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Constructing Literacy Spaces in Low-Income Homes and Communities: A Study of Two Latino First Graders and Their Families

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Abstract

This article describes a research study using an ethnographic approach and sociocultural theory with a spatial perspective to explore the ways that two Latino children, with the mediation of their families, constructed literacy spaces in their homes and communities. The families lived in low-income neighborhoods, and their school district was identified as urban emergent. Challenging the profiling of children, families, and neighborhoods, the article details how the children and families expressed their agency by building on the affordances of their homes, neighborhoods, and city. Implications for practice include foregrounding children's expertise and creating collaborations between schools and community settings.

Keywords

reading, identity, elementary school, urban, social, culturally relevant pedagogy, ethnography, Hispanic students, urban education, teacher education, education, literacy, language

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Introduction

In an article describing their "ecological study of four neighborhoods," Neuman and Celano (2001) challenge the simplistic but common assumptions that the characteristics of families determine children's achievements in literacy and that all families have equal access to literacy resources. Their study investigating the affordances of low- and middle-income urban neighborhoods in terms of "access to print" looked at access to books, signage, and other reading materials, as well as public places for reading and concluded that

> [t]here were . . . major and striking differences at almost all levels between neighborhoods of different income. These data indicate that children from middle-income neighborhoods were likely to be deluged with a wide variety of reading materials. However, children from poor neighborhoods would have to *aggressively and persistently* seek them out. (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 15, emphasis added)

In the study described here, the research team I led took a close look at the ways that two Latino families, living in two low-income neighborhoods similar in some ways to those described by Neuman and Celano, "aggressively and persistently" nurtured their children's developing literacy. More specifically, we asked, What are the access points to literacy in the homes and low-income neighborhoods of two young Latino boys? The primary participants in the study were Benny and Miguel,[1] emerging bilinguals enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) first-grade class. Benny's family was Puerto Rican and Miguel's had emigrated from El Salvador and both started the year of the study as 6-year-olds.

Given the rich but small body of research literature investigating the literacy experiences of Latino children beyond the schools walls (Spencer, Knobel, & Lankshear, 2010) and the focus of most of this research on interactions in the home or a single community site (see, for example, Baird, Kibler, & Palacios, 2015; Baquedano-López, 2016; González, 2005; Valdés, 1996), our intent was (a) to broaden the scope of inquiry to include a range of urban locations the families visited in their daily lives as well as their two homes and (b) to move beyond generalizations about low-income urban neighborhoods and families toward a counter-narrative, focusing on Latino families. We planned to investigate both the places outside of school, in their homes and communities, where the two children and their families accessed literacy resources and the formal and informal literacy interactions that they constructed there. In this way, we hoped to problematize the common privileging of school-centered literacy and education, challenge the discriminatory

profiling of Latino children, families, and neighborhoods grounded in deficit stereotypes (Long, Volk, López-Robertson, & Haney, 2014), and highlight their agency. What we learned also broadened our perspectives on young children's literacy and the affordances and complexities of their urban neighborhoods and worlds and led us to better understand what we came to call their "literacy spaces."[2]

This article provides details of our work, including discussions of our conceptual understandings and the relevant literature; the methods we used, the urban contexts of the city, school, and neighborhoods; what we found and what we learned; and implications for practice in urban schools.

Starting Points and Understandings

The study was grounded in sociocultural theory which puts "culture in the middle" (Cole, 1996, p. 116) by exploring the complex "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) among the social and cultural understandings and practices constructed by human actors. Children are positioned as active agents, expert and intentional, who construct their own learning, often with skilled mediation from family and community members (Long, Volk, & Gregory, 2007; Lytra, Volk, & Gregory, 2016).

Drawing on my previous research using this theoretical approach (Volk & de Acosta, 2003; Volk & Long, 2005) and the research of others on Latino families (González, 2005; Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 2005), we focused on the strengths and resources of the children and their families, rather than their needs and alleged deficits as often described in the dominant discourse (Arzubiaga, Ceja, & Artiles, 2000). We knew that many Latino children had rich literacy lives—often invisible to teachers in urban schools or dismissed as irrelevant to school learning—and that they and their families possessed expertise and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Long et al., 2007; Spencer et al., 2010) that could serve as the basis for a culturally relevant curriculum (Boardman et al., 2014; Gay, 2010)

Much of the related literature on the out-of-school literacy experiences of children from a range of language and cultural groups is also grounded in the funds of knowledge perspective (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Spencer et al., 2010). It tends to focus on learning in the home and is divided between studies that look at children's formal learning experiences of school-related information and skills and more informal learning involving popular culture and/or new technologies. Other work looks at children's out-of-school learning in only one setting such as religious contexts or community schools emphasizing language and culture (Gregory & Kenner, 2010; Lytra et al., 2016).

The recent literature on literacy provided additional understandings for our work. First, literacy has come to be defined broadly as "meaning making practices" (Pahl & Burnett, 2013, p. 4) with a focus on what people do and how they understand what they do. Second, people have facility with multiple literacies in differing contexts, using a range of meaning-making practices involving written, oral, gestural, digital, and visual forms (Li, 2008; Lytra et al., 2016). Third, literacy has been described as a situated, sociocultural practice that is embedded in and shaped by social and cultural contexts (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). And fourth, children create syncretic literacies when they draw on literacies from school, home, popular culture, the Internet, and religious and other community settings to create new forms and practices. Often, they blur the boundaries between these as they take texts and practices from one place to reinvent in another (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Gregory, Volk, & Long, 2013; Volk, 2013).

As we continued to study the literature, we learned from "the spatial turn" (Comber, 2016; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Mills & Comber, 2013; Pahl & Burnett, 2013; Tejeda, 2000) in the relevant research that the sociocultural theory used fruitfully for years to conceptualize context as the interplay of social and cultural elements was critiqued for neglecting spatial elements, that is, the material resources and affordances of the places where literacy interactions are constructed, as well as the ways these are taken up (Arzubiaga, Brinkerhoff, & Seeley, 2015; Nichols, Rowsell, Nixon, & Rainbird, 2012; Pahl & Burnett, 2013). We came to understand that there is a distinction between *places* as the actual locations while *spaces* are constructed by human actors who are, in turn, shaped by those spaces in fluid and reciprocal processes. Little research exists on Latino families or on families with young children drawing on sociocultural theory extended to include this spatial perspective (Arzubiaga et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2012; Tejeda, 2000). No other studies drawing on this stance that explore the literacy practices of urban Latino families of young children were identified.

With our work grounded in these conceptualizations and this literature, and given the gaps in the literature, our focus came to be on literacy spaces in the children's homes and communities where they, their families, and community members constructed spaces for school-related and informal literacies, taking advantage of the material conditions and possibilities of those places, within their cultural and social contexts. We aimed to identify, privilege, and learn from their literacies and literacy spaces.

Methods of Study

The study was conducted using an ethnographic approach, exploring the perspectives and practices of the two boys and their families. Consistent with the

"spatial turn" in the literature, this was a "multisited" ethnography (Pahl & Burnett, 2013, p. 3). To collect data across multiple sites in and beyond the families' urban neighborhoods, the research assistants, consultant, and I used participant observation; interviews with the parents, siblings, focal children, and with members of community literacy spaces; audio recording; and still photography and collected literacy artifacts. We also worked with the families to develop maps detailing places where literacy interactions occurred and networks of people who supported the children's developing literacy.

After observing in the ESL classroom once a week for the fall semester, initially for the entire day, then for the morning session during literacy instruction, selecting two Latino boys with no identified learning challenges, and obtaining consent from their families, the research assistants and I visited the families once a month for 2 to 4 hours from January to July. During the visits, we spent time with them at home and followed them into community places they regularly visited. We observed and participated in the activities and took photographs when appropriate. We also learned about other literacy spaces we were not able to observe.

The network and community mapping interviews took place in March and were used to guide the subsequent data collection and to inform the ongoing analysis. Semi-structured interviews with parents and siblings took place in June and July. Benny and Miguel were invited to join these and were asked to draw themselves reading in their favorite location. Informal conversations with these participants and with extended family members took place during the entire research process. Semi-structured interviews with community members took place in July.

The data analysis was multilayered (Gregory & Williams, 2000), embedding turns in literacy interactions which were embedded in spatial, social, and cultural contexts. As is typical of ethnographic research (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), the overall process was recursive. It began with an initial question about places that was both refined and expanded to focus on spaces. As we continued to review the literature and conducted the data collection and analysis, these processes informed each other. As we collected information, we began to develop a tentative analysis and the data analysis sometimes drove us to collect additional data.

Beginning in July, we reviewed transcripts and field notes, identifying patterns and themes as well as outliers as they emerged from multiple iterations in an inductive and reflexive process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Specifically, we identified the locations and the literacy interactions, putting data into these "mundane categories" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 202) in a first coding cycle (Saldaña, 2013). Then, because our interest in spaces directed us to investigate the construction of literacies within those locations, we identified, classified, and reclassified the elements

of spaces and eventually coded literacy places, materials resources, and the affordances, actors, and actions in literacy spaces moving horizontally through the data. The results of these subsequent coding cycles (Saldaña, 2013) can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 that are shared in the presentation of the findings. As insights developed, we linked them to what we knew from the relevant literature and to our theoretical stance, moving vertically to greater abstraction and tentative understandings (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) about the affordances of neighborhoods and literacy spaces.

Throughout the analysis process, we wove together the participants' perspectives, contexts, and histories; the literature; and our perspectives (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Our experiences and identities were relevant. I am a White, Spanish-speaking teacher educator who has lived in Latin American, and the consultant is Latina, an education professional and researcher, originally from Argentina; we both have experience working in the communities studied. The research assistants were college students, Mexican American and Puerto Rican and all bilingual, who also participated in the data analysis along with the classroom teacher who is Puerto Rican and bilingual. Working with these various viewpoints, we attempted to illuminate aspects of the children's literacy lives and insider perspectives as well as our own etic analyses (James, 2001).

Contexts: The City, Neighborhoods, and School

Benny and Miguel lived in Midwest City, a large Rust Belt city with substantial Eastern European, African American, Puerto Rican, and growing Central American, Arab, and Asian communities. The city had an estimated population of 389,521 in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), and public school enrollment was 38,695 in 2015 (O'Donnell, 2015). As of the fall 2016, the school population was 66.9% African American, 14.4% Latino, and 14.6% Caucasian (Cleveland Metropolitan School District, 2016). The district, though gaining in students after years of declining enrollment, had a large budget shortfall in 2016 (O'Donnell, 2015). Children in Benny and Miguel's school spoke more than 11 languages and the latest state report card indicated that 49.1% of the children in the school had passed the state test, resulting in a rating of F (State Report Card, 2015).

In sum, the district could be identified as *urban*, meeting criteria of size, diversity, and challenged resources for an urban education system (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). More specifically, Milner's (2012) typology of urban education contexts, based on the characteristics of the cities not the alleged deficits of the students, provided a useful way of characterizing this urban district. Using Milner's (2012) definitions,[3] Benny and Miguel's school district was

identified as *urban emergent*, located in a midsize city that has "*some* of the same characteristics and *sometimes* challenges as urban intensive schools and districts in terms of resources, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students" (p. 560, emphasis added). Although *urban declining* rather than urban emergent might be a more accurate label today for this Rust Belt city characterized by a shrinking population and industrial base as well as efforts to reverse this trend, the identification of the district as one in flux with characteristics of the much larger city it once was and aspirations to redevelop was appropriate.

Benny and Miguel's school and homes were located in adjacent low-income neighborhoods in Midwest City. Benny lived in Fountains, two blocks from the school in a subsidized apartment. The neighborhood was bounded by busy streets and a transportation hub. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012)[4] (R. Piiparinen, Center for Population Dynamics, College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University, personal communication, September 30, 2015) indicate that a little more than half of the people living in the neighborhood were Caucasian (56%), with substantial African American (32%) and Latino (20%) populations. The poverty level was 44%, 10 percentage points higher than that of the city as a whole (34%). Miguel lived in Lorimar, several blocks away from the school on a street lined with multistory wood frame homes like his own. There, the Latino population was slightly higher (23%) than in Fountains, the Caucasian population higher (69%), the African American population lower (23%), and the poverty level was less though still substantial (31%). Both neighborhoods had about double the percent of Latinos than the city as a whole (10%), and both had low levels of educational attainment with 32% and 28%, respectively, without a high school diploma.

In Neuman and Celano's (2001) study, the two low-income neighborhoods were similar in some ways to Fountains and Lorimar, different in others, emphasizing the diversity among neighborhoods. In Kensington, the population was 65% Caucasian, 26% Latino, and 6% African American with a poverty rate of 46%, similar to that in Fountains. In Kingsessing, the population was 82% African American and 10% Caucasian with a poverty rate of 90%, much higher than in either neighborhood in this study. In Kensington and Kingsessing, 4% and 30%, respectively, were without a high school diploma, the latter similar to the rates in Fountains and Lorimar despite their much lower poverty rates.

These figures indicate that Benny and Miguel's neighborhoods included diverse racial and cultural groups and could be defined as "high poverty," according to guidelines noted in a recent Brookings Institution report (Kneebone & Holmes, 2016). Nevertheless, the poverty rates in these

neighborhoods were just above and just below the cutoff of 40% which, again according to the report, is typically used to indicate the "concentrated poverty rate." Thus, faced with less concentrated poverty and in light of the *urban emergent* label noted above, residents in these neighborhoods may have had more possibilities and resources with fewer challenges which may have been of a lesser scope and complexity than exist in other neighborhoods such as Neuman and Celano's (2001) Kingsessing with a 90% poverty rate.

Our aim in the study reported on here was to contribute to a counter-narrative by looking beyond these numbers and the well-documented challenges of poor neighborhoods at the possibilities and affordances (Neuman, 2009; Ulluci & Howard, 2015). We wanted to see what two Latino families actually did to support their children's developing literacy within these contexts, to see the assets and agency as well as similarities and differences between the families (Milner, 2012, 2013; Wodtke, Elwert, & Harding, 2012).

The Boys and Their Families

Benny lived with his 4-year-old brother and grandmother who became his legal guardian when he was an infant and his mother was charged with neglect. A church sister and her three children shared their small apartment for several months and extended family members lived nearby. Benny's grandmother, Doña[5] Nydia Santos, had received her high school diploma in Puerto Rico and had moved to the mainland about 25 years before. She spoke English with ease. Benny was fluent in Spanish and English, and the family spoke primarily Spanish among themselves. In school, Benny was eligible for the free lunch for low-income families. Participation in a Spanish Pentecostal church was at the center of the family's life.

Miguel lived with his mother, father, grandfather, and 10-year-old sister. His parents, Felipe Fernández and Nelly Rosado,[6] attended high school for several years in El Salvador and arrived in the city 18 and 12 years before, respectively. Don Fernández spoke some English, Doña Rosado was never observed to speak English, and Miguel's sister Gina was fluent in both. Miguel spoke Spanish with his family and was learning English in school. Doña Rosado worked cleaning offices and then at a garden nursery. Don Fernández was undocumented; he worked cleaning offices and then became unemployed though was always busy fixing cars, gardening, and driving his children to school. Miguel's grandfather who worked in a recycling plant explained that he had never attended school in El Salvador and could not read. Like Benny, Miguel was eligible for the free school lunch. The family spent much time together enjoying the affordances of the city and its Central American community.

In their ESL classroom in which all instruction was in English, Benny was in the top reading group and Miguel was in the average group, based in part on their scores on a standardized test. When asked what he thought about school, Benny, an enthusiastic participant in lessons, effused, "It's the best!" Miguel declared that he only liked play times in school. He was described by his teacher as "flourishing" and her "little soldier" for his obedience and quiet demeanor.

The boys' teacher, Mrs. Martin, Puerto Rican and bilingual, was effective at integrating the children's lives and cultures into lessons. An ESL teacher and bilingual aides assisted in working with the children who were speakers of Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Romanian, and Cambodian. Mrs. Martin's approach to teaching literacy integrated a meaning-making approach with a focus on phonics, using children's literature and open-ended discussions as well as district-mandated workbooks and computer programs.

What Did We Find?

The following section illustrates the construction of some representative literacy spaces by Benny and Miguel and their families in their homes and communities. The literacy practices of the two boys and the resources and affordances of the spaces they created are highlighted.

In contrast, both to the stereotype that there are few literacy resources in low-income homes and to studies such as Neuman and Celano's (2001) that found few "reading materials" in such neighborhoods, this investigation found that the boys and their families had created rich literacy spaces that reflected their lives and interests. In addition to workbooks, worksheets, and books brought from school for homework, the families had books of their own, library books, newspapers, folders of student awards and report cards, school and city notices and questionnaires, advertising flyers, lists, cookbooks and recipes, games with instructions, photo albums, Bibles and religious books, televisions and TV schedules, soccer magazines, computers, videotapes, electronic games, CD players and CDs, iPods, and global positioning system (GPS) devices among others. Family photographs were displayed along with sayings on plaques, the children's art work, and artifacts such as a model plane purchased at an air show. Crayons, markers, and pencils were available in both homes. Miguel owned one children's book about cars and a Pokémon activity book as well as a collection of science gadgets (magnetic "gravity" balls, transformers, compass, plastic pouch with fish, remote controlled car). Benny had about 10 children's books in his room (including one written by his father when he was in school) along with a Pokémon activity book and a young people's Bible while dictionaries and

other important volumes were kept on a high shelf. As there were no book stores in his neighborhood, his grandmother took him to secondhand stores to purchase books, looking especially for ones with maps, one of his passions. Both boys owned a DS (dual-screen hand-held game console) and other electronic toys and games.

Miguel's Literacy Spaces

Table 1 provides information on a selection of literacy spaces in Miguel's home and community, highlighting material resources and the affordances and actions identified in the spaces, including Miguel's participation and that of the people who mediated his participation.

For Miguel, homework was one important way to engage with literacy in the space of his home. Miguel's sister, Gina, helped because of her fluency in English. She explained that when she had attended bilingual classes in the primary years, her mother had helped her with her homework in Spanish. Now she took her turn to help her brother, completing the tasks with confidence and patience. Miguel's mother and grandfather made sure that homework was completed everyday and Doña Rosado checked Miguel's backpack to make sure that it was returned to school.

To complete the homework, Gina and Miguel sat at the dining room table, using pencils, crayons, paper, or scissors stored in the cabinet there. First, either Miguel read the instructions on his own or Gina read them in English, asking whether he understood. Then, Miguel proceeded to complete the tasks while Gina provided prompts if he hesitated, scaffolding the sounding out of words and rarely providing them. They moved through the tasks without interruption and without words of praise from Gina.

For Miguel, the intersection of virtual and electronic worlds with popular culture was also an important literacy space. He frequently played Pokémon games on his DS, learning how to complete the levels by reading menus embedded in the game, through trial and error, and using information gained from the cohort of boys in his class who were also Pokémon fans. Miguel watched Pokémon programs on television, cartoons, Nickelodeon, and cooking shows and, according to his sister, had learned a lot of English watching them. He was observed autotuning the television with ease to set the TV to turn on for his favorite programs. Although the family had a computer, it was in Gina's room and she used it for homework. There was no Internet access, and Miguel was not known to use it.

Miguel and his family usually spent the weekends enjoying places and events in the city together. They went fishing and shopping, saw air shows, went to the mall to play video games, and to restaurants. The children played

Table 1. A Selection of Literacy Spaces in Miguel's Home and Community.

Literacy places	Material resources	Affordances, actions, and actors in literacy spaces
Living room and bedroom (school)	TV, DS and 3DS, Pokémon, books, TV schedules, soccer magazine, folders of children's awards, photos, newspapers, notices, cookbooks, lists, Bible, car	Miguel: Watched English TV, taught self to autotune TV, played Pokémon on DS Gina: Used computer for school work, watched TV, studied Bible, read YA books Parents: Watched Spanish TV, used print materials and modeled use, provided TV, time, and comfortable space; gave DS and 3DS as gifts School peers: Provided Pokémon advice
Dining table (school)	Homework, school book, pencil, paper, scissors, crayons, etc.	Miguel: Followed written directions plus Gina and teacher's verbal directions, completed work Gina: Read directions, used prompts Mother: Established expectations for completing work and for Gina and Grandfather, set time and space, checked completion and backpack, provided paper, pencils, etc. Grandfather: Monitored homework time
Bedroom (rec center)	Photos from study, family album and camera used to record family events	Miguel: Created album with photos of self and Gina at rec center from study Mother: Created original album
Living and bedroom (recycling plant)	Science gadgets, GPS	Miguel: Experimented with gadgets, followed others' directions Grandfather: Provided gadgets from work at recycling plant, gave oral instructions Father: Shared GPS, gave oral instructions

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Literacy places	Material resources	Affordances, actions, and actors in literacy spaces
Kitchen and back porch	Baby birds, cage, bag of bird seed	Miguel and Gina: Participated in shopping, named birds, fed and cared for birds, read instructions on seed bag Mother: Helped Miguel and Gina care for birds, took them shopping for equipment and food, gave oral instructions and responsibilities
Back yard (mother's workplace and El Salvador)	Garden, plants (cilantro, tomatoes, corn, etc.), tools	Miguel and Gina: Helped in garden Father: Created garden, talked of former life in el campo (the countryside), gave oral instructions Mother: Brought home plants from work at nursery
Public library	Books, computers and games, library card and application form, car	Miguel: Played computer games and got library card Gina: Provided assistance with games and card, checked out YA book Father: Drove to library twice monthly, searched for book on war in El Salvador
Grocery Store	Food packages, grocery cart, boxes, car	Miguel: Looked for food items to put in cart, found favorite items and boxes for carrying food, inserted coin to rent cart Gina: Looked for food items, assisted Miguel Parents: Shopped, gave oral instructions and responsibilities
Restaurant(s)	Menu, food, car	Miguel: Ordered favorite dish Father and Gina: Read menu to select items, read menu aloud to Miguel
Mall	Video games, game from Chuckie Cheese, car	Miguel: Played video games, won game, read directions and played Gina and father: Played and assisted Miguel

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Literacy places	Material resources	Affordances, actions, and actors in literacy spaces
Lake	Rented boat, fishing equipment, car	Miguel: Fished Father: Modeled and gave oral instructions, drove to lake
North Carolina and en route	GPS, car	Miguel: Sat in car, watched GPS, helped make tamales, played with cousins Family: Drove to family Christmas reunion Extended family: Organized reunion
Rec center (winter)	Television and televised soccer games, ping pong and Nintendo, car	Miguel: Watched soccer games on TV, played games with peers and followed rules Family: Drove together to rec center, watched games with other families
Rec center (summer)	Central American soccer league, scheduled by rec center director, shelter, stands, team jerseys, Central American food vendor, playground equipment, bikes, car	Miguel: Played and biked with Gina and friends, purchased food with money from Mother Gina: Played with Miguel and friends, sat with women Children: Played with Miguel and Gina Father and Mother: Drove to rec center, brought Miguel and Gina's bikes, provided money for buying snacks Father, other men, teenagers: Watched soccer games Women: Talked at tables, bought food for selves and children Adults and older children: Watched smallest children

Note. DS = dual-screen hand-held game console; GPS = global positioning system.

outside, biked, and visited cousins while their father cultivated a vegetable garden and built a patio and their mother helped them care for two pet birds. Two community literacy spaces stood out. About twice a month, Don Fernández took Miguel and Gina to the local public library. Although English was the primary language used there, there was a shelf of children's books in Spanish. Typically, Miguel avoided books and waited his turn to use the computers to play games in English. When his turn came, he sat at the computer with Gina who helped him select games and provided instructions. Although she controlled the mouse at first, he quickly took over. During our visit to the library with them, Don Fernández watched the children, then searched for a book on the civil war in El Salvador. When the children's computer time was up, Gina checked out a chapter book and helped Miguel get a library card so that he would be able to sign for a computer in the future.

During the winter, Miguel was driven to the local recreation center by his father to play ping pong and Nintendo with other boys while the whole family went there to watch soccer games on Spanish television with other families. Most weekends in the summer, they went to the rec center when the local Central American soccer league was sponsoring games. In the field, picnic, and play areas, the participants created a bilingual space for Central American identity with multiple literacies meaningful to those who could read them. This space stood in contrast to the inside of the center that was papered with signs in English and where only English was spoken. Some children and adults wore T-shirts noting their countries of origin and soccer paraphernalia with team names. Don Fernández along with other men and some teenagers watched knowledgably from the bleachers as teams representing different countries in distinctive jerseys played. Doña Rosado sat with other women in the picnic shelter, speaking Spanish and purchasing elote (roasted corn), horchata (a rice drink), mango, paletas (popsicles), grilled meat, and other Central American snacks. Miguel and Gina were given money to buy food, rode their bikes, played on the playground equipment, and played games with other children, usually speaking English.

We took photographs of these activities, taking care to take them from a distance so that individual adults could not be identified. A few weeks later, we presented the family with some of the photographs of Miguel and Gina playing. When we later returned to their house, Miguel ran to show us a small photo album with Spiderman on the cover. In addition to the few photos that his mother had placed there previously, he had added the photos of himself and his sister, creating a book that he shared proudly (see Figure 1).

During the last interview with the family, we asked Miguel to draw a picture of himself reading, hoping to capture his special literacy space. As can be seen in Figure 2, he drew himself entering the classroom, carrying his book



Figure 1. Miguel and the book he created.

bag. Classroom elements such as the teacher's desk, calendar, board, and bell identified the location. Just as he divided school into work and play times, Miguel appeared to be narrowly identifying literacy with reading in school rather than with the many ways he engaged with literacy in the world beyond school.

Benny's Literacy Spaces

Table 2 provides information on a selection of literacy spaces in Benny's home and community, highlighting material resources, affordances, and actions of Benny and the people who mediated his participation.

During one of the first visits to their home, Doña Santos shared a picture of Benny at 4 with a Leapster, a popular electronic device used to teach

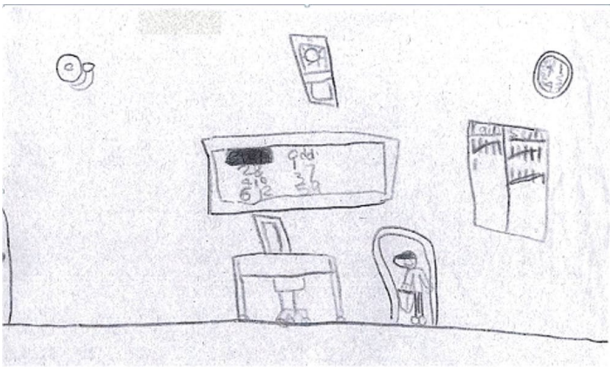


Figure 2. Miguel's drawing of his literacy space.

reading. It appeared to symbolize both Benny's prowess as a reader and her own expertise as a teacher. The strengths of both were evident in the Bible reading/Spanish reading lesson they created using Benny's young people's Bible (Lytra et al., 2016). Sitting close to his grandmother on the living room couch, Benny read Bible stories using his knowledge of Spanish and English while Doña Santos corrected his pronunciation and provided prompts. For example, when Benny—who had never been taught to read in Spanish but spoke it fluently—read "llamo" ("yamó" in Spanish) as "lámo" as if it were an English word, she provided the correct Spanish pronunciation. Doña Santos also asked comprehension questions, asking him to retell in his own words what he had read.

Benny completed his homework on his own though it was sometimes checked by his grandmother. The family's computer with Internet access was in his bedroom and, thus, the virtual world was an important literacy space for Benny that he entered sometimes on his own, sometimes with assistance. He watched cartoons, listened to Justin Bieber songs and traditional coritos (hymns), and, once he had discovered the karaoke function, was able to sing along, following the written texts. A discussion of maps in school led him to question his grandmother about Puerto Rico and she purchased a towel map of the island that she pinned to his wall. Kenny, the teenage son of the family living with them temporarily, taught Benny to use Google Maps and he explored Puerto Rico—copying the spelling of cities from the towel map—as well as his neighborhood, sites in the city he had seen on a school field trip, and a water park he had visited with his family. Benny drew maps of Puerto Rico in his school notebook and a notebook belonging to his grandmother.

Table 2. A Selection of Literacy Spaces in Benny's Home and Community.

Literacy places	Material resources	Affordances, actions, and actors in literacy spaces
Kitchen, living room	Magnetic letters on fridge, Leapster	Grandmother and Aunt: Taught letters, provided reading materials Benny: Practiced alphabet and reading
Living room	Television	Benny: Watched TV, learned to use it from practice and grandmother's instructions Grandmother: Provided TV, time and comfortable place to watch
Living room and bedroom	Young people's Bible in Spanish	Benny: Read Bible using knowledge of English and Spanish Grandmother: Provided Bible, urged Benny to read in Spanish, prompted, provided correct pronunciations, asked comprehension questions
Bedroom	Homework, school/story/religious books, pencil, paper, Pokémon books, World Wildlife Fact File, almanac, globe, school notebook, scissors, glue, newspaper	Benny: Completed homework on his own, read books, drew and labeled Pokémon characters, read directions, sought advice from school peers Grandmother: Checked completion occasionally, required Benny to cut out news items, glue in notebook and write about them, provided scissors, etc.
Cyberspace bedroom, kitchen (Church)	Computer: cartoons, hymns, and Justin Bieber songs using karaoke function, own notebook and grandmother's, pencils, paper, CDs	Benny: Learned from practice, learned hymns from church, websites, and grandmother's CDs, transcribed hymns and songs Grandmother: Provided computer, internet access, and notebook, had computer repaired, provided CDs and player, used notebook for Bible study classes
Cyberspace bedroom (Puerto Rico, school)	Computer and towel map Google Maps, notebooks, pencils	Benny: Copied from towel map, recreated maps in school and notebooks, explored Puerto Rico and sites of school field trips and family trip, church and own apartment locations Grandmother: Purchased towel map, described Puerto Rico, scaffolded Benny's writing, organized family trips, church experiences Kenny: Taught Benny Goggle Maps, scaffolded his spelling Teacher: Organized field trips

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Literacy places	Material resources	Affordances, actions, and actors in literacy spaces
Grocery Store	Grocery list, food packages, money, car	Benny: Wrote list in Spanish and English, used list to find foods and buy candy, paid by self Grandmother: Dictated list, drove to store, provided money, shopped, monitored purchases
Church (sanctuary)	Hymns and notices on LCD screen, sermon, play for children, grandmother's personal Bible and own, notebook, translation service, iPod, church clothes, car	Benny: Wore church clothes, sang, followed words in Bible and on screen, copied words of hymns, listened to Christian songs on iPod, participated in witnessing with grandmother Grandmother: Provided church clothes, facilitated church membership and participation, provided Bible, iPod, notebook Pastor: Delivered sermon, organized play for children
Church (Sunday and Bible School)	Blackboard, chalk, worksheets, pencils, paper, crayons, bulletin board, car	Benny: Raised hand to answer questions, recited prayer from memory with teacher's help, completed worksheets by writing and drawing Teacher: Asked questions and gave instructions in English, prayed with Benny in Spanish, created, distributed, and discussed worksheets Other children: Answered questions, worked on worksheets, recited prayers in unison
Doctor's office	Books, car	Benny: Looked at books in waiting room, received book as gift Grandmother: Made appointment, drove to doctor's office
Value World	Used books, car	Grandmother and Benny: Selected books Grandmother: Drove to store, helped select books, purchased books
Discount store	Clothing, car	Benny: Helped Grandmother find right-size shoes for brother Grandmother: Drove to store, asked for Benny's assistance selecting shoes

Benny's family belonged to a Pentecostal Spanish-speaking church, and this was his most important community literacy space, providing an array of experiences with oral, written, visual, and gestural texts, some constructed on his own and some mediated by others, using materials from the church and brought from home. For example, Benny and his grandmother brought their own Bibles as did many other congregants and they followed along when psalms were read. The services they attended on weekday evenings and weekends were in Spanish but, as many younger congregants spoke English more fluently, English translations were provided by a man in a booth while receivers and head phones were given to those who needed them. A large LCD screen hung over the altar with announcements and the words of hymns that were sung over and over many times by the congregation as they raised their hands in a supplicating gesture. On one occasion, Benny and his grandmother went to the front of the congregation and she testified about her recent surgery and how well he was doing in school. Together they sang a hymn. On another occasion, adults performed a skit for the children to help them understand key religious lessons. When he was bored, Benny wrote in his notebook or listened to Christian songs on his grandmother's iPod. Sunday School and weekday Bible study classes were conducted primarily in English, with children reading from and coloring worksheets and listening to short lectures outlined on the board. Prayers were recited in unison in Spanish.

When Benny was asked to draw a picture of himself reading, he hurriedly sketched himself in his room, next to his bed, with a copy of the World Wildlife Fact File (see Figure 3). Typically, he was more interested in demonstrating his self-taught ability to write in cursive than draw. And he insisted on recreating his drawing, asking to be photographed in the same position (see Figure 4). His room with his books and access to the virtual world, a place where he used multiple literacies to learn about topics of interest, was a significant literacy space for Benny.

Perspectives of Urban Community Mediators

To better understand the library, the recreation center, and the church as literacy spaces constructed by the boys and their networks of support, we conducted interviews with the children's librarian, the head of education for the church, and the rec center director. The first two clearly communicated an understanding of their roles as teachers and their places as literacy spaces. They believed that literacy is a decoding process that is mastered when children engage in the activities they provide. Both hoped to communicate with the children's schoolteachers through formal arrangements for their activities to complement school lessons. In contrast, the rec center director resisted any

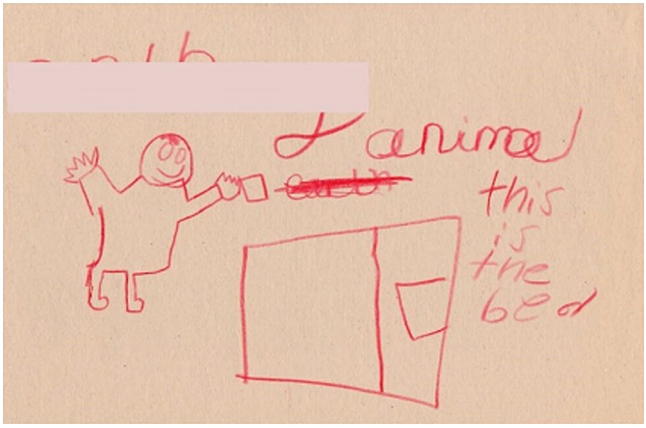


Figure 3. Benny's drawing of his literacy space.

notion that sports and recreation activities might have a connection to education and bristled when asked whether the center provided materials in Spanish. During the interview, she called her superior in the city bureaucracy and was warned that she could only answer questions about recreation, her area of expertise, not education.

What Was Learned?

This article began with Neuman and Celano's (2001) study describing the lack of literacy resources in low-income neighborhoods. Although much research has detailed similar problems as well as the "gaps" of low-income urban families, schools, and neighborhoods in general (Milner, 2013; Neuman, 2009; Waldfogel, 2012; Wodtke et al., 2012), this ethnography of two families in low-income neighborhoods in an urban emergent school district where challenges and poverty may have been moderated provides a more nuanced portrait, revealing assets and variations, and contributing to the development of a counter-narrative. This investigation provided a portrait of the agency of two Latino boys and their families in an effort to move beyond generalizations and stereotypes about the limited resources in their low-income neighborhoods or the families' educational and economic limits.

We found that there were multiple literacy spaces in the homes and communities constructed by the children and their families as they took up the



Figure 4. Photo of Benny in his literacy space (towel map of Puerto Rico in the background).

affordances of their urban neighborhoods and city. In these spaces, the children engaged in many rich and complex authentic literacies that were embedded in meaningful contexts and interactions. Although both provided formal and informal learning activities at home, Miguel's family tended to construct spaces throughout the city while Benny's spent much of their time in their church in an adjacent neighborhood. The families also created spaces where there were no places, such as the secondhand stores used as book stores by Benny and his grandmother and the representation of Central America in this Midwestern city created by Miguel, his family, and their community of compatriots. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions about causes, both boys were learning to read in English at or above grade level as they continued to develop as bilinguals.

In addition, as described in the recent "spatial turn" in the literature (Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Mills & Comber, 2013; Tejeda, 2000), literacies in the children's lives did "flow in and out of context[s]" (Pahl & Burnett, 2013, p. 7) while interweaving different practices, forms, and people in different spaces. Their literacies were multisited, challenging traditional home-school binaries. The agency of the boys, their families, and community members was evident as they generated that flow by transporting, transforming, and syncretizing literacies "aggressively and persistently" (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 15). Looking at the places alone as "access points" as we originally intended would have masked the activity and creativity of the participants and the flow they generated between spaces.

As noted, variations were revealed. Although the literacy practices of the boys were similar in some ways, they were distinct in others. The syncretizing of literacies across multiple spaces was most clearly evident, for example, in Benny's practices as he studied maps in school, online, and in his bedroom; created maps in his notebook; and looked for books with maps with his grandmother in the secondhand store. Similarly, he explored the lyrics of hymns and Justin Bieber songs online, in his bedroom, and in church and read Bible stories in Spanish and English in both spaces. His drawing of himself reading in his bedroom expressed his comfort and enjoyment as he explored his interests in his own literacy space.

Miguel's words reflected the school-centered notion of literacy as *reading in school*, and he was adamant about the dividing line between, on one hand, work as exemplified by what he did in the classroom and for homework and, on the contrary, play in multiple spaces. This was evident in his words and his drawing. Nonetheless, the literacy practices identified here present a different understanding. His Pokémon play with texts and images, for example, was practiced at home in the virtual world, on TV, and in an activity book and was discussed at school with friends. Miguel's play with computer games in the library built on knowledge developed at home with his DS and TV programs. Miguel's most creative effort at syncretizing literacies came when he put the photos of himself at the rec center into his mother's album to make a book about a play experience in the literacy space of his home.

We also came to better understand the skilled mediation of members of the children's networks of support as integral to the literacy spaces. Especially since they were young children, their engagement with literacy often relied on the assistance of family, friends, and community members. Sometimes, this help involved direct instruction and scaffolding in lessons, and other times, it was less formal as when Kenny showed Benny how to use Google Maps or Gina helped Miguel get a library card. Even when the children were

working independently, they had been transported to a literacy space in the community by adults or had relied at one time on the provision of instructions by others or materials purchased by others. This perspective frames the family and friends as agentic too, widening the roster of children's "teachers" and privileging family members' role as teachers of literacy rather than merely the recipients of instructions from school, as they are often positioned in school-centered parent involvement projects.

There were also differences between Benny and Miguel's mothers as they mediated the boys' developing literacy. Contrary to many Latino parents who see their role as getting their children to school prepared to be taught, Doña Santos acted as an "adjunct schoolteacher" (Valdés, 1996, p. 166) who provided formal instruction in the literacy space of their home. For example, she bought Benny the Leapster so he could learn to read in English and created the Bible readings/reading lessons to help him learn to read Spanish. Doña Rosado, in contrast, provided the materials, place, and mediating support for homework of her father-in-law and daughter to make sure Miguel did well in school. She also provided other opportunities for informal learning within the context of family activities at home and beyond. Thus, the mothers engaged with different literacies with their children, used a range of different practices to mediate their literacy, and understood the border between home and school in distinct ways. Both created spaces for authentic literacy learning in their homes and communities.

Although we entered this study assuming that the families had knowledge, skills, and resources, we underestimated the skillful use of multiple electronic devices by the children and their families. Due to our unexamined assumptions about limited access to new technologies in low-income Latino families, we were surprised to see the number of them in the homes, the time spent using them, and the children's expertise. The literature on children's engagement with new technologies confirms the ubiquity of these experiences and their vital role in cyberspace as a literacy space for children (Marsh, 2014; Wohlwend, 2010).

The role of family cars was also a surprise, given the descriptions in the literature of poor families' reliance on public transportation (Neuman, 2009). As we engaged with the families, it became clear that an important aspect of the parents' mediating role was driving Benny and Miguel to places beyond their neighborhoods where spaces were constructed. The fact that both families had cars seems consistent with the identification of their neighborhoods as low income but not without resources or characterized by a concentrated level of poverty. Notably, the cars also presented challenges. Because Don Fernández was undocumented and driving with an expired license that he was unable to renew, he drove with anxiety and

care so as not to be stopped by police. Doña Santos' old car periodically broke down, though she was able to borrow a car from extended family members when this happened.

Benny and Miguel's language choices—to use English or Spanish or speak bilingually—were also evident and were important aspects of their construction of literacy spaces (Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Lewis et al., 2007). Although they lived in an English-speaking city and attended a school where English was the language of instruction, they and their families resisted those powerful constraints by creating spaces where Spanish was privileged: their homes, the church, and the soccer league at the rec center. Within these three spaces, the children expressed *their* bilingual agency at times by speaking English with each other, resisting the imposition of Spanish-only in literacy spaces in which they were subordinated to their elders. Thus, the children created their own literacy spaces within the spaces imposed by the broader society as well as within those provided with care by their Latino families and communities in efforts to maintain Spanish and their Puerto Rican and Salvadoran identities.

Implications for Practice in Urban Schools

In this article, we aimed to contribute to a counter-narrative that would challenge the pervasive privileging of school-centered literacy in urban schools at all levels of Milner's (2012) typology and of generalizations and deficit stereotypes of Latino families and their urban neighborhoods. We see this counter-narrative as a crucial element in the development of a systematic analysis of the racism, classism, and linguicism that permeate much of urban education as well as in the development of culturally relevant curricula (Boardman et al., 2014; Gay, 2010; Milner, 2013; Osorio, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2013). As pre- and in-service teachers engage with their own biases; recognize the obstacles to learning posed by profiling children, families, and neighborhoods; and get to know low-income urban families and learn from them, they will be better able to foreground the richness and complexities of children's literacy lives in the curriculum. Expanded understandings of literacy as well as informed notions of children's literacy spaces, the multiple affordances of even low-income neighborhoods, and the effective mediation of family and community members would help them recognize authentic practices and resources that are often invisible (Purcell-Gates, 2013). If children like Miguel and Benny were to learn from teachers that their play with Pokémon and maps were valued literacies, their engagement with school might be ignited (for Miguel) and expanded (for Benny). Many parents too would better understand their enhanced role as teachers if they learned about the many

literacies in their lives and the expert but unacknowledged ways they already support their children's developing literacy.

Action research projects linking schools with children's "teachers" in other literacy spaces such as libraries, recreation centers, and religious settings would provide all parties with insights and would help create resource networks for urban schools with limited resources (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Nichols et al., 2012). For example, Kenner and Ruby's (2012) projects in London connected teachers in elementary schools with the same children's teachers in community school programs run for or by Bangladeshi, Somali, and Russian communities. What resulted was enlightening for the teacher partners as they collaborated to build on children's developing literacies and cultural knowledge; to draw on each other's knowledge of the children and curriculum; and to engage families. Children expressed amazement as teachers challenged the common home-school binary that positions school as a privileged learning space and ignores or disparages home and community spaces (Hall, Cremin, Comber, & Moll, 2013). In contrast, the bureaucratic response of the rec center director and her boss described above—not uncommon in many cities—reflect the maintenance of separate worlds threatened by any breach to the borders between institutions and expertise, borders crossed frequently by the children in their everyday lives.

It is important to note that, in addition to the Neuman and Celano (2001) study, other studies using a spatialized approach by Moje (2004) and Nichols et al. (2012) also found limited resources in the neighborhoods of Latino and working class families, respectively. Their work complements the analysis described here. Thus, while Moje emphasizes the resourcefulness of Latino teenagers, Nichols et al. note the contradictions between official pronouncements about family responsibility in communities where useful resources are limited. For practitioners in urban settings, the latter argue

> for the repositioning of parents and children as knowledge producers and for harnessing of available sponsors and networks to the circulation of even more diverse resources for the support of young children's learning. (p. 25)

In the urban spaces studied, children, like the literacies they practice, "flow in and out of context[s]" (Pahl & Burnett, 2013, p. 7) in a dynamic and fluid process created by the children and those who support their developing literacy. Although there are limits to generalizing from the experiences of the boys described here, they certainly represent many other emerging bilinguals living in urban emergent districts who, with the mediation of family and community members, take charge of their own learning by taking up the

affordances around them, creating new spaces, and resisting the constraints of their low-income neighborhoods. They and their families have much to teach their teachers in urban schools while still learning from them.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and for their neighborhoods, school district, and city.
2. Our work exploring religious and cultural elements of the families' literacy practices is published elsewhere.
3. Milner's "evolving" typology consists of three levels of school districts: urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic, each tied to the characteristics of cities.
4. The 2012 5-year estimates represent averages of data from 2008 to 2012.
5. Don and Doña are courtesy titles, forms of respect for addressing men and women in Spanish.
6. Although married, she maintained her original surname as is the custom in many Spanish-speaking countries.

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