the local supermarket, one of the clerks convinced her colleagues in the deli department – as a complementary service to *Cuentos* families – to prepare all of the foods Denise collected in her grocery basket. While Denise paid for aluminum trays, boxes of spaghetti, jars of sauce, and bags of salad, she left the market with a hot meal ready to serve dozens of children and adults. Without the support of individuals in the neighborhood, we could not have accommodated all of the families who participated in the program.

Co-constructing a Safe Environment for Latinx Families

Together, the three of us (Denise, Silvia, and Max) introduced the new *Cuentos* program to the community as a cultural celebration rather than a remedial program for struggling readers of English. We conducted the sessions entirely in Spanish, using English only when necessary. We collaborated with the library staff to revise the recruitment narrative for local elementary schools. The new *Cuentos* program welcomed children and adults to come together to read, share, and discuss stories that not only resonated with their experiences but also helped to foster a sense of community among Spanish-speaking families in an English-dominant region of the country.

The popularity of the *Cuentos* series spread by word-of-mouth. After a few sessions, little effort was needed to recruit new families. An average of 9-14 families with children ages 4-10 participated in each of the six-week series. In total, over the course of four years, the programs served nearly 60 families and more than 130 children ages 3 and above. Most parents were first-generation immigrants from rural regions in southern México and the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, and Estado de México. A few families were also from Honduras, El Salvador, and Perú. Most of the younger children (under age 8) were born in the United States, although some of their older siblings were not.

Our design and implementation of the *Cuentos* program was informed by scholarship, which demonstrates that bicultural and bilingual facilitators are invaluable to guiding and mediating meaningful dialogues with the staff and within the constructs of public institutions like schools and libraries (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubíaga, 2012). We wanted families to feel as though their voices mattered so that we could build a reciprocal relationship based on trust and support (Alvarez & Alvarez, 2016). Thus, we used Spanish to foster a sense of familiarity and belonging among immigrant families who had few, if any, prior experiences at the local library.

Participant Reflections on the Cuentos Program

Via the *Cuentos* program, we learned that many Latinx parents in the community shared with their children stories from their everyday experiences intended to foster a sense of cultural identity (Villenas et al., 2006). We were interested in learning more about the families' backgrounds and experiences and wanted to evaluate the efficacy of our program. We conducted open-ended interviews in which we asked participants to tell us about their family histories, their experiences at the library, and the books they enjoyed reading with us. Here, we highlight excerpts from the interviews Max conducted with some of the families.

Rosa (all participant names are pseudonyms), a mother of two girls, immigrated to the U.S. with her two sisters from Michoacán, México. In 2005, she married and had her first child in Georgia. Rosa liked the *Cuentos* program not only because “*está en español y no quiero que mis hijas pierdan el idioma / it is in Spanish and I do not want my children to lose that language,*” but because “*No tengo la oportunidad de leer libros en español / I do not have the chance to read books in Spanish.*” She explained that where she lives in Georgia, “*no tenemos libros con nuestras historias [de México] y el programa nos ayuda con eso. / we do not have books with our own stories [from México] and the program facilitates that.*”

Rosa most enjoyed one of the culturally relevant picture books:

de la Virgen de Guadalupe porque a mis hijas les gusta leer de ella y también participan en eventos religiosos para honrarla, por eso nos gusta que haya un libro de ella. / about la Virgen de Guadalupe [The Beautiful Lady / La hermosa Señora: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Mora, 2012)] because my children like reading about her a lot and they participate in religious events to honor her, so it is great there is a book about her.

For Rosa, having access to Spanish-language picture books that include familiar content is extremely important to sustain her children's primary language and cultural identity.

Magdalena, another mother of two children who participated during the second round of the *Cuentos* program, was also from Michoacán, México. When she first immigrated to the U.S., she started working with her sister and brother at different restaurants in Tennessee. She prepared Mexican and Tex-Mex dishes as well as Japanese and Chinese food. She decided to migrate to the U.S. because of the lack of opportunities in Michoacán and her familial connections in Tennessee. She subsequently moved to north Georgia for two reasons:

Había la oportunidad de trabajar por más tiempo y ganar más dinero en la pollera que en Tennessee, y aquí hay más ayuda para mis hijos. / *There was the opportunity to work more time and to make more money at the poultry factory than in Tennessee, and here there is more help for my children at school.*

She reported that she liked the Cuentos program because “convivo con otros Latinos y porque me siento en familia, aquí en la biblioteca con ustedes y las familias. / *I interact with other Latinos and because I feel like family, here at the library with you and the families.*” In other words, she liked the home-like quality of the program environment.

As for the books, Magdalena added that the stories she enjoyed reading were “el cuento de los tamales porque mis hijos ven cómo se hacen y después quieren ayudarme. / *the tamales one [¡Qué montón de tamales!/ Too Many Tamales (Soto, 1993)] because my children see how to make tamales and they want to help.*” Magdalena also shared that she and her children enjoyed reading “el libro de los luchadores porque a mis hijos les gustan las luchas y las máscaras. / *the one about wrestlers [Lucha Libre: The Man in the Silver Mask (Garza, 2005)] because my children like wrestling and the wrestling masks.*”

Each of these picture book stories features a child protagonist who engages with her/his extended family. During each session, we invited families to participate in an activity associated with the week’s featured book(s). For example, on the night we discussed *Lucha Libre*, the children and parents designed their own wrestling masks (see Image 1). For many, as Magdalena indicated, engaging in the stories and activities offered a way to connect with other Latinx families around culturally familiar topics.



Image 1. Latinx children coloring their wrestling masks

Gabriella, who also attended the *Cuentos* program with her young daughter, was in agreement with Magdalena. She said that she enjoyed the program because it “reúne a las familias en casa y en la comunidad cuando vamos a la biblioteca / *keeps families together at home and as a community at the library.*”

Moreover, “Cuando leo con mi hija mi esposo también lee con nosotros y a veces mi hermana y mi mamá / *When I read with my daughter my husband joins us and sometimes my sister and my mother do too.*” Gabriella also appreciated “los libros bilingües y el hecho que nos dieron de cenar porque ya no me preocupé de eso ese día / *the bilingual books and the fact that you provided us with food so we did not have to worry about dinner on that day.*” For Gabriella, familial and community-building experiences were key to her family’s participation.

Finally, Francisco, Miriam, and their three children, Juan, Julian, and Nancy attended the Cuentos program alongside Francisco’s brother Ignacio, sister-in-law Linda, and their two children, Anselmo and Ada. Together, they immigrated from Michoacán, and the children from both families were born in the United States. Francisco liked the program because, he said:

Yo les he contado el cuento de la llorona a mis hijos porque ellos no han ido a México y les dije que la llorona salía de noche y cuando leyeron el libro ya no salían de noche. / *I have told the story about the weeping woman [La Llorona / The Weeping Woman, retold by Hayes (2006)] to my children because they have not been in México and I told them that the weeping woman went out at night and then they read the book and did not go out at night.*

Ignacio added:

Antes, yo leía los libros sin entender de qué eran y al final no sabía lo que traía el libro. Ahora leo con mis hijos y eso hace que sepa de qué es el libro, el interesarme por la historia. Ahora ya disfruto el libro, de lo que trata. Y el ver cómo leen los libros me motiva más a leer con mis hijos. / *Before, I read the books without understanding them and at the end I did not know what the book was about. Now, I read with my children and that makes me care about the story, we pay attention to the story. Now, I enjoy the book, the story. And to see how you read the books motivates me more to read with my children.*

For Francisco and Ignacio, having access to picture books with stories from their childhoods not only inspired them to read with their children but to model engaged reading for their children.

Collectively, the families’ accounts of the *Cuentos* series validate the benefits of renovating traditional programs housed by public institutions to be more home-like and thereby inclusive of material and expressive elements that reflect the preferences, customs, and rituals of program inhabitants/participants. Next, we share the feedback from one of the children’s librarians regarding the transformation of the PTFRT program to the *Cuentos* program.

A Librarian's Impressions of the Program

Robin, the director of the children's library section during the *Cuentos* program, shared the following feedback with us:

I know very little Spanish, and I know that coming into the library can be extremely intimidating if you don't speak the language that the staff there speaks.... [T]he families attending... [the program] were sometimes quiet in the first session and many said they had not visited the library before. But, by the end everyone was friends and they appeared happy and excited to come to the library. I think... [the program] helps make the library seem more accessible and less intimidating. And, I think it made me seem less intimidating, too! I don't often think I come across that way, but, I think my being there so families could get to know me, and the families learning that I am there to help them probably made them more willing to come to the library and ask for help. I also noted that there were many families that I continued to see using the library regularly after... [the program] was over, and they would often come in to say hello when they were there.

As described by Robin, the library and the staff can be intimidating for immigrant families who are not proficient in English. However, the fact that the library staff valued the Latinx culture/practices and were fellow participants in the *Cuentos* program helped families to feel safe and welcomed in the community space, thus promoting confidence with the library staff and with the library services. Our findings correspond with the work of Alvarez & Alvarez (2016), who found that co-constructing safe and welcoming environments is necessary to building trust and confidence among immigrant families who participate in library programs.

Moreover, Robin's description reinforces the ideas of Heidegger (1975) and Didakis and Phillips (2013), which we introduced earlier. In order for a house to become a home, a series of interactions between the space and the individuals are needed so that the space absorbs the preferences, particularities, and the history of the individuals. Such interactions were possible in the *Cuentos* program because in each session, we welcomed and reinforced the families' linguistic and cultural repertoires (Dávila, Noguerón, & Vázquez-Domínguez, 2017).

Although the *Cuentos* program was successful at our library setting and similar programs are successful in states with larger Latinx populations (see Naidoo & Scherrer, 2016), more public institutions need

such programs to demonstrate that immigrant families are valued members of their communities. As described by Robin:

I am happy [the program] was offering a service to an underserved population.... [It] made them [immigrant families] aware of the services that are available to them, totally free. It also brought families together in a way they had not experienced often... Most of the families wrote in the initial survey that they “rarely” all read books together as a family before the program, and in the exit survey, almost all of them said they read books together as a family every day. Many of them added that they felt like reading together brought them closer together as a family. That made my heart really happy.

One of the main goals of the program was to encourage local immigrant families to visit the library and engage in bilingual activities. In the *Cuentos* program, Latinx parents and their children started forming a community in which their language and culture were valued and respected. This program is in accordance with the UNICEF (2007) framework for the realization of children’s right to education, which affirms that every child has the right to an education that addresses the child’s own culture. In order to fulfill the UNICEF framework, libraries and schools in general should be safe spaces for all community members and their children, and should be equipped with cultural resources representing the diversity of the population in the community.

Lessons Learned

The parents and children were consistent in their participation in the *Cuentos* program. As described in the interview excerpts, they saw many benefits. First, they had access to books in both Spanish and English for use at home and in the *Cuentos* program. Second, the Latinx stories/traditions in the books were culturally relevant, containing content the parents wanted their children to learn about their heritage. Third, at the *Cuentos* program families had the chance to meet and interact with other Latinx families, share their experiences, and create a sense of community. Finally, parents viewed the program as a resource for helping children to practice and maintain their Spanish-language abilities and for helping the adults to facilitate early literacy development by learning to read and discuss books with their children.

The opportunities and benefits identified by the families illustrate the significant roles libraries and literacy development programs play in fostering a sense of community and belonging among

immigrant families. Just as we adapted a nationally recognized family literacy program to support the needs of Spanish-speaking immigrant families in Georgia, our hope is that other libraries will use the *Cuentos* program as a blueprint for constructing a program that feels like home to the immigrant families in their communities. Just as building a house requires a dedicated plan of action, the process for constructing a home-like atmosphere in the library takes time and energy in connecting individuals, families, and their resources to other community members (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubiaga, 2012). Didakis and Phillips (2013) suggest that, “An accumulative process of domestic time and experience builds hidden layers of meaning, affection and emotion between the space and inhabitant” (p. 308). The meanings, affections, and emotions we tried to co-construct with Latinx parents and children were always with the goal to form a home at the library.

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Denise Dávila is an Assistant Professor of Literacy and Children's Literature at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the inclusion of Latinx and diverse children's literature in intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and community-based literacy programs for children and families.



Silvia Nogueroń-Liu is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. In her instruction and scholarship, Dr. Nogueroń-Liu aims to create learning environments where teachers capitalize on the knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Her projects—conducted in traditional and new migration settings—document the affordances of digital resources for Latino families and the transnational funds of knowledge parents mobilize in literacy practices with young children.