



The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal
 Volume 19, Number 1, April 2019

Engaging English Learners and Their Families: The Power of Non-Fiction Text and the Participatory Approach

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ABSTRACT

Relevant, non-fiction texts became primary teaching materials for second grade English Learners in a poor urban school in the Midwest United States. Politics, news and other current events captured children's attention, helping to engage, explore and extend their literacy confidence in the real world. The Principal Investigator employed the participatory approach (Freire, 1970) as an essential pedagogy to model and share literacy strategies with students and their families. Subscriptions to Time for Kids™ & Scholastic News™ became the teaching platforms in the classroom, then were sent home to be shared with siblings and parents. This study provided participants with physical texts and reading materials, as they did not have the financial means to use technology in their homes. Results showed that ELs' literacy skills improved measurably without the online tools, and that parents/guardians demonstrated high-level collaboration with their children using literate behaviors (Heath, 1990).

INTRODUCTION

“Literacy is an act of knowing, a creative act that should view learners as subjects in the reading process and not as objects of the educator's action” (Paulo Freire, 1994, p. xi).

One purpose of education should be in inspiring the poor to take charge of their lives and circumstance through literacy and cultural capital (Horton, 1990, Freire, 1970).

This study employed Paulo Freire's participatory approach in support of literacy development of English Learners as a means to empower them. The participants represent groups in America that are typically marginalized culturally, socially, and linguistically. The working paradigm for the research posits that literacy in a multilingual and multicultural society “is a right and not a privilege” (Lunsford, Moglen, & Slevin, 1990, p. 2).

In this article, the authors show the power of family engagement using non-fiction texts and the participatory approach that empowers the children of the poor to read the world. In the long term, such power should help them recognize their authentic cultural experiences and build their histories in the global society as productive high-functioning citizens.

According to the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools (2008), "... even when family engagement is described as minimal or poorly structured, it still makes a difference in students' daily lives and their planning for the future (see Auerbach 2007; Glick & Haohmnn-Marrott, 2007)" (p. 3). Henderson et al write that "partnerships among schools, families, and community groups are not a luxury-they are a necessity (2007, p. 1).

Research Questions

1. Can integrating non-fiction texts with the reading activities of young English learners (ELs), have a positive impact on their literacy achievements and family engagement?
2. Can teachers influence family caregivers to support literacy behaviors in the home using non-fiction materials?

Why does it matter?

Many of the children in the study, although born in the U.S., have immigrant parents who are not necessarily "legal". They might typically be classified as at-risk, struggling or English Learners (ELs). We used the term ELs inclusively, for students who are developing literacy skills in English (first language learners), as well as those who are learning English as a second language. All are poor, representing a population easily dismissed or overlooked. They are aware of the political climate - perhaps more than other children. Non-fiction topics impact all persons - every race, religion, gender and age. This connection between the world and the children was a relevant venue for exploring the learning and improvement of literacy skills.

The researchers wanted to learn about empowering participants' right to be literate. Being literate is a critical component in the 21st century, allowing people to fully participate in a multilingual and multicultural society as engaged citizens. To successfully address the needs of young English Learners (ELs), the researchers sought to nurture family engagement in collaboration with the children themselves. They wanted to observe the effectiveness of family engagement for literacy development. The participatory approach was the most suitable foundational pedagogy, allowing observation of participants' behaviors and changes in literacy practices (at school and at home) that were meaningful and relevant to lived experiences.

Successful literacy learners have familial support that creates relationship between school and home. (Wilson, 2017; Buhs, Welch, Burt, & Knoche, L, 2011; McCarthey, 2000). Non-fiction is more accessible and relevant for English Learners and struggling readers (Lambert, 2018; Silva, Delleman, & Phesia, 2013). The study depended on how non-cognitive skills - motivation, discipline, stamina and confidence - could improve ELs' literacy skills using non-fiction texts related to content areas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical basis, the participatory approach offers a critical democratic perspective (Freire, 1970). Learners are creative, active subjects in "a relationship of authentic dialogue among teachers and students" (Freire, 2017, p. 181). The researchers explored topics that "can help students feel they are in sufficient command of the learning process to perform at their

peak... ” (Shor, 1992, p. 21). It may also give economically marginalized children academic tools to access topics that impact their intellectual and social development.

Family Engagement

The researchers utilized ideas they gathered from the families. Family engagement builds capacity among educators and families to partner with one another around student success (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Families were actively engaged at the beginning of the study. They selected books and allowed their children to choose materials. They asked questions and signed consent forms, sometimes with help from a translator. Later, these adults also participated in conferences with the researchers and their child’s teacher, allowing for questions, and feedback related to ELs’ performance in literacy events (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Nonfiction & Non-cognitive Skills

What do we mean by “non-cognitive” skills? These emotional and social behaviors support intellectual growth and understanding. Cheng and Zamaro (2018) note that these qualities correlate to student success in learning. Anger and Schnitzlein (2017) report a powerful relationship between family background and student skill development - a strong argument for sharing literacy materials from school with those at home. Finally, Nichols (2017) observes that students can consciously choose to have what he calls “grit” (we call “stamina”) - and implement behaviors to support learning. Grit is also described as the power of passion and persistence (Duckworth, 2016).

Motivation is an internal state or desire that energizes behavior and gives it direction (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981).

Intrinsic motivation allows *individual* opportunities to select learning tasks to create curiosity. One child declared that his life’s work was to be a paleontologist. From that time forward, he avidly gathered and read everything he could on this topic.

Extrinsic motivation provides clear expectations and allows opportunities to engage in *social* learning activities. When the researchers invited the children to discuss what they might like to be when they grew up, each child chose differently, but as a group they selected roles they could study and “try on” for future reference.

Discipline is the ability to monitor and control one’s own behaviors. The ELs had to learn to wait their turn before interacting one-on-one with the PI. At first, this was difficult. As time passed, all of them learned to stay engaged until it was their turn (Laitsch, 2006).

Stamina is the ability to “sit in one spot, not moving” allowing children to focus on practicing desired behaviors and attending to the task at hand (Boushey & Moser, 2014, pp. 46-48). ELs learned, in time, to remain engaged for the full 50 minutes. The PI gave them five-minute breaks to do Total Physical Response Activities (Asher, 1982, 2009), to help “students gain confidence in classroom participation” (Herrell & Jordan, 2016, p. 28). This allowed them to sit quietly and engage in other desirable behaviors. Regrettably, English Language programs do not generally offer longer periods of instructional time.

Confidence is an individual’s belief that he or she can be successful in organizing and executing the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1986). ELs’ increasing grasp on literacy acquisition was crucial to their confidence and learning. At the start of the study, one child used to sigh and skip words that were unknown to him. He grew confident about asking for explanations of new words.

The participatory approach proved to be an effective pedagogy to engage ELs, using their experiences and cultures to empower curiosity and interest. They were learning to read and reading to learn. Current practice is to “standardize knowledge in a multicultural society” (Sleeter & Stillman, 2017). This does not work for all children, especially those who do not come from “mainstream” America. High stakes testing and assessment, along with the Common Core Standards, create inordinate pressure on teachers, children and their families to conform to a way of learning that involves frequent assessment and quantitative results (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011).

The PI wanted to collaborate with her students, to prepare them for the right to *be* literate in a global society that requires high-functioning literate workers and engaged citizens. The nonfiction materials she shared with them (and sent home for families) covered topics such as *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA) and immigration policies. These issues impacted ELs emotionally and psychologically. They were often upset by national and international developments. They and their families had opinions about these events and discussed them at home and in the classroom. The PI also worried about the ELs and their families. She engaged in “the caring teacher’s role...the student’s welfare” (Noddings, 1984, in Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). She showed caring by encouraging ELs to express and share concerns.

Using non-fiction texts with young literacy learners is an important way to grow literate thinkers. Vygotsky (1978) notes, “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes...able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (p. 90). Using the paper magazines was a deliberate choice. Only one of the students had access to the internet at home; the others did not and their families could not afford to be “online”. The paper copies offered a way for collaboration in the learning experience. In addition, these students are from Generation Z (GenZ), the generation born between 1996 and 2011 (Lanier, 2017). According to Cilliers (2017), teaching GenZs include adapting a student-centered learning approach comprising “a demand for instant information, visual forms of learning and replacing ‘communication’ with ‘interaction’” (p. 195). The non-fiction materials feature colorful visuals, authentic, and culturally relevant themes, and pertinent topics, which encourage creative and critical thinking skills. Topics included real world problems, such as global warming, climate change, cultural events, literature, and immigration policies.

The ELs in this study are from low-income backgrounds. Four are children of immigrant families from Mexico. The PI found that they were always hungry. She made sure healthy snacks were always available.

Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) write that “Immigrants [understand] ...the importance of learning English as a key to getting ahead” (p. 158) and, “...cultural background does emphasize self-initiated achievement as well as the notion that hard work is critical for success” (p.183). While many of the ELs’ guardians could not speak English, they made considerable effort to work with a translator in order to support their children. It must be noted that *all* of the ‘engaged families’ in this study - Hispanic, White, and African American.

To establish an opening dialogue between caregivers and instructors, the PI and her associate convened the *Family Engagement Event*, in August 2017. Families were invited to attend and learn about the research. Refreshments, free children’s books, and information about the study were shared with everyone. The school translator attended. Face-to-face interactions, conferences (October, 2017 and February, 2018), and written exchanges supported continued communication among the families, their children, and the researchers.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a mix of qualitative methods to “produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 14). This form of naturalistic inquiry “... sets out to understand and document the day-to-day reality of the setting” (p. 42). The PI kept daily logs of her interactions with children. Together, the team identified trends, analyzed themes, and studied each EL’s situation, behaviors, written and reading evidence, and assessment outcomes. Thus, the theoretical traditions and essential aspects of ethnographic research were implemented.

“Ethnographers use the methods of participant observation and intensive fieldwork...What makes the approach distinct is the matter of interpreting and applying the findings from a cultural perspective” (Patton, 1990, p. 68). Since there were only seven ELs, the team also used a case study approach - a way of “... making sure that the information for each case is as complete as possible” (p. 384).

Once approved by the IRB, the researchers used a purposeful sampling method; only students in one classroom were recruited. Most were African-American, but there were four Hispanic students, and a few White students in the second-grade classroom. Those who returned a signed informed consent from their legal guardians participated. The consent form was translated by a bilingual, Spanish-speaking translator in the school, who volunteered to translate the form and letters shared with guardians. Four English Learners (three boys and one girl) and three native-born English speakers (two African American boys and one White boy) were recruited. Before participating, they signed an assent form. All students received free breakfast and lunch. The ELs and the English speakers in the PI’s classroom were given a 50-minute instruction, the former meeting five times a week and the latter three times. The ELs did not miss regular reading sessions in their home classroom.

The researchers employed what Geertz (1973) called “thick description” (p. 5)...“doing ethnography...establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts...” (p 6). The associate researcher kept notes when she observed. She attended the *Family Engagement Event* and parent/teacher conferences in the fall and early spring. ELs were always present during the conferences. She was also permitted to interact freely, which allowed her to ask questions, observe, and offer resources. Quantitative data was tracked each time the ELs took the STAR reading test.

The first focus of this study was to support students who struggle with reading and enhance their literacy skills. Student thought processes were facilitated by linking lived experiences and cultural resources to extend receptive and expressive literacy. Jensen (2009) observes that the socioeconomic background of parents and “inattention from care providers has a huge impact on the children’s developing language skills and future IQ scores” (p. 35). Poverty impacts the availability and use of printed materials in the home. Jensen (2009) comments on how reading, “requires attention, focus, and motivation from the primary caregiver...unfortunately in short supply among poor families” (p. 37).

The researchers used high quality non-fiction texts for content area reading and writing. The teacher modeled and had ELs practice enjoyable literacy activities in the classroom. After that, the material was sent home to be shared with families.

Another focus of this study was to help parents be active participants in the literacy education of their children. The researchers encouraged interaction with ELs using participatory strategies (Shor, 1992) that help develop literacy skills. Parents and teachers encourage the child

to do just a bit more than he does or she normally would (Vygotsky, 1978), using the *zone of proximal development* approach. Gradually, reading should become more integrated into daily habits, expanding student vocabulary and developing sentence structures and discourse patterns in speech and writing.

About the Principal Investigator: The Teacher

The PI used the *Participatory approach*, called the Freirean Approach (Spener, 1992), that incorporates themes or content area of interest to the learners. Themes derive from real issues that affect students' daily lives. Language learning is used as a vehicle to solve social problems. Various activities can be incorporated to develop all language domains in the process. The PI used non-fiction materials to pique student interest and invite meaningful exploration, helping ELs to make connections between content areas and their lives.

Research shows that "...Most teachers have little or no training in language acquisition or bilingual education" (Ziegenfuss, Odhiambo, & Keyes, 2014). Fortunately, the PI has extensive training in second language acquisition. English is a second language for her, and her academic experiences and achievements are centered on teaching others English in a culturally responsive manner. Ziegenfuss et al. (2014) propose that the first thing an instructor must do is choose an approach. They observe that many ELs "fall behind in curriculum content material" (p. 60). The PI selected the participatory approach, determined to use content specific material so her students would acquire language and develop comprehension skills in academic content areas.

Establishing the Environment

The PI made sure her students were fed and comfortable. Her classroom was full of visuals, pictures, and printed materials, showing current events and stories. She checked their physical, mental, and emotional well-beings, each day, looking at them closely upon greeting and listening carefully to their responses. She showed what Van Manen (1986) called "tact" toward her students. She communicated with siblings and parents often. She made sure to model that reading is fun, using enthusiasm, gestures, expression and tone to engage them when introducing new materials or reading aloud. She demonstrated, through her interest in *their* interests and respect for *their* concerns, that their curiosities and learning preferences were valued and integrated in lessons.

Strategies

The PI used student lived experiences and cultural capital (Gay, 2010) focusing on characteristics of *Communicative Language Teaching* (Brown & Lee, 2015).

Communication and meaningful dialogues were essential to reading non-fiction texts in this class. She used authentic materials. *Scholastic NewsTM* has content area stories and current issues of interest to children - like homework policies. *Time for KidsTM* has current events, politics, health and science, culture and education. ELs had opinions as they accessed this information, and tended to be excited to read more, discuss, and share their understandings.

The PI provided "just right" books (Boushey & Moser, 2014) and time to read them. Although the ELs were 2nd graders, reading materials K-6 were always available. The PI shared

advanced materials with all students. She found that those who were “behind” recognized they needed more effort to catch up. Those who were already advanced continued to read more complex materials, learning quickly that they were responsible for answering “Why” questions. They began to anticipate, and prepare to answer, which further developed their metacognition and confidence.

The Associate Researcher

The associate researcher took field notes; asked questions; offered feedback; interacted with parents, teachers, and children, and engaged in reflective inquiry dialogue with the PI. A professor of literacy education, she has worked with students from birth through adulthood, and learners with diverse needs from diverse backgrounds. Her scholarship includes multicultural education and language and literacy acquisition. She and the PI conferenced regularly, reviewing data, discussing students and their needs, and exploring the effects of the PI’s teaching strategies.

The Classroom Teacher

The second-grade teacher was a veteran. While she had only 20 students, the majority of them were reading well below grade level. She was the only teacher in the building to commit to the study. She granted permission to the researchers to participate in parent teacher conferences and interacted with the researchers, but chose not to participate in the study itself.

Student Profiles

Albert was the most talkative of the EL group. He was in trouble nearly every day in his classroom. He had a remarkable repertoire of social expressive vocabulary and craved conversation to the point of annoyance for his teachers. He had great difficulty transferring his verbal skills to written language. This alerted the researchers to a possible learning challenge. His grandfather was engaged in Albert’s progress, but could not read or write. Albert’s single mother worked full time and was not available. Her expectations were clear, however; she wanted Albert to be “good” and be obedient.

Andy’s parents speak Spanish and he needed additional academic support for content area reading. The mother spoke only Spanish, but was proactive in support of her son, and collaborated consistently with researchers and the school translator. Andy’s family participated in the *Family Engagement Event*, conferences, and some classroom observations. The father and youngest child were both shy but very attentive.

Evan had remarkable family support. His parents participated in all activities including the *Family Engagement Event*. The mother speaks only Spanish, but the father has basic English skills. When there was an occasion to interact, they were proactive and requested the school translator. Evan’s older sister often served as translator. A younger child was also always present.

Ian was on level for grade two, but needed support for academic language. His mother is taking graduate classes, and his father works full time. They were not able to attend the study events. The PI had one encounter with Ian’s mother to explain the study and obtain permission. She trusted the researchers to support Ian’s literacy development. His progress was slower than the others, but did make academic advances. He was quiet, but, given an opportunity, became a

lively and engaging speaker. He was eager to please, and participated willingly in all student activities.

Jimmy was the most outspoken EL. He loved reading so much; he got into trouble with his classroom teacher every day. He would “sneak read” when he was supposed to be doing assigned worksheets. He hid his homework from parents so he could read instead. He loved to talk, so he had difficulty fitting in to his classroom teacher’s structure. Both parents speak English, have college degrees, and are very engaged in their children’s lives. Both work full time, but made it a point to engage in the study.

Liam was a social person, who sometimes got into trouble for talking or playing in class. His teacher offered him for the EL group even though he was well above grade level when the study began. Liam’s grandmother seemed to be the primary caregiver and participated in social occasions and interactions with the research team. Liam enjoyed talking about reading and content area topics.

Mary, quiet by nature, was the only girl in the EL group. Her mother speaks only Spanish, but Mary is bilingual. She can speak and understand English, but still needed support with academic talk, reading, and writing in the content areas. At first, she was often the last person to receive the teacher’s attention, but this changed later in the study.

Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation

Figure 1 shows the introductory data for the EL group.

Study Name	Ethnicity	Sex	Grade	First Language	USA arrival	EL status	Free Breakfast & lunch
Albert	African American	M	2	English	born	English Speaker	Yes
Andy	Hispanic	M	2	Spanish	born	EL	Yes
Evan	Hispanic	M	2	Spanish	born	EL	Yes
Ian	Hispanic	M	2	Spanish	born	EL	Yes
Jimmy	African American	M	2	English	born	English speaker	Yes
Liam	White	M	2	English	born	English Speaker	Yes
Mary	Hispanic	F	2	Spanish	born	EL	Yes

Figure 2 shows academic performance for the ELs, prompting researchers to discuss differentiated instruction for each child. The school uses the Renaissance STAR reading program, a standards-based, computer-adaptive assessment to measure students’ reading comprehension aligned to the state-specific learning standards. The first number refers to grade level; decimal points represent months.

Name	September 2017	October 2017	November 2017	December 2017	January 2018	February 2018	March 2018
Albert	0.6	1.2	1.7	1.8	1.9		Moved away
Andy	2.1	No Record	2.8	1.9	2.7		3.4
Evan	0.9	1.0	1.5	1.8	1.9		2.3
Ian	2.3	No Record	1.9	2.5	2.4		2.7
Jimmy	2.4	No Record	2.7	1.7	2.9		3.9
Liam	3.4	No Record	3.5	3.0	3.3		4.0
Mary	1.9	1.8	2.3	No Record	2.2		2.6

Beginning of the Study

The researchers established key points for data collection and conferencing throughout the study. The PI gave the STAR reading tests at regular intervals, recording student progress monthly. This data was included in the researchers' reflective inquiry dialogues (Cardiff, 2012; Burgh & Yorshansky, 2011).

The associate researcher visited the school several times. She and the PI conducted reading interest surveys with the children, reviewed them, and discussed options for addressing individual needs. The researchers engaged in reflective inquiry dialogues, which, using Cardiff's (2012) definition is a three-stage process. Researchers reflected individually on the context, then shared a narrative description with the other researcher. Finally, the team interpreted findings through shared dialogue related to the contextual and specific observations. They discussed reading scores, but also delved into the challenges and gifts ELs brought to the study with their social, emotional, and intellectual qualities. "Learning," says Shor (1992) "works best when it is an active, creative process" (p. 21).

Reflective Inquiry Dialogues

The PI and her fellow researcher met bi-weekly to review data and engage in reflective inquiry dialogues. While they discussed each EL every time, their insights did not fall in any particular order for each child. One of the earliest conversations was about Mary. The PI noticed that she was very passive during the EL sessions, and worried that she was not as engaged as the others. Through reflective inquiry dialogue, the researchers realized that Mary was always the last one addressed during the EL sessions. They discussed giving her more attention and moving her place in the session forward. The PI acted on this and Mary blossomed - initiating conversations and participating in-group talk. Initially, she was performing slightly below grade level, but by the end of the study, she had advanced nearly one year. Her scores showed she was ready for third grade reading.

The next dialogue concerned Andy. He was cherished, the first-born son in his family. His mother was supportive of his literacy learning. He had difficulty focusing on the topic at

hand - an avid reader, who quickly lost interest. The PI gave him more complex tasks to keep him engaged and she differentiated instruction to help him accomplish literacy tasks better suiting his level of ability. Level of interest was important here. Andy's scores sagged midway through the study, which was when the researchers realized he was bored. The PI allowed him to read the book he brought with him to her sessions, (something he was not permitted to do in the regular classroom). Andy had the freedom to read what he wanted to read until the PI needed his attention. Having a choice made a significant difference for Andy. His scores went up to above grade level.

Ian was obedient, to the point of passivity. Unless the PI engaged him directly, he did nothing during the EL sessions. He worried about "getting into trouble," which made him nearly invisible in the classroom. The researchers wondered how to engage and motivate him to develop his literacy skills. They realized that he was not allowed to talk much at school. He needed to talk and read. The PI began to call upon him directly, and gave him more time. The increased interaction helped - he began to progress in his grade level in small increments. His family moved right after the study ended. In their dialogue session, the researchers noted that Ian needed more family involvement in his literacy journey (Buhs et al, 2011).

Then there was Jimmy. This boy was excited by everything, particularly science. He told the researchers he wanted to be a paleontologist - and used appropriate and advanced terminology on this topic with great enthusiasm. He was the most active EL participant. He loved to read. He loved to talk, too. His interests were wide ranging and he enjoyed the nonfiction materials the PI used with the group. He loved the *Time* and *Scholastic* materials. He advanced rapidly in the EL group, progressing well past grade level by the end of the study. During reflective inquiry dialogue, the researchers investigated the possibility of Jimmy's having gifted intellectual abilities that might require specialized support. This observation was shared with the mother, who was surprised and a little dubious, since his enthusiasm often expressed itself by being in trouble in his regular classroom. However, she was open to conversation on this topic and later reported that her son asked if he could be in the PI's classroom instead of his usual one. She decided to have him tested for gifted services. A letter came from his mother that spring.

"Dr. S,

Thank you for working with [Jimmy]. I have seen the progress he has made while working with you. He also enjoys reading the *Scholastic News* and *Time for Kids* magazines you send home with him. My son has also asked me to subscribe to those magazines. Again, thank you, [Jimmy's mother's signature]".

At first, Liam was very passive, although he perked up in the EL group. He sat alone in the regular classroom. After studying his situation, the researchers deemed he would benefit from being tested for gifted services. His grandmother was educated and very involved in school activities. She encouraged Liam to work hard in class. At home, she worked with him by sharing the materials he brought from school and engaging him in conversations about them. He progressed rapidly and was at a fourth-grade reading level at the end of the study. His grandmother was very impressed with the EL initiative. She wrote a letter to the researchers, showing the engaged participation between "school" and "community" (Heath, 1983).

"From the X Family

To: Dr. S,

Dear Dr. S,

Our family just wants to express how much your teaching has helped our student at [school], [and Liam's full real name is noted]. It is amazing how above his reading level has become under your guidance. [Liam] can now read and understand words that some adults find difficult! This is a wonderful program that all students at [school] could benefit from. It is so good to see [Liam] excited about learning! Thank you again, Dr. S. [school] elementary is lucky to have you as a teacher, and so is [Liam]! Sincerely, [Signed by three women in Liam's family]"

Evan was always tired and very thin; he depended heavily on his older sister for translation and social interactions. He was the child who sighed when meeting unfamiliar words and was inclined to simply give up. In reflective dialogue with her associate, the PI determined that Evan needed a referral to the school nurse and counselor. The translator became involved and discovered that there were difficulties at home. Evan had trouble sleeping because of angry interactions between his parents. Evan began to receive counselling services, and the PI gave him more attention. She made sure he had enough to eat. She established a safe environment for him so he could relax and read. He began to improve rapidly. Despite personal problems in the home, both parents and all siblings attended the *Family Engagement Event* and conferences. They used translation help, informally through the oldest sibling, and formally, with the school translator. Evan moved from a .09 to a 2.3 STAR score at the end of the study.

Albert's grandfather attended the *Family Engagement Event*, but was not, himself, literate. His mother worked nights, but came to school conferences. She worried about Albert's misbehavior. He was often alone at home, but was eager to learn. He needed a friend - someone to listen to and talk with him. He was very articulate and had an excellent, even superior grasp of verbal English. However, he had an enormous amount of difficulty in writing and hence in deciphering written text. The PI worked with him by having him say the word and pointing to it so he could practice connecting the spoken with written words. He finally began to recognize "sight" words, a delayed area for him that caused him to misbehave as a way to deflect attention. Once the PI understood this, she took time to catch him up with material he could practice without shame. This is another good reason to use non-fiction text (Stygles, 2016). Albert made substantial growth - starting below grade level at kindergarten level and making it almost to second grade. Unfortunately, he moved away just before the research concluded.

RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The study ended in March of 2018. However, the researchers were able to continue to monitor five of the ELs reading progress because they returned to the same school in the following year. One student moved to another school district and another moved to different school in the same district.

At the time of this writing, Jimmy has been identified as gifted and has been recommended for appropriate services. Mary's reading scores indicate steady and rapid increases and she is now in a "regular" classroom. Evan and Andy are showing steady progress in reading. Liam is reading well above grade level, with scores showing 4th grade competence.

Classroom teachers are encouraged to take action to support family engagement for their ELs. Do discuss participatory approach practices through engaged family literacy at home. Send home resources used in the classroom that connect school and home literacy practices. When

families were actively engaged in interacting and communicating with the school (e.g. letters, meetings, conferences, and social events), ELs' literacy skills improved measurably.

Evan and Andy both showed a significant increase in math skills that seemed to coincide with their improved reading scores. A future study might examine whether or not the acquisition of skill in one area (literacy) supports equal development in another area (math).

School administrators supported this study, and provided food for the *Family Engagement Event*. New books were donated for "just right reads" that students could take home and keep. The researchers helped to create a space for family engagement, connecting them with the school in a meaningful way. Despite the economic marginalization of these families, literacy development was successful, with potential for life-changing options for the ELs and their families. This study could be replicated in any urban elementary school where socially "at-risk" children and their families are often found.

The participatory approach, through dialogue, empowered these young literacy learners. They acquired or honed non-cognitive skills to develop English proficiency in collaboration with their families and teacher. This affirms the importance of family engagement in the development of literate readers and thinkers. The data showed that the three ELs with siblings performed better than the one "only" child. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) note, "Immigrant students are less likely to turn to parents for help with school-related tasks; they tend to rely more on siblings" (p. 166). This should be considered in future studies.

CONCLUSION

Participants and researchers were subjects and partners, jointly responsible for relationship in which all grow and learn. "The students - no longer docile listeners - are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p. 81).

The researchers continue to be interested in using authentic practical non-fiction texts relevant to students' stories and experiences. They believe that literacy is a powerful resource for ELs to read the world, build their lives, and employ critical thinking as they find their roles in the increasingly competitive global community. Many of the families involved in the study still communicate with the PI, which indicates that the relationship established between school and home has resilience. Recently, the PI and children examined an article about *The Government Shutdown*, which is a very important topic right now to immigrant communities. The children asked her about different parties, government agencies, funding, and what the government shut down means and why it happened. The power of using non-fiction with young learners connects them to issues that have power and value in their lives.

ELs' literacy skills improved measurably without using online tools and technology. English Language programs do not generally offer longer periods of instructional time. Different levels of non-fiction texts, featuring culturally relevant topics, allowed the PI and the ELs to effectively use their learning time to interact with one another. When the PI talked with her students about the three branches of government and social studies in general, she discovered that they had not encountered these topics. The curriculum values linguistic and mathematical measures over the "real world" challenges of geopolitical events. For these ELs, and probably many others like them, this is a serious omission in developing their knowledge about citizenship and responsible social action. "The overwhelming tendency of education today is to simplify, standardize, and make predictable. What society must recognize is that literate behaviors allow

us to address complexities, promote creative problem identification and solution, and chart new directions for learning” (Heath, 1990, p. 303).

ELs were empowered to recognize their authentic and creative power as literate thinkers and readers, accessing the *word* and the *world* through non-fiction texts. Alienation, a deciding factor in student disengagement in academic work, is defeated with fully engaged and inclusive participation. Young literacy learners, with the support of teachers and families, are capable of overcoming limitations and become engaged users of literacy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Mr. Ray, former principal and Ms. Edwards, current principal, supported this study helping the participants subscribe to non-fiction texts and holding the family engagement event during the course of this study. We learned a lot from children in this study and their families, who are active engaged learners. They are very resilient in the American society of multilingual and multicultural groups.

Our thanks, too, to KMOS public radio at the University of Central Missouri, for donating new books to the children and their families.

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