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Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices

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Abstract

The study focuses on storytelling among Mexican families, documenting the frequency of storytelling in the homes of working and middle class Mexican families, the range of topics of the stories, characteristics and genres of stories, and intergenerational continuity of storytelling practices. Also examined are potential associations between storytelling practices and children's performance on language and early reading tasks. This qualitative study draws from interview data with 30 families, supplemented with survey and outcome data from the larger mixed method project of which it forms a part. Storytelling continues to be a widespread but not frequent activity, including genres of family anecdotes, horror stories, folktales, and historical recounts. Storytelling as a cultural resource is discussed.

"De verdad que en aquel tiempo...." ('is it true that in those days...')--thus begins the invitation for storytelling to begin in the González home. *"Los sábados y domingos en la noche, nos empezamos a relajar y ya empiezan las historias"* ('Saturday and Sunday evenings we start enjoying ourselves together and that's when the stories start.') The sharing of stories and narratives, *dichos* (sayings) and *consejos* (advice), is a prominent experience among families in Mexico as well as among immigrant Mexican families in the United States. An opportunity for entertainment and enjoyment, the retelling of family stories and folktales also serves to build family bonds, share cultural values, and construct identity. The sharing of narratives, particularly narratives of poverty and struggle, is associated with resiliency and empowerment, serving to support parents in their interactions with school and advocacy for their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2005). *Dichos* used in the family and shared with children not only transmit cultural values but also serve as "social resources that Latino families possess to respond to the power relations that exist between families and schools" (Espinoza-Herold, 2007, p. 268). Stories and *dichos* have also been used by teachers to make connections between the classroom curriculum and children's lived experiences (Mercado 2005), as well as to enhance family involvement in their children's schooling (Sanchez, Plata, Grosso, & Leird, 2010). Oral storytelling has been hypothesized to support and contribute to children's literacy development as well (Sneddon, 2000). This paper seeks to extend the study of oral practices in the home to examine the potential relationship between family storytelling and children's early literacy development.

Oral Tradition in Mexico

Current oral practices of Mexican and Mexican immigrant families are rooted in a long tradition of storytelling and oral folklore in Mexican culture (Briggs, 1988; Herrera-Sobek, 1982; Mariscal, 1990). Indigenous oral traditions predating the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish include a rich history of poetry, prayers, and discourse through which

cultural content was transmitted from generation to generation (Requejo del Blanco, 1999). Mexican scholars have documented methods used during the periods of conquest and colonization to convert the indigenous peoples to western culture and the Catholic religion. These methods include the oral genres of theatrical plays, songs, storytelling, and poetry (Florescano, 1997; López Austin, 1985). The acquisition of Spanish language and writing was strongly resisted during this time period, and instruction in written language was reserved for children of the native élite. Through this historical process, the value of the oral tradition as an instrument for learning as well as for cultural survival was reinforced.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), recognizing that oral tradition forms part of the world's cultural patrimony, adopted in 1989 recommendations for safeguarding what they term "intangible cultural heritage." To this end UNESCO publishes an annual journal, *Oralidad* (orality), that carries the subtitle, *Para el Rescate de la Tradición Oral de América Latina y el Caribe* ('For the Rescue of the Oral Tradition of Latin America and the Caribbean'). The creations that make up oral tradition embody the cultural and social identity of the community and serve to transmit its norms and values (UNESCO, 2002). "The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing States as for developed ones" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 4). Seen from this perspective the *dichos*, narratives, legends, stories and *consejos* that make up the lived experiences of many Mexican and Mexican immigrant families represent a resource for communities and individuals. For children in particular, home activities that families construct and sustain have a profound impact on children's development, through their participation in mediated social learning embedded in goal-directed interactions (Rogoff, 2003).

Oral Language and Early Reading

Most of the research examining the relationships between oral language and literacy in the U.S. has been carried out with monolingual English speakers. There is a long-standing recognition that a substantial relationship exists between oral language (e.g, vocabulary, listening comprehension) and reading comprehension (Biemeller, 2006; Hoff, 2006; Nagy & Scott, 2000). The practice of reading aloud to young children is a home literacy practice that has received particular attention in the literature. Studies have shown positive relationships between vocabulary knowledge and home literacy practices, particularly shared reading (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Although the language that young children most commonly experience is embedded in a context shared by speakers, they experience decontextualized language through storytelling and shared reading experiences. Texts shared orally with young children have a range of features that are rarely employed in conversational language with children (Bus, 2001). Children who come to formal reading instruction with more exposure to and proficiency with richer vocabularies have an advantage not only in terms of comprehension of texts but also in terms of skills in phonological processing and awareness, themselves aspects of oral language ability (Hoff, 2006). At the same time it is through reading, initially reading to the child but increasingly reading by the child, that vocabulary knowledge expands and deepens.

Among immigrant Latino families in the U.S., there is a growing body of literature that documents a variety of experiences that children have reading and interacting with texts of various sorts, including reading for religious purposes (Farr, 2005; Reese, 2009), texts associated with parents' occupational activities (Ortiz, 2004), letter writing to family members in the home country (Guerra, 1998), activities centered around children's

homework (Durand, 2010; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 2003), as well as ample opportunities to engage in activities with environmental print (Reyes & Azura, 2008). In their study of a Northern California Mexican community, Vasquez et al. (1994) found that Mexican-origin families constructed narratives with story-like elements as they shared family history, cultural experiences and folklore, or news and gossip, and they worked together to construct meanings nuances of unfamiliar texts. In many cases these reconstructions were a strategy utilized by Spanish-speaking families to maximize comprehension of English texts—forms, instructions, letters, legal documents, and school information—and represented a response to the challenges of living in an English dominant community. In immigrant homes, children are often called upon to serve as translators for their parents in interactions with the school and other service institutions (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003).

At the same time, immigrant Latino families do not appear to engage in “storybook” reading activities at home with the same frequency as mainstream European American families (Zentella, 2005). Families’ beliefs about the value of reading aloud to children in the preschool years may differ from those prevalent among mainstream, English-speaking families as well (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Some researchers contend that other types of activities, particularly oral narratives and stories, are more prevalent in immigrant Mexican homes (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Vásquez, 1992). For example, González’s (2001) transcriptions of household discourse revealed multiple examples of collaborative narrative activities carried out by parents and children, as well as the joking and teasing by the fathers that lent a jocular air to mealtime conversations. Vasquez (1992) concluded that oral experiences such as these are more common in Mexican homes in the U.S. than are encounters with extended written language. Similarly, Zires (1996), studying home learning environments in a working class community in Mexico City, found that the audiovisual culture (radio and television) had a greater impact on home practices than did written text.

In a seminal article, Heath (1986) asked “what no bedtime story means” for children who grow up in homes without this practice and concluded that they are disadvantaged in American schools in comparison to children who had experienced regular shared reading and discussions. While immigrant Mexican children may be growing up without the experiences of regular bedtime stories that mainstream children have, it is clear that many are growing up in environments rich in oral language expression and activities. The extent to which oral experiences with storytelling might play a similar role in Mexican families of exposing children to story elements (e.g. character, motive, plot) and building story grammar as do “story time” experiences with print material in mainstream American households remains largely unexamined in the literature. It is possible that storytelling has the potential to contribute to children’s early literacy development, building children’s background experiences through exposure to story elements, vocabulary, and a variety of story genres.

Storytelling is one of many activities that Mexican children experience as part of everyday experience. Sociocultural theory (Leont’ev, 1981; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1981, 1985) provides a helpful framework for looking at the role of cultural values and assumptions in shaping activities important in children’s development. Everyday family activity settings (e.g., meal time, Bible study, storytelling) are partly determined by the surrounding environment and partly constructed by the families in accordance with personal and cultural schemas (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993), and these activity settings have profound consequences for cognitive development. Activity settings can be described and analyzed using the following dimensions: the personnel present and available for participation; the cultural goals and beliefs that participants bring to the activity; the motives

and intentions guiding the action; the nature of the tasks that are accomplished; and the scripts, or patterns of appropriate conduct, used during the activity. Implicit in this dimension is the notion that scripts are culturally appropriate, and often unconscious, ways that participants engage in a task (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990).

This study draws from a larger, longitudinal study of language and literacy development of Mexican children in grades one through three. The present study focuses on the practice of storytelling in the homes of Mexican families -- the extent to which urban parents currently engage in "traditional" storytelling practices with their children, as well as ways in which the home practice of storytelling may be associated with children's early literacy development. Using an activity setting framework, the study seeks to document (1) the frequency of oral story activities that take place in the homes of working and middle class Mexican families, (2) the range of topics of the stories (including the extent to which traditional folktales continue to be a prominent part of family practices), (3) intergenerational continuity of storytelling practices, (4) the relationships among storytelling and other activities such as reading to children and helping with homework, and (5) associations between home storytelling practices and children's performance on oral language and literacy tasks at school.

METHODS

Participants and Setting

The present study is part of a larger, mixed method longitudinal study that included children from 4 public schools in Guadalajara, Mexico, from communities ranging from low to middle income. Students (n=344) were selected at random from all first through third grade classrooms at the participating schools. From the initial first grade sample (n=102), 30 case study families were randomly selected to participate in two parent and two child interviews each year in the home. The present study is primarily a qualitative study based on two years of interview and observational data from the case study families carried out from 2006–2008, supplemented with survey and performance data from the larger study.

Research was conducted by a binational team of researchers from California, Texas, and Jalisco, Mexico. The author, a former bilingual teacher in the U.S. and teacher of English in South America, has conducted studies of home-school connections among immigrant Latino families in the U.S. Her Mexican colleagues have worked with children attending one of the schools in the study on research studies of situated learning and have coordinated a university-sponsored learning center in another community in the study. Project research assistants were university students, most of whom were natives of Guadalajara and lived near the communities in the study.

One third of the participating families live in a working class area on the outskirts of the city served by one of the schools. This is a community with historic roots in the pre-Columbian past, where the local Catholic church dates from the 18th century. Formerly an isolated town, and one that still retains its traditional feast days and traditions, this community has been incorporated into the metropolitan area through the rapid urban expansion of the past few decades. One third of the families are located in mixed working and lower middle class *colonias* (neighborhoods), served by two of the schools in the study, that include residential areas sprinkled with small businesses and workshops operating out of private homes. The neighborhoods are crossed by commercial thoroughfares lined with small businesses and light industry. One third of the families reside in a predominantly middle class neighborhood of the city served by the fourth school in the study. This *colonia* is made up of primarily single-family homes, and local businesses which include numerous *papelерías* (stationary stores), cyber cafés and internet businesses, and copy centers.

The average number of years of schooling for parents of the children in the sample was 9.28 for mothers and 9.51 for fathers. There were striking differences in the level of parent education by neighborhood and school. Parents in the predominantly middle class neighborhood averaged 13.4 years of schooling (range 9–21 years); parents in the two mixed working/lower middle class neighborhoods averaged 7.8 and 9.1 years respectively (range 1–17 years); and parents in the working class community averaged 6.7 years (range 2–9). Father occupations for the overall sample included 42% working in skilled or unskilled labor, 9% working in professional occupations, 9 % unemployed, and the rest working in white collar jobs. Again, however, there were wide discrepancies across communities. In the middle class community, 20% of the fathers were engaged in skilled labor (none in unskilled labor), while 23% were professionals. In the other communities, only 3% of the fathers were professionals, with 50% working as skilled or unskilled laborers.

Data Collection

Trained research assistants administered language and literacy assessments in the fall and spring of each school year to all participating students (grades 1 – 3). The individually administered student outcome measures included Listening Comprehension, Picture Vocabulary, Verbal Analogies, Letter-Word Identification, and Passage Comprehension from the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised, WLPB-R, in Spanish (Woodcock & Muñoz-Sandoval, 1995). The Spanish version of the WLPB-R is a widely used psycho-educational assessments; psychometric data for the Spanish version were compiled from samples of several thousand native Spanish speakers inside and outside of the United States (Woodcock, & Muñoz-Sandoval, 1995).

All parents completed a 46-question parent survey asking about family demographics and the frequency that family members (mother, father, siblings, target child) engaged in a variety of literacy practices. In Year 1, parents were invited to come to the school, where the surveys were administered in person by project-trained research assistants (92.5% return rate). Frequencies of reported home activities such as reading to children, visiting the library, helping with homework, and frequency of storytelling with the target child were reported using a 5-point scale in which 0=almost never, 1=once/month, 2=2–3 times/month, 3=1–2 times/week, and 4=daily.

Three families per grade 1 classroom (n=30) were selected for more in-depth home visits twice each year that each included a parent interview, a child interview, and an observational field note. The interviews, carried out by project-trained research assistants, focused on family literacy practices, attitudes, and materials. During Year 1, parents described the reading and storytelling practices with which they were raised. The Year 2 interview protocol incorporated preliminary findings from the first year interviews, with parents asked to describe and provide more in-depth examples of the kinds of reading, writing, storytelling, and other oral language activities that family members currently engaged in and that included the target children. Interviewers also completed an open-ended observational field note following each home visit, where they were directed to describe the home setting, the people present (in addition to the interviewee), and the activities that they participated in during the time of the visit. Particular note was made of any type of literacy material visible or used, and of the activities of the target child during the parent interview.

For the present analyses, narrative data from three open-ended parent interviews per family, which included transcriptions of open-ended responses and ethnographic field notes, were reviewed and coded according to themes of interest. Analysis of interview data is guided by an activity setting model derived from socio-historical and activity theory. The focus of inquiry is not simply on the activity itself--in this case storytelling--but also on the personnel who carry out the task, the way in which the activity is carried out, the beliefs underlying the

activity, and the motives that drive it. The interview notes were coded with respect to story topic, the purpose or motive for the story activity, who tells the story, the extent of children's participation, the duration of the activity, and the form that the story takes. Coded material was reduced using data matrices for purposes of summarizing and identifying patterns in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes used for analysis are included in Table 1.

The practice of constant comparison, originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1965), was used to examine similarities and differences across participants. Analytic induction (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) was used to systematically seek negative as well as confirmatory cases. Coded material was reduced using data matrices for purposes of summarizing and identifying patterns in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

It should be noted that the findings of the present study are based on parents' descriptions of home activities and on their retellings of stories in an interview setting. Although parents were asked to retell stories as they told them to their children or as the stories were told in family gatherings, this is not the same as transcriptions of stories as they are told in authentic settings, access to which was beyond the scope of the current study.

FINDINGS

Parents and Children's Experiences with Storytelling

As the 30 case study parents recounted their own experiences with schooling and literacy when they were growing up, reading aloud to children was not an activity widely reported in the homes of the parents, reported in only 33% of the families. However, the practice was three times more common among parents in the middle class community than among parents in the working class community. On the other hand, telling stories to children was a much more common activity for the parents growing up regardless of community setting or family socioeconomic status and was reported in 77% of the homes. In the working class community, for example, while only 12% of the families reported being read to as children, 62% described stories that they remember hearing.

This pattern of greater prevalence of storytelling over reading stories with children, and frequency across communities irrespective of socioeconomic status, is not apparent with respect to parents' current practices with their own children, as reflected in the survey of all participating families ($n=344$). Parents were asked how often someone read to the child, told stories to the child, worked with the child on homework, and worked with the child on reading and writing activities other than homework. Parent reports indicated that telling stories was slightly less frequently reported overall than was reading to children (means of 1.88 and 1.96 respectively, where 1=once a month and 2=2–3 times per month). In the middle class community, both activities occurred on average close to once a week, whereas both occurred in the working class community approximately twice a month. Reported story reading and storytelling were correlated ($r=.379$), such that families who were more likely to read to their children were also more likely to tell stories to them.

These findings led us to hypothesize that the storytelling that parents experienced as children might be less prevalent among families today, and traditional storytelling might be replaced by or associated with storybook reading. In order to further explore this hypothesis and potential connections between storytelling and reading, we designed an interview protocol in Year 2 in which storytelling and oral language practices were examined more extensively. We asked case study parents to describe opportunities that children had to participate in storytelling activities; in addition to stories told to the child, these also included home activities in which the storytelling occurred but where stories were not told directly to the

child, as well as activities that took place with family members but outside of the home. The protocol explored these themes in open-ended fashion, and then probed for the genres of stories that had emerged in Year 1 interviews as prevalent in the parents' own experiences growing up. These included family anecdotes, historical anecdotes, children's stories and legends, scary stories, and jokes. Finally parents were asked to recount stories that their children have had the opportunity to hear. This resulted in a data set that included not only parents' recounting of storytelling practices but also included narrative examples of the various genres. Thus "storytelling", as the term is used in this study, refers to the range of oral narratives of various types that children might hear (anecdotes, stories, legends, jokes, and *consejos* [advice]), in both explicit and spontaneous experiences.

While storytelling was not a daily activity in most homes, it was reported to occur in 93% of all of the homes. In no home, however, was the activity described as occurring between parent and child exclusively. Rather, storytelling was a highly social activity that involved parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and friends. At times storytelling was an explicit activity, for example when a group of cousins decided to put a sheet over a table and crouch underneath to tell ghost stories, or when a child would ask a parent to tell a story about when he or she was little. Many other times, however, storytelling was described as a spontaneous event that occurred when the family would get together for a Sunday meal or a birthday celebration. The family times of being together [*convívio*] were described with affection as important for family unity. One mother exclaimed, "*Yo digo si Dios me recogiera así, yo digo que he disfrutado mucho a mi familia*" [I say that if God would take me [as I am now], I'd say that I have enjoyed my family so much].

In 76% of the homes, the presence of grandparents, and sometimes great-grandparents was noted. Children might be cared for after school in the home of a grandparent, and there hear stories about their own parents as children or about life in the *pueblo* [town] in the past. Grandparents' homes were often the center of family gatherings, where family anecdotes were traded and jokes were enjoyed. In 18% of the cases, parents made explicit reference to the transgenerational continuity of stories, as for example when a mother remarked that her own mother tells the child "*anécdotas de cuando ella era niña, los cuentos que le contaban a ella*" [anecdotes from when she was a little girl, the stories that she had been told].

Story Genres

Family Anecdotes—Family anecdotes were the most common type of story that children had the opportunity to hear, told in 87% of all of the homes and occurring on average several times a month. In 21% of the homes where storytelling occurred, children heard family anecdotes on a daily basis. Many of the anecdotes dealt with family experiences growing up in rural *ranchos*. In these stories, children might hear what life was like in the *pueblo* (small town) where grandparents grew up or how a grandfather "*sufría para obtener toda su tierra*" [suffered in order to obtain his land]. One mother described the kinds of stories her father shared: "*Mi papá les dice que cuando estaba chiquillo, lo mandaban al cerro a traer leña. Por ejemplo, no le importaba hasta andar sin zapatos o que se quitaban los zapatos para cuidar el huarache en aquél tiempo, entonces todo ese tipo de pláticas* [My father tells them that when he was small they sent him to the hills to gather wood. For example, he didn't care if he had to go barefoot or that he had to take off his sandals to take care of them in those days, so all kinds of stories like that].

Some of the parents reported telling the stories with the intent of using them as examples for children to follow. For example, Señora Gómez stated that sometimes her mother-in-law starts to tell her daughter stories about what her father was like as a little boy. "*Adelia es el vivo retrato del hijo, que era bueno en la escuela, dando a entender que la niña debe estar igual*" [Adelia is the living portrait of her son, who was good in school, giving her to

understand that the little girl should be the same.]. Many of these stories, especially those dealing with the experiences of living in poverty, are similar to the *testimonios* of immigrant mothers described by González (2001), who told powerful autobiographical stories of their lives prior to immigrating and of their struggles to make a better life for themselves and their children in their new country.

Some of the children enjoyed listening to family stories and were reported to ask to hear more. One little girl often asked her father, “*Papi, plátame de cuando tú eras chiquito*” [Daddy, tell me about when you were little]. Others, more typically some of the boys, were reported to enjoy playing and did not pay particular attention to the stories being told around the table. Some of the children, however, played with their cousins but were also observed to be paying attention to the family conversation. As one mother described her son as “*el coyote con la oreja parada*” [the coyote with his ears standing on end]. Most children were described by their parents as interested in the stories and participants in the family events.

Jokes—Chistes [jokes] were the next most common narrative that children had the opportunity to hear, experienced by 83% of the children and occurring on average several times a month as well. As with the family anecdotes, jokes were often told during family events. Parents often described family members who were particularly good at jokes, “*tíos muy bromistas*” [‘uncles who were real jokesters’] or a father who was the “*payaso de la familia*” [‘the family clown’]. Even children who were reported to be not particularly interested in family anecdotes paid attention to the jokes. Family settings were not the only settings in which children heard and told jokes. School was a place where children would also exchange jokes with their friends, especially Pepito jokes which one parent described as “classic” in Mexico.

Legends or Children’s Stories—In 63% of the homes, children were reported to hear legends or stories. On average, children heard these stories once a month. Sometimes parents reported telling children classic stories such as Little Red Riding Hood or Sleeping Beauty, but traditional stories and legends were more common. For example, in 37% of the families in which storytelling occurred, the classic tale of *la llorona* [the crying woman] was reported to have been told to the children. Typically, legends would be told as having occurred to someone in the family rather than as a fairy tale or fictional story. One mother recounted her daughter asking her about the story of *la llorona*:

Mi mamá decía que a su prima, o sea de antes, que se le apareció la llorona... cerca de su casa pasa un arroyo. El otro día me preguntó, ‘Mami, sí es cierto que mi tía y fulana gente de aquí oyó a la llorona?’ Le dije ‘pues ella dice pero yo no la he oído.’

My mother said that her cousin, a while ago, that the *llorona* had appeared to her... nearby her house there’s a stream. The other day (my daughter) asked me, ‘Mommy, is it true that my aunt and those others from here heard the *llorona*?’ I said, ‘She says so but I haven’t heard her.’

Prior to the period in which the interviews took place, a television commentary had appeared on the Panteón de Belén, a well-known cemetery in Guadalajara dating from the colonial period. One of the schools attended by participating children had also visited the cemetery for a field trip at the time of the Days of the Dead (November 1 and 2) holiday. A number of widely known stories are associated with this cemetery, and explicit mention of the Panteón de Belén and these tales was made in 22% of the cases.

Several of the families told the story of the Casa de los Perros [the House of the Dogs], another colonial period building in Guadalajara with a story of buried treasure offered to the brave soul who can spend the entire night in the haunted environment. Others cited stories

that were typical of the different states, such as Zacatecas or Guanajuato, that the parents came from.

Horror Stories—Many families also recounted children’s experiences with *cuentos de miedo* [stories about fear] or *cuentos de terror* [terror stories], described by one mother as being the current rage with children (“*la moda*”). Horror stories reported in two-thirds (63%) of the homes, occurring on average once a month, and were retold with relish. Some families cited familiar horror stories such as the headless horseman, the woman in the bathroom of the school, or the taxi driver. In other cases, however, there was considerable overlap between family anecdotes, legends, and horror stories. Often family stories included recurring elements from ghost stories and legends such as encounters with apparitions, witches, and the devil engaged in stories that had happened to family members.

More than any other of the oral genres, the telling of horror stories was associated with play and entertainment. For example, one mother described how the family would bring mattresses into the living room and all sit around and tell stories. Another mom laughingly reported that telling of ghost stories often ended with the children being chased through the house as one moaned and wailed. Children’s responses to the stories varied. Some children were described by their parents as being too afraid of the scary stories to be included in the telling of these tales; another mother described her son’s fear of the stories saying “*les gusta y no les gusta*” [they like them and they don’t like them]. Another mother described the feeling as “*adoración al miedo*” [adoration of feeling afraid].

Historical Anecdotes—Finally, in one third (37%) of the families, children were reported to hear stories relating to Mexican history, although these anecdotes occurred on average only a few times a year. Often these were experiences related to the Mexican Revolution and to the Cristeros Revolution, which took place in the state of Jalisco during the 1920’s. The role of grandparents as storytellers and sources of shared family experiences emerged as particularly important in this story genre. As one mother explained, “*le tocó a mi abuelito vivir la Revolución*” (my grandfather actually lived the Revolution). Another mother explained how her husband’s grandfather got his name:

El era chino, cien porciento chino que se vino de allá entonces le tocó más que nada la revolución. Bueno, la moda era Francisco Villa en ese entonces. Cuando él se quiso casar tenía que ponerse un nombre mexicano para bautizarse y poder casarse. Como estaba de moda Pancho Villa, se puso Francisco.

He was Chinese, one hundred percent Chinese who came from over there and he lived through the Revolution. Well, at that time Francisco Villa was all the rage. When he wanted to get married, he had to take a Mexican name so he could be baptized and get married. Since Pancho Villa was in vogue, he chose Francisco.

In homes without contact with grandparents or in which the grandparents were relatively young, children were less likely to hear these anecdotes.

In many of the homes, stories relating to Mexican history were also told when children asked about topics that they were studying in school. For example, a child might ask a parent about the *niños héroes* (child heroes) and the cadet who wrapped himself in the flag and jumped from the cliff off near the Chapultepec castle rather than surrender to American forces.

Story Characteristics

Purposes—As parents described the different oral narratives that children have the opportunity to experience, they often included the reasons that they told stories to their children. By far the most common reason given for telling stories, reported in 37% of the

homes, was to instruct the children and provide *consejos* (advice) about how to behave. *Consejos* might emerge from a variety of genres. The story of Pinocchio was used to teach children not to lie. Children were encouraged to be good, or else they might find themselves carried away by *la llorona*. And a family anecdote of growing up in poverty might be used to illustrate how children should study hard and strive to succeed. *Consejo* is often translated as “advice;” however, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) contended that the meaning of the word goes beyond the problem-solving connotation of advice in English to include “a cultural dimension of communication, sparked with emotional empathy and compassion, as well as familial expectation and inspiration” (p. 300). She found that parents used *consejos* as critical tools to instruct their children in schooling matters, as well as to convey their expectations regarding children’s behavior and attitudes towards schooling.

In other families, parents reported telling stories to quiet their children or to get them ready to go to sleep. Storytelling as “bedtime story” was reported in 22% of the homes, and stories were most often reported to be children’s stories such as Lion King, the Little Mermaid, or Sleeping Beauty. In two homes, fathers were reported to tell invented stories, much to the delight of the children. Storytelling for the purpose of preparing the children for sleep is the context which is most similar to the activity of parent-preschooler book reading that has been the primary focus of most research (Scarborough & Doherty, 1994), in the sense that the story activity is directed to the child and not carried out in a social setting such as family mealtime in which the child’s participation may be peripheral. It is in the bedtime setting that explicit evidence of overlap between reading aloud and telling stories to young children occurred: In two homes, the father was reported to tell stories, while the mother was reported to read to children at bedtime. Finally, in 11% of the homes, storytelling was reported to be engaged in for entertainment purposes.

Roots in Everyday Experiences—By definition, the category of family anecdotes is composed of archives of lived experiences of the grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, and children (participating children and their siblings and cousins). Family experiences are recounted at family gatherings, when a parent is looking at a photo album with a child, or while the family comments on a television show they are watching. These experiences contribute to feelings of family unity. They are stories that “create their own bonds,” contributing to shared understandings and deeper, ethical values (Delgado, 1989).

At the same time, elements of everyday experience make their way into retellings of traditional stories and legends as well. In only one instance was the story of *la llorona* told as a story with no personal connection to the narrator. In all other cases, when parents and grandparents shared the story of *la llorona* with children, it was always in the context of a lived experience of a family member or acquaintance. Children listening to these stories were often reported to respond by asking if the story is true [*¿Es cierto?*], and the response was usually that it was true.

Similarly, ghost stories told by families take place in familiar and shared urban spaces. A trip on a city bus that passes by the Casa de los Perros may provoke a retelling of the story of buried money inside, or a visit to the cemetery for the Day of the Dead is an occasion to recount familiar tales of the Panteón de Belén. And many stories of ghosts and apparitions take place in the homes and small towns of the families themselves. These family stories often include elements of traditional stories: buried treasure, unexplained sounds, ghost beasts who leave scratches on the door. Family members report being pursued by characters from popular culture such as the *catrín* [the dandy], death, and the devil, whose images are part of the traditional game of *lotería* played throughout the country. Señora Arévalo provides an example of an anecdote that took place with her father and brother, complete with the popular theme of encountering the devil:

Cuando en eso vimos un perrote negro y se vino enfrente de mí. Entonces mi hermanito, era más grande que y pues no pudo hablar y yo tampoco. Hasta de repente, porque el nos bailaba así, nos pelaba unos ojotes bien gachos y luego estaba a medias de una lumbré. Y a medias de una lumbradota se apareció y en eso yo volteo. "Papá!" Entonces mi papa siempre, siempre anduvo armado. El siempre andaba con una pistola, cuidaba el rancho. Cuando él oyó que grité, corrió y en eso ya "¿Qué tienen?" y ya volteó y vio al perro. Y ya mi papá lo que se puso "Ave María Purísima del Refugio, Ave María Purísima del Refugio." Agarró la pistola y le metió un balazo y el perro corrió. Se subió a una barda ardiendo pero así ardiendo. Brincó mi papá y ya no estaba. Así que yo pienso que era el Diablo, pos sí son cosas que nos pasan pues.

Right then we saw a huge black dog and it came in front of me. Then my brother, who was older than I was, well, he couldn't talk and I couldn't either. Until all at once, because it was dancing almost, it stared at us with big eyes and then it was in the middle of a light. It was a giant light that appeared and I turn. "Father!" At that time he was always, always armed. He always carried a pistol; he took care of the rancho. When he heard my shout, he ran and right then "What's wrong?" and then he turned around and saw the dog. And my father went "Ave María Purísima del Refugio, Ave María Purísima del Refugio." He took the pistol and he put a bullet in it and the dog ran. It went up on a wall burning, but really burning. My father jumped and it wasn't there. So that's why I think it was the devil, and those are things that happen to us.

The rooting of the scary stories in the families' everyday lives was described by Palafox (1990) in her study of six Mexican tales of witches. These witch stories were not intended to be fantasy stories; rather Palafox noted that the introduction of the story with phrases such as "my father told the story that happened to him and my uncle" was clear evidence of *the "estatuto de realidad"* (rule of reality) that serves to underscore the veracity of the tale (p. 49).

Story Discourse—With the exception of the invented stories and retellings of classic children's stories such as Little Red Riding Hood, stories that children hear are rooted in family experiences. As seen above, even when the story is a traditional legend, in its narration it is told as a family anecdote. The style is conversational and intimate, with a focus on the sequence of events.

This style of story discourse can be compared with storybooks that are read to children. For example, Mexican American author Gloria Anzaldúa has written a Southwestern version of the *llorona* story for children. In this storybook, the young girl Prietita is sent into the woods to gather an herb that her mother needs. Her encounter with a ghost woman is described as follows:

"Soon she came into an open area where the moon was reflected on the surface of a lagoon. Prietita looked across the lagoon and saw a flash of white in the trees. Then she saw a dark woman dressed in white emerge from the trees and float above the water" (Anzaldúa, 1996).

The section includes descriptions of the setting, complete with subordinate clause construction, and the ghost woman. On the other hand, the examples of stories gathered in our interviews are not characterized by aspects of written texts shared with children such as subordinate clauses, passive constructions, unfamiliar expressions, colloquialisms, and idioms that have been found to be associated with children's literacy development (Bus, 2001). Rather, the stories are spontaneous, immediate, and characterized by a conversational tone. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that few associations were found between the frequency of reported storytelling to children and any of the oral language and early literacy measures used in the study.

Connections between Storytelling and Children's Early Literacy Performance

As described above, parent surveys reported the frequencies with which a variety of early literacy and oral language activities were carried out in the home, including how often an adult or older sibling told stories to the child (*"le cuenta una historia"*). Growth model analyses were used to examine the extent to which home literacy practices were associated

with children's initial performance on the early literacy and oral language skills (picture vocabulary, listening comprehension, verbal analogies, phonological awareness, letter-word identification, and passage comprehension) at the beginning of grade 1 (intercept), and with growth (slope) in these skills from the fall of grade 1 through the end of grade 3.

Overall, reported frequencies of various home practices with children (including reading to the child, storytelling with the child, helping with homework, and helping with reading) were only minimally associated with initial child performance on oral language and early literacy outcome measures. The frequency with which the child read on his or her own was associated with higher initial performance (intercept) on Verbal Analogies, Letter-Word Identification, and on Passage Comprehension. Frequency of reading to the child, on the other hand, was not associated with either intercept or slope on any of the outcome measures. Storytelling did provide a slight but significant ($p = .05$) advantage on initial performance in Picture Vocabulary and was associated with growth (slope) in Verbal Analogies. These findings suggest that while more frequent exposure to storytelling was associated with certain aspects of oral language proficiency, it was not associated with either initial performance or growth on the early reading measures used in this study.

DISCUSSION

The Mexican children in our study, whether they are growing up in working class or in middle class families and communities, have ample opportunities to listen to, retell, and enjoy a variety of oral narratives. The storytelling that is a commonplace aspect of family gatherings and in more intimate home settings such as bedtime is engaged in for a variety of purposes, including entertainment, to get children to sleep, to promote family unity, and to foster desired moral values and behaviors. The findings from our study indicate, however, that it would be misleading to assume that these oral narratives take the place of reading to children. Although the practice reading to children is, overall, more prevalent today among the participating parents than it was for parents when they were growing up, the recounting of traditional stories and legends has not disappeared. At the same time, the discourse style of these narratives is not that of a storybook, but rather that of a family conversation.

Although the stories retold by parents in our study do not seem to replace storybook reading and are not associated with many of the early language and reading outcomes utilized in this study, viewing storytelling strictly in terms of its relation to reading outcomes can result in serious underestimation of the force and contributions of the practice of storytelling in the lives of children and families. Villalpando (2003) described cultural resources as "a set of cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and values that, among other things, may nurture and empower individuals who associate with the group" (p. 621). Experiential knowledge becomes a resource stemming directly from a group's lived experience. "The experiential knowledge can come from storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, chronicles, and narratives" (p.624).

Martínez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999/2000) provide an example of application of this experiential resource with a detailed description of ways in which Spanish-speaking first graders participated in literature circle discussions, drawing on their home experiences with storytelling to make connections between the texts and their own lives. These researchers observed many more stories told during the literature discussions, and many more connections made by the children between events and issues in the texts and their own experiences, by the Spanish-speaking students in comparison with the English-speaking students. The English speakers, on the other hand, were observed to make more text-to-text connections. They concluded that the literature discussions "gave students space to create meaning together" and contributed to a feeling of power as storytellers (Martínez-Roldán &

López-Robertson, 1999/2000, p. 278). Their experience underscores the potential value of storytelling experiences to support students as learners, given opportunities in the classroom to share and apply these experiences in meaningful activities.

A number of scholars have examined factors contributing to the academic success of Chicana/o students at the university level, and have noted the powerful effects of storytelling and family narratives in the young people's aspirations and choices. Through these stories, parents and elders share "knowledge of conquest, segregation, labor market stratification, patriarchy, homophobia, assimilation & resistance" (Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 624). Delgado Bernal included stories, legends, and *corridos* [ballads] in what she termed the "pedagogies of the home," finding that these pedagogies provided positive and powerful strategies of resistance that challenged the dominant perceptions of Chicana/os as unlikely to succeed in college. In his study of Chicano high school and community college students, Pizarro (2005) also noted the critical role of parental anecdotes and advice in inspiring students' efforts to succeed in school. Similarly, Gándara (1995) identified family stories as cultural capital, describing ways in which Mexican immigrant family "lost fortune stories" of former wealth or status in the homeland served a special function of motivating children of immigrants to persevere in school and the workplace despite facing discrimination or structural inequalities.

Although we did not find "lost fortune stories" of former wealth or status among the exemplars shared in our study, we did find many examples of parents and grandparents sharing their life stories in order to inform and motivate their children. Ceja (2004) found stories of overcoming obstacles of poverty and hardships became stories of empowerment and motivation for the Chicana high school seniors in his study, and hearing the personal struggles of their parents helped students develop a sense of resiliency. Ceja conceptualized storytelling and the use of current and past lived experiences as a "nonconventional method of parental encouragement on college aspirations" (p. 350). These powerful stories, testimonies and chronicles became counterstories that enable members of marginalized groups to tell stories that are different from the predominant metanarrative of what it means to be successful in America, a metanarrative that "too often seems to doom minorities to life on the outermost borders" (Greene, 1993, p. 16).

An understanding of effective ways of working with Mexican-descent children, who as a group experience disproportionate underachievement in American schools, is of paramount importance for teachers. Storytelling offers a possible "fund of knowledge" (Gonzalez, 2005) or "cultural resource" (Villalpando, 2003) that teachers can identify and utilize in their work with immigrant children in U.S. schools. Greene (1994) argues that not only do minority children benefit from hearing and telling their own stories, but that America benefits from opportunities for telling all of the diverse stories, with their potential "to heal and to transform" our society.

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Table 1

Codes used in interview analysis

Code	Description
Who	Personnel present during storytelling (both narrator and listeners)
Child	Child response, agency, and participation (or lack of
Participation	participation) in storytelling activities
Setting	Physical and social setting and context in which storytelling occurs
Duration	Frequency and length of storytelling activities, planned or spontaneous
Topic	Topics and genres of the stories and narratives
Form	Story elements, discourse style, inclusion of television and other media, inclusion of text sources
Purpose	Purposes and motives expressed by the participants for engaging in storytelling, as well as the broader goals discussed in relation to storytelling
School	Ways in which school serves as a source or impetus for oral practices in the home, or in which school serves as a source of storytelling experiences for the child