The Family Backpack Project: Responding to Dual-Language Texts through Family Journals

In this article, we describe parent and child responses to a home book reading program aimed at providing prekindergarten students and their families access to dual language books and audio recordings in English and their home language. Our curricular decisions were grounded in social and cultural perspectives on literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Bolome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Gee, 2003; Street, 1995) that highlight the cultural basis for reading and writing. Working from these perspectives, we assumed that families’ interactions with their children around books would necessarily involve culturally based interactions, values, and beliefs. We viewed these family literacy practices as foundational for initiating preschoolers into literacy.

Family–School Partnerships through Home Book Reading Programs

Research shows that family–school partnerships have a positive impact on student learning (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008), and one of the most common ways preschool parents have been encouraged to get involved at home is by reading to their child (Rodríguez-Brown, 2011). Some family–school reading programs have used a family training approach to teach caregivers to use school-based read-aloud and discussion strategies at home (e.g., Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Mol, Bus, DeJong, & Smeets, 2008; Richgels & Wold, 1998). Though these studies show positive results when working with middle class parents, other researchers working with culturally and linguistically diverse families have highlighted cultural conflicts that can occur when programs strive to teach families to mirror school-based reading and response styles.
language supports their learning of English (Wiley & deKlerk, 2010), and specifically that reading books at home in the child’s primary language can support learning of vocabulary and concepts when the books are later read aloud in English at school (Roberts, 2008). To this end, we invited families to read books in their primary language or English and to respond through art and writing in a reader response journal (Fain & Horn, 2006). The invitation was left open-ended to allow families to respond in ways that reflected their own styles of interacting around books. Family response journals were one way to connect school language and literacy practices to family interests and experiences. Teachers used family journals as a way of learning about children and their families.

Program Context, Sites, and Participants
The Family Backpack Project was developed as part of the Enhanced Language and Literacy Success (ELLS) program (Rowe & Dickinson, 2008)—a comprehensive language and literacy program funded by an Early Reading First grant from the US Department of Education. Classroom teachers implemented six theme-based units incorporating storybook reading, play-based exploration, and literacy activities that were part of the Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum (Schickedanz & Dickinson, 2005). In addition, the ELLS program provided supports for emergent writing and English learners.

The goal of a funds of knowledge approach is to alter views of working class or poor communities by taking advantage of their strengths and resources.

Supports for writing involved creating well-provisioned writing centers that were resupplied with paper, envelopes, markers, and other writing tools as needed. Coaches worked with teachers to create an inviting and well-organized writing area where children could access writing materials on open shelves. Teachers were provided with professional development and coaching related to implementing large-group interactive writing.
and authentic writing as part of play-based learning centers (e.g., blocks, art, and dramatic play). Program supports for English learners were designed to value and build connections to children’s home languages and cultures. Classroom libraries were supplemented with books reflecting the diverse experiences of students enrolled in the ELLS classrooms. Teachers worked with families and community members to include culturally relevant content and environmental print in both languages spoken by the children. Additionally, teachers participated in professional development about best practices for English learners, such as using multisensory materials to introduce key words needed to comprehend texts.

Our goal in the Family Backpack Project was to provide opportunities for ELLS students and their families to read, talk about, and respond to books at home, in English and/or their primary languages. This article reports our initial experiences with the Family Backpack Project in 13 urban, pre-kindergarten classrooms at a public school serving low-income children. All 249 children enrolled in these classrooms participated in the Family Backpack Project. Of the participants, 48% were African American, 35% were Latino, 8% were Middle Eastern, 7% European American, and 1% were African. All of the children identified as Latino, Middle Eastern, or African were English learners speaking Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, or Somali at home.

**Curricular Structures and Materials**

Working from research on family book reading, second-language learning, and emergent literacy, we identified nine guiding principles for designing the Family Backpack Project. As seen in Table 1, these principles shaped curricular structures and materials.

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**NOW ACT!**

**Selecting Books for Young Multilingual Learners and Their Families**

Read the book several times, considering the following book-selection criteria:

- **Audience Interests:** Think about your students and their families. Select books that relate to and extend children's and families’ experiences. Consider the potential for family discussion.
- **Audience Involvement:** Select books with varied formats that engage families with the text's language. Include predictable and rhythmic books that encourage shared reading and/or movement and gestures that match the text.
- **International and Global Point of View:**
  - Select books from established sources that have thoroughly reviewed international, global, and dual-language texts. (See “For Inquisitive Minds” sidebar on p. 413 for suggestions.)
  - Reflect on the representation of characters. The depiction should honor multiple voices and ethnicities.
- **Language:**
  - Choose stories that possess imaginative and vivid language in the child’s home language and in English.
  - Check with a parent or community member regarding his/her perspective on the language used in the book and for input on the translation.
  - Avoid books that are literally translated. Choose books that emphasize meaning in the translation.
- **Illustrations:** Choose books with vibrant illustrations using varied illustration techniques.
- **Length:** Think about the story’s pace. Judge whether the book can be completed in one sitting.
- **Old Favorites & Newer Book Selections:** Include familiar books that children have read at school so they take the lead in family book reading. Select new titles to pique their interests.
Table 1. Curricular structures for the Family Backpack Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Principles</th>
<th>Curricular Structures &amp; Materials</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide physical and linguistic access to books.</td>
<td>Send home dual-language books with audio CDs in the child’s primary language and English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect children’s primary language(s).</td>
<td>Provide dual language books and CDs; extend invitations to write in English or the family’s primary language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value and use family funds of knowledge.</td>
<td>Extend open invitations to read and respond in journals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschoolers learn to read and write though participation in reading/writing events.</td>
<td>Emergent reading, drawing, and writing responses are invited and valued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book reading involves the extended family.</td>
<td>All family members are invited to take part in reading and composing journal entries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning making is multimodal.</td>
<td>Invite and value oral, dramatic, embodied, written, and graphic art responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home reading can help children learn concepts and vocabulary needed in school instruction.</td>
<td>Select books related to unit themes that organize instruction. Select books children hear read aloud at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children and families connect to texts with positive depictions of diversity, a global perspective, and culturally relevant topics.</td>
<td>Select supplementary books that represent family cultures; support families in composing texts from their own perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote two-way sharing of texts. (School to home and home to school)</td>
<td>Core instructional books are sent home. Family journal entries are sent to school.</td>
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**Logistics**

Family Backpacks were designed to complement the themed OWL units focusing on: a) wind and water, b) color, and c) shadows and reflections. As described in the following section, backpacks included two books—an OWL book and a supplementary book. (See Appendix A for a list of backpack books). When the primary home language was English, families received books in English. For families speaking Arabic, Kurdish, Somali, or Spanish at home, the books were translated to the child’s primary language, creating dual-language books with the original English texts and written translations in the child’s primary language. Backpacks also included CD recordings of the book in English and, for English learners, in both English and the child’s primary language. Other materials included in each backpack were a CD player, a blank family response journal, pencil/pen, a translated parent invitation regarding the Family Backpack Project, and an inventory list to assist families in keeping track of the materials. Throughout the project, families received communications translated into their family’s primary language if a language other than English was spoken at home.

Before sending backpacks home, parents were introduced to the materials at a family meeting hosted at the child’s school. Families were invited to read, listen to, and discuss the books with their child and to respond in any way they desired in the blank journal. During these meetings, parents were shown several examples of family journal responses produced by multilingual families in another project (Rowe & Dickinson, 2008). These examples contained child and family drawings as well as writing in English and the families’ home languages. The invitations in the meeting and in a letter were purposefully open-ended, encouraging parents to create responses reflecting their family’s interpretation of the book. We invited them to use their home language or English to talk about the books and create journal responses.

Each classroom was supplied with 5 to 6 backpacks containing books matched to the home languages spoken by students. Classroom teachers sent backpacks home with all ELL students on a rotating basis. Backpack distribution was timed to match the instructional units underway in the classroom, and each family had the opportunity to keep the backpack at home for one week during each of the
month-long instructional units. All ELL students took backpacks home three times between January and May.

**Book Selection and Translation**

In selecting books for the backpacks, we chose one book from the OWL curriculum that the children would hear read aloud in English as part of classroom instruction. Read-alouds of children’s books were a central feature of the OWL curriculum, with core books being read three or four times during the unit. When choosing which of the OWL books to include in the backpacks, we considered quality of story, overall appeal to families, and predictability. To expand the range of theme-related literature available in ELLS classrooms, we also provided each classroom with 10–20 supplementary books for each unit. The second backpack title for each unit was selected from this list.

Supplementary books were selected based upon guidelines that included connection to the unit theme, cultural relevance, interest and quality of illustrations, varied vocabulary, and global worldview (Wolf, Coats, Enciso, & Jenkins, 2010). In terms of cultural features, we selected books that showed insider knowledge of culture and that demonstrated a range of diverse perspectives within an ethnic group. In particular, books needed to avoid stereotypical and discriminatory images and expand understandings of local group practices. Books were also selected based upon inviting illustrations that worked with the text to move the story forward. Informational books, conceptual books, and picturebooks with interesting and unique illustration formats were also considered. Readability, age-related themes, and rich content and vocabulary also played an important role in book selection. As a set, supplementary books were intended to promote a global worldview.

We gave preference to books that were available in a second language. Dual-language texts in Spanish, Somali, and Arabic were included, though Kurdish books were difficult to locate. International books were selected based upon recommendations from the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY), Worlds of Words (WOW), and University of Arizona’s international collection of children’s and adolescent literature. (See sidebar for additional sources.) Reviews of children’s literature from Book Bird: Journal of International Children’s Literature, Language Arts, Reading Teacher, Journal of Children’s Literature, and the Amazon website were also used to inform book selection. Additionally, winners from Science Notable Trade Books, Social Studies Trade Books, Caldecott, Pura Belpré, and Coretta Scott King Awards were considered.

Despite our attempts to locate high-quality, culturally relevant texts available in English and children’s home languages, only a few titles were available in two or more of the target languages, and no titles were available in all five of the languages spoken at school and in children’s homes. Because we wanted families to have access to print in English and their home language, we created dual language copies of all texts by affixing labels with Arabic, Spanish, Kurdish, or Somali translations on the book pages. Translators were selected based upon their translation expertise and experience as well as their knowledge of the community. We developed a translation checklist for translators to follow in constructing their translations. Translators read the picturebooks several times, concentrating on the key features of the story and keeping the audience of preschoolers and their families in mind. A contextual and nonliteral translation was encouraged, and commonly known expressions used in the community were incorporated instead of word-for-word translations.

Finally, to provide all families with another means of accessing the books, we created CDs with dual-language audio recordings of them. Translators and/or ELLS team members read stories in their native language (English, Arabic, Kurdish, Spanish, Somali) page by page into a digital recorder.
Signals for page turning were inserted in the final audio performances to assist children and families in following along.

**Studying Family Responses to the Backpack Program**

We gathered logistical information about families’ participation in the backpack program by examining the materials logs that teachers used to inventory backpack contents when they were returned from homes. We tallied the number of times backpacks were taken home and returned, as well as the number and kinds of materials that were lost or damaged. Information on family attitudes and ways of interacting with the books came from two sources. First, all 249 families received a one-page survey included in the last backpack of the year. We asked parents/guardians about the number of times books were read, their thoughts on books and translations, and information about the ways the families completed the response journals. Second, we analyzed family journal entries for information about family book sharing and response. For the purposes of our analyses of family participation, a journal entry was defined as all pages a family composed in response to a single book.

To determine the overall frequency of participation, length of responses, and number of books for which responses were created, we entered demographic information for each entry, including the child’s name, book title, number of pages, who composed the entry, and the languages and sign systems used. In addition to these demographic analyses, we also used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to develop categories describing the content of families’ entries. Looking carefully at family journals, we learned a good deal about the ways families read and responded to the backpack books at home.

In the sections that follow, we first describe family participation and attitudes toward the backpack program. Next, we discuss what surveys and journals revealed about the ways families read books together. Finally, we discuss what we learned about the ways families composed journal responses, the interpretive work used to comprehend and respond to books, and how their responses varied in relation to book characteristics.

**Family Participation in the Backpack Program**

Each child enrolled in an ELLS classroom took a family backpack home three times, for a total of 747 school to home “round trips.” An initial teacher concern was the possibility that backpack books, CD players, and journals would be lost or damaged as they traveled between school and home. To assist parents with the return of materials, each backpack included an illustrated inventory sheet listing all items to be returned in the backpack. While we were prepared to make replacements, the care with which families treated backpack materials exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic members of our team. When materials were inventoried, we found that all backpack sets had been returned in good condition, with only 2 power cords, 3 books, and 5 CDs missing or in need of replacement. As described in the next section, parents and children appreciated the opportunity to read and listen to books at home in English and their home languages, and took good care of the materials.

**Family Attitudes**

About one-third (n=79) of the ELLS families responded to our end-of-year survey. Though the response rate was low, responses provide some insights into families’ attitudes about the Family Backpack Project. Survey evaluations of the backpack materials were overwhelmingly positive. The following comment was typical:

“Piensó que son libros muy buenos bien ilustrada para que los niños entiendan lo que están leyendo, con personajes muy interesantes, y vocabulario diferentes a lo que esta acostumbrados a escuchar en casa.” [I think the books are really good and well illustrated so that the children understand what they are reading, with very interesting characters and different vocabulary than they are used to hearing at home.]
Common themes in parent responses were the importance of family book reading as a learning opportunity for their child and as an enjoyable family activity.

Families who received dual-language books and CDs were especially positive about the opportunity to share books in their home languages because it allowed their children to use and learn both languages. The following comments from two families were typical.

“Si, yo estoy contenta y agradecida con ustedes, porque yo no puedo leer inglés, y a mi hijo le gusta mucho que nosotros le leamos libros, y mi me gusta leerlos en Español.” [I am very happy with you and thankful because I can’t read English and my son really likes to read books and I can read them in Spanish.]

“Pues esta bien por que aprenden los 2 idomas.” [It’s good because they learn two languages.]

**Family Book-Reading Interactions**

Families’ responses to survey questions and our analysis of their response journals provided information about family book-reading interactions. Survey results showed that many of the families read the books multiple times during the week that the family backpacks were in the home. Among the 79 respondents, 13% reported reading the family backpack books once, 52% read them twice, and 34% read them 3 or more times.

Response journals also provided us with a glimpse of family members’ roles as they read the backpack books with their child. In some journal entries, parents took up the role of teacher, commenting on the learning opportunities the books offered: “The book is great to help preschoolers with their counting. Also it teach them to care for animals in trouble.” Many parents also reported asking their children questions about the books; in some cases, they recorded comprehension questions and their child’s responses in their journal.

Parents sometimes reported their own responses to the books alongside their child’s, providing models of the kinds of meanings and perspectives adults brought to the text. The caption provided by one of Fernando’s family members at the top of his *One Dark Night* (Hutchins, 2001) entry (Figure 1) is a good example: “La bondad nos hace mas humanos.” [Kindness makes us more human.] Fernando’s parents analyzed story events to identify kindness as a central theme of the story and to connect it to core values for human living. Parents also engaged as co-learners, especially in relation to the information book *Chameleon, Chameleon*. A number of family members wrote about their excitement and interest in the new information they learned about chameleons and their habitats, providing prekindergarten students with opportunities to observe parents and siblings expressing a sense of wonder as they engaged with information books.

Some family journal entries described book-reading events that surpassed listening to or reading the text. An example comes from a family response to *The Black Book of Colors* (Cotin & Faria, 2006). In this book, raised, tactile images and Braille text are embossed in black on black pages, visually relieved only by lines of white English print:

The first thing that Jamil notice was there no colors. I told him to close his eyes and imagine the colors and to feel the page. He told me that the pictures all felt smooth and rough to him. We talked about the things in the book that stood out the most to him. He told me he really liked strawberries and the taste good to him. The grass was another one. He told me that he likes to play cook with it.

Overall, surveys and responses showed that many families not only read the books aloud, but also engaged in extended conversations about the characters, events, and information in the books.

![Image](Figure 1. Collaborative parent–child story interpretations)
Family Response Journals

Participation in the Journaling

Journal entries were also a source of information about the interpretive work and composing processes of families as they responded to backpack books. Sixty-seven percent (n=164) of ELLS families completed at least one journal entry. Among families creating journal entries, the number of books to which they responded varied as follows: 29% (n=47) responded to 1 book, 26% (n=42) responded to 2 books, 15% (n=24) responded to 3 books, 16% (n=27) responded to 4 books, 8% (n=14) responded to 5 books, and 6% (n=10) responded to all 6 books. Overall, families responded to an average of 2.7 books—about one book each time they received the backpack. Families of second language learners who received dual-language books composed journal responses at a rate somewhat higher than the group as a whole, with 76% composing at least one journal entry. Altogether, families created a total of 441 journal entries.

While the majority of families of second language learners responded in English, some used their home language or created dual-language journal responses. For example, Ximena’s parents drew objects with different colors and wrote questions in both Spanish and English. “Encuentra algo amarillo. Encuentra algo rojo. Find something yellow. Find something red.” Through dual-language journal responses, parents extended the opportunities provided by dual-language books to explore and compare how meanings were expressed in two languages.

Overall, 52% of entries were coauthored by the child with other family members, 14% were produced by a family member alone, and 35% were authored by the child alone. Among signed entries, we found that parents were frequent participants, but that brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, and uncles sometimes wrote and drew about books with the child. As in previous studies (Fain, 2006), most families settled on a style for responding, and then applied it with some consistency. Some families interpreted the task as an invitation for their child to be the primary artist and writer, and confined adult contributions to labeling children’s artwork. In other cases, older family members’ drawing and writing were featured prominently.

Family Roles in Writing and Drawing

Family response journals also provided insights about writing and drawing roles families offered their preschoolers at home and the extent to which they expected preschoolers to produce conventionally recognizable forms of writing and drawing. Given the young age of ELLS students, it is not surprising that more of the writing in the journal entries was produced by adults than children. Adults often wrote paragraphs or even whole pages of text, as Cara’s parent did in the journal entry shown in Figure 2: “Cara really enjoyed the book Clap Your Hands. It was interactive. Cara felt she was playing a game and learning at the same time.”

As in Figure 2, when children wrote, they most often wrote their names, the book title, or a short label for their drawing. Writing assessments conducted in the classroom as part of the larger ELLS project showed that, as expected for this age group, children’s writing ranged from scribbles to invented

Figure 2. Parent’s narration of her child’s book responses
spellings (i.e., using letters to stand for the first sounds of words.) However, when writing in the journals at home, most child writing was conventionally spelled, suggesting that they had collaborated with family members to produce conventional print. Though emergent writing was common at school, it appeared infrequently in the family journals. Parents showed their orientation toward conventional writing by recording words related to the story that their child copied below. Other parents likely patterned their interactions on school-based exercises, using the journal as a space for asking their child to write alphabet letters or numbers in sequence.

Artwork was featured prominently in most entries. Like print, pictures were drawn only by the child, only by an adult, or were completed collaboratively. Collaborative artwork, such as Fernando's entry for *One Dark Night* (Hutchins, 2001; see Figure 1), where his parents drew the adult characters, while he drew the child and animal characters, shows evidence of coordination between the child and family members in order to decide what each person would draw. Children's artwork ranged from Fernando's highly detailed drawing to entries like the one seen in Figure 3 where unconventional marks and shapes would not have been recognizable without the labels families provided.

Like the backpack picturebooks, many family journals included both print and drawings. These multimodal entries sometimes involved transmediation (Siegel, 1995)—movement of content encountered in one sign system (e.g., art, writing, or talk) to a new sign system. Children and their parents transferred information originally encountered in print to their drawings and vice versa.

Figure 4 reproduces a journal entry created by Nathan and his family in response to *Dear Juno* (Pak, 1999). The text of this story describes a child receiving a letter from his grandmother who lives far away in Seoul, South Korea. In their journal response, Nathan and his family created a two-column chart using arrows to represent the exchange of letters between Juno and his grandmother. The erasures suggest that Nathan received a good deal of support and that his parent guided the form of this entry. Nevertheless, entries of this type required parent and child to return to the book to review details presented in the print and illustrations. Multimodal text construction involving transmediation.
challenged authors to reconsider both the content and the form of their entry, as they selected ways of expressing meaning in the new sign system.

Overall, families used both writing and drawing to compose journal responses, and sometimes used transmediation to express book ideas in a new sign system. Most families wrote for their preschooler or supported the child in producing conventional print. At the same time, they accepted children’s scribbled drawings and frequently attached written labels to explain the child’s intentions. Invented letter-like forms and other emergent writing forms were infrequent, and appeared without adult labels to indicate children’s intended meanings.

Family Approaches to Story Comprehension

Retelling Stories

Family response journals also provided clues to the interpretive work occurring during book discussion and journaling. The most frequent types of entries were those in which families and children drew characters or objects central to the story or book topic. Figure 5, a response to Dear Juno (Pak, 1999), is typical in that it shows the main characters, Juno and his grandmother, as well as the letters they exchanged in the mail. Family entries also depicted complex scenes showing characters along with features of the setting crucial to comprehending story events. For example, Figure 6 depicts Jonathan, the protagonist of One Dark Night (Hutchins, 2001), holding a flashlight. The artwork also shows Jonathan’s house, and the rain and lightning that set the scene for the story’s central problem.

Overall, many families used journal entries to identify and unpack key information in books to support comprehension. Their summaries and statements about book themes often required inferential work that went well beyond literal comprehension.

Making Personal Connections to Books

Families also moved beyond literal retellings of texts when they made personal connections in the form of critical evaluations of the texts or book-to-life connections. Some offered general evaluation of the books (e.g., “We liked this book”) while others recorded family members’ preferences for particular parts of books. Though few critiques of books deeply analyzed the stories, when families adopted a critical stance, children had an opportunity to reflect on ways that books linked to their personal interests.
Family members provided personal interpretations ranging from a retelling of the story *One Dark Night* (Hutchins, 2001) from the perspective of a supporting character, to personal opinions about the animals depicted in the information book, *Chameleon, Chameleon* (Cowley, 2005): “The gecko looks scary.” Some journal entries made explicit connections between the stories and the family’s experiences outside of school, as in this entry for *One Dark Night* (Hutchins, 2001): “Khamari pointed out that the little boy sleeps with a stuffed monkey like his older brother.”

Another student, living far away from his grandmother, wished to exchange letters with her like the characters in *Dear Juno*: “Bernardo me comenta que quisiera que su grandma le mandara una carta igual que lado de Juno y que el le mandaria una carta a su grandma.” [Bernardo commented that he wished his grandma would send him a letter like the one Juno got, and that he could send a letter to his grandma.] Entries such as these showed that children and families talked about connections between the stories and their personal experiences, providing a natural opportunity for young readers to observe how family members made book-to-life connections to help them understand and extend what they read.

**Responding to the Differing Potentials of Children’s Books**

Finally, we noticed that the six backpack books had different affordances for activity and response. For example, the books with family themes and characters were the most likely to generate connections to families’ home experiences. The two books with special kinds of illustrations were the most likely to generate multimodal responses that went beyond traditional two-dimensional depictions of objects and people. Figure 7 is an example of Almendra’s experimentation with the mirror image techniques used in *Reflections* (Jonas, 1987).

Another book, *Clap Your Hands* (Cauley, 1997), illustrating a child’s action song, was the only book for which parents reported children physically acting out the story as they read. Finally, for the three books that were familiar to children from multiple read-alouds during classroom instruction, parents reported that their children enjoyed acting as expert readers. Overall, families’ written responses demonstrated that the books selected for the family backpacks had different potentials for action and response that were related to the nature of the genre, print, and illustrations, but also to social situations in which children had encountered them.

**Conclusions**

As a framework for organizing what we have learned about supporting home–school book reading, we return to the program design principles listed in Table 1. First, when we provided families with access to books in English and their home languages, many families took up the opportunity to read and talk with their children about the stories and to respond in family journals. This was as true for families of second language learners as for those whose first language was English. Some families who spoke languages other than English at home specifically commented in the response journals that the dual-language books and digital recordings made it possible for them to read with their
prekindergarten child, or that the books provided an opportunity for children to see and talk about their two languages.

Second, we view positive comments about receiving dual-language texts and some parents’ willingness to compose journal entries in their home languages as evidence that families of second language learners responded positively to our attempts to value their home languages. This is important both in terms of maintaining respectful home–school partnerships and because research shows that it is important for children to maintain and develop their home language while learning English at school (Wiley & de Klerk, 2010).

Third, we purposefully refrained from directly telling families how to respond to the texts. Instead, we offered open-ended invitations for families to read books in their own ways and to produce any kind of journal entry that reflected their family’s interests and ways of interacting with their prekindergarten child. The variety in journal responses suggests that families drew on funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2001) formed in family, community, and school experiences. Because families utilized their shared home experiences to interpret and respond to the backpack books, journaling provided opportunities to create their own culturally relevant texts and then to share them with teachers when journals were returned to school.

Fourth, we assumed that children’s active participation in book reading and journaling was important. Children independently or collaboratively composed journal entries portraying key story elements, identified central facts, and wrote about

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

Resources for Evaluating and Finding High-Quality Books for Young Multilingual Learners and Their Families


Provides essential information on books written by and about African Americans and incorporates strategies for using books in authentic ways in schools.


Presents a framework for learning to read in multiple languages. Offers information on including family and others in community contexts as expert reading teachers.


Provides a brief overview of Latino children’s literature in the United States and includes a recommended bibliography of children’s literature and related professional resources.


Provides readers with insight into the role of translators in children’s literature.

International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Honour List. www.ibby.org

Lists outstanding recently published books from writers, illustrators, and translators from IBBY member countries.


Examines children’s literary studies, awards, and resources.


Highlights new global authors, reviews global literature, showcases examples of teachers writing about their personal experiences using international literature in the classroom, and has a search engine for finding international literature.
book themes and connections to family life—all important comprehension activities. Book discussion was a necessary part of journaling when family members and children collaboratively composed different parts of a picture, or even when parents labeled children’s unconventional drawings.

Fifth, research (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1995) has suggested that family book reading can have an emotional component, as well as a cognitive one. An important feature of family backpack events was reading with family members with whom the child had a significant emotional bond. Entries were composed by siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the occasional neighborhood friend, demonstrating the child’s literate participation with wider social networks.

Sixth, we expected meaning making to be multimodal, and so invited families to use drawing as well as writing in the journals. Our participants combined art and writing in ways that reflected their views of the task and the capabilities of their prekindergarten child. Drawing was a central way caregivers and children represented their book responses. This was important because of the young age of our writers, and because images could be interpreted equally well across languages.

Our seventh and eighth guidelines shaped the ways we selected books for the family backpacks. We chose pairs of books with a common theme (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). One book was selected from the books children heard read aloud at school and the second from supplementary texts that provided a more diverse treatment of the instructional theme. Family responses suggest that both approaches to book selection had merit for encouraging family book reading at home. Children enjoyed being experts on familiar books, and families enjoyed many of the supplementary books because of their interesting illustrations or culturally relevant family themes. These data confirm that the book matters! Different genres and topics afford different opportunities for action, discussion, and response. Since families’ experiences, resources, and interests vary, variety is important, as are issues of cultural relevance, literary quality, and each book’s unique affordances for discussion, response, and activity. Including books from the classroom curriculum has the benefit of positioning prekindergartners as expert readers.

Finally, we designed the Family Backpack Project to promote two-way sharing of texts and literacy practices. By sending books home, we encouraged family interactions with a particular kind of schooled text—a children’s picturebook. At the same time, the journals gave families opportunities to express and display their own interests, interactions, and literacy practices. While schools often send materials and assignments home, there are

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**FAMILY MESSAGE JOURNALS**

ReadWriteThink.org has several resources on using Family Message Journals:

- **Launching Family Message Journals:** This lesson introduces Family Message Journals—a teacher-tested tool for encouraging family involvement and supporting writing to reflect and to learn.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/launching-family-message-journals-77.html

- **Family Message Journals Teach Many Purposes for Writing:** This lesson encourages children to explore authentic reasons for writing by writing messages to family members in a family message journal.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/family-message-journals-teach-82.html

- **Persuasive Writing: What Can Writing in Family Message Journals Do for Students?** This lesson engages children in using writing to their families as a persuasive tool to get what they want and need.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/persuasive-writing-what-writing-100.html

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

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fewer opportunities for families to send back materials that reflect their own interests and interaction patterns. Family journals functioned as a way of bringing family funds of knowledge into the classroom to be used as a resource for learning.

Overall, we are encouraged by the positive responses of families to opportunities to read and journal about family backpack books. Providing families with books and audio recordings in English and their home languages gave all families equal opportunities to explore books together and encouraged families to continue to support their preschoolers’ use and learning of their home language. As families made sense of the literature, they naturally shared their linguistic knowledge. The Family Backpack Project intentionally tapped the power of school and family partnerships to provide both entities with spaces for valuing bilingual voices. In settings like ours, public schools provide supports for learning English, but do not provide continuing bilingual/biliteracy education. Therefore, school support for programs that value parents’ roles as the primary teachers of their home language can help to send the message that a child’s home language is a valuable resource for learning in both languages.

References


Children’s Literature Cited


Appendix A. Children’s books included in the family backpacks (For complete bibliographic information, see “Children’s Literature Cited.”)

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