Decolonizing family literacy in a culture circle: Reinventing the family literacy educator’s role

LOUI V. REYES New Mexico State University, USA
MYRIAM N. TORRES New Mexico State University, USA

Abstract There is a growing ideological divide in the field of family literacy between programs that are striving to colonize families with middle-class European-American literacy practices, and those based on Freire’s philosophy which works toward affirming diverse family literacy practices. The Freirean alternative includes ‘culture circles’ for the growth of critically conscious participants and family educators, who work toward ‘reading the word and the world’ while working to transform that world into a better place for all. Organizing various culture circles has enabled the authors to examine critically and co-reconstruct a reflective narrative on the role of the culture circle’s ‘co-coordinator’ or ‘leader’, as well as to reinvent themselves as ‘decolonizing family literacy educators’. This article is a step in this reinvention.

Keywords childcare and development; childcare training programs; early childhood literacy; family literacy; relative children care

Introduction
Family literacy is not a new concept. Family literacy programs have been part of social work and community health programs for many years. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), family literacy has become a part of school activities; first, it was a background activity and now it is in the foreground.

A literature review of family literacy programs reveals various focuses. There are programs that focus more on how to ‘fix’ the child’s family and communities (e.g. Bird, 2005; Snow et al., 1991; Taylor, 2005). Other programs focus more on how to ‘fix’ the child (e.g. Anlung et al., 1990).
Other types of family literacy programs are rooted in the liberal compassionate ‘pobreza’ (pity) type of attitude, discourse, and practices (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 1995). Those who follow this approach accept differences among families, but naively work to ‘help’ them become literate as if the families had no literacy practices and were living in a vacuum. They take on a caring, supporting role for these ‘poor people’ who are unable to care ‘appropriately’ for their children. For example, consider a European-American middle-class family literacy educator who genuinely believes that the schools are not serving the families of poor and immigrant children, and she is angry at this reality. She expresses her care for those families by showing them the ‘right track’—how to become literate within the frame of her own culture. What is problematic with this scenario is that she is not aware of the various and equally valid popular family literacy practices. She does not acknowledge the power unbalance between schools and those non-mainstream families, which is actually the very thing she is fighting against.

Early childhood family literacy is situated in the intersection between the areas of family literacy and early childhood literacy. Traditionally the early childhood domain has been rooted in the psychological theories of child development, which is considered endogenous to the individual, and enacted by environmental conditions. Consequently, the success of a given early childhood family literacy program relies heavily on the performance of individual children. Thus, it becomes easy to blame the child or his/her family when a given literacy program fails, rather than examining the relevance of the program to the culture and life experiences of the children and their families. The deficit thinking model (Valencia, 1997) is embedded in the rationale and evaluation of these types of programs (Hannon, 2003). There are other perspectives of early childhood family literacy programs that are rooted in the sociocultural perspectives. Razfar and Gutiérrez (2003) demonstrate how the sociocultural view of early literacy helps educators understand the culturally mediated character of learning and the situatedness of cognitive functioning in cultural and social contexts. In the same vein, but with critical lenses, we situate our early childhood family literacy approach, described later, as participatory, democratic, liberating, and dialogical, hence based on the work by Freire (1992), Fals-Borda (1985), and Lankshear (1993), among others. We cannot agree more with Hall et al.’s (2003) editors as well as with all the authors of the Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy in their purpose to focus on children’s and their families’ strengths and potentialities, and not on their weaknesses.

Traditionally non-mainstream families have been ‘colonized’ by measuring them against the European-American middle-class family literacy practices (Ada and Zubizarreta, 2001; Panofsky, 2000; Valdés, 1996). Most family literacy programs implemented at schools and other organizations, despite having good intentions, are actually motivated by the idea of ‘fixing’ those non-mainstream families, rather than collaboratively identifying and solving the problems that alienate both the families and their children and obstruct their progress toward full literacy.

The majority of family literacy projects are conceived and implemented within an instrumentalist and utilitarian view of education and are imposed arbitrarily, having the greatest impact on non-mainstream families. The model followed is often referred to as ‘functional literacy’ (similar to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] worldwide programs) and is driven by the ‘efficiency’ paradigm. Andrade et al. (2000) call it ‘competence-based-skills banking education’. According to this model, the needs assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation of a family literacy program are determined and controlled by experts either in the school system or at other institutions. Families become fair targets to be changed or trained to improve their ‘parenting skills’ with the ultimate goal of supporting the school work of their children (Panofsky, 2000; Valdés, 1996). These programs are of doubtful success due to the colonizing mentality that underlies the understanding of family literacy problems and solutions. The end result is actually more marginalization from school for those families, given the fact that such special programs actually turn into tracking systems (De Carvalho, 2001). In brief, these family literacy programs fall short because they take those practices that are different from the ‘norm’ (Eurocentric middle-class practices) as ‘deficient’ without understanding literacy practices and possibilities in the context of participants’ cultures and languages. Our critical family literacy approach, even though it is still in the margins, not only opposes the problems of the deficit-thinking model, but creates venues for the empowerment of families and/or child caretakers, as demonstrated in this article.

The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) Describe and document the colonization and decolonization process of a family literacy program as evidenced by the participants’ engagement in a ‘culture circle’; and (2) Describe and critique the role of the ‘decolonizing family literacy educator’ in navigating the complex dynamics of a culture circle inherent in a Freirean-based family literacy project. In order to do this, the authors have co-reconstructed a reflective narrative of the lived experience of the first author who was a consultant and family literacy educator in the project reported here.
About the relative-care family literacy program

The state in which this program was carried out had established education policies on family literacy that are rooted in the deficit-thinking model of ‘fixing’ families. To comply with these education policies the state made funding available for new programs. The program referred to in this article began as a response to the state’s public Request for Proposals. The first author participated in writing the proposal based on the possibility of building a more socially and culturally responsive family literacy program, one distinct from the mainstream programs already in operation in the state. However, as with all State initiatives, the ‘statement of work’ outlined the specific outcomes expected in alignment with state competence standards applying to early care and education. The development of the Relative-Care Curriculum was as follows: first, there were created seven three-member teams composed of experts in the field of early childhood and family-daycare providers. The developers of the family literacy curriculum, who were called ‘consultants’, had to have experience with adult training and at least three years of working with young children; at the minimum, they had an associate of arts degree in early childhood or a related field. Consultants were recruited from the communities in which the family literacy project would be implemented. The role of the consultants was to plan and actually provide the training of the participants in the Relative-Care Curriculum project. Each consultant was responsible for developing a module by starting with a literature review on the topic of the assigned module, guided by ‘best practices’ and ‘competencies’, as defined by the State’s early childhood professional development system (Turner, 2002). Second, each team was assigned a module with the set of competence standards to be used to guide its development. Third, the teams met in a large group and presented their modules to receive feedback from the other teams for revising the modules. Fourth, upon revision of the modules, the seven three-member teams received training in adult learning principles and the delivery of the Relative-Care Curriculum. Fifth, two teams were selected to carry out an 18-hour pilot program of the Relative-Care Curriculum training, one in a rural community and the other in an urban community.

Pilot Study

The family literacy project had the overall purpose of providing formal training to caregivers who care for children of their relatives. Caregivers included grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. The pilot project was implemented during a four-month time span, during which nine modules were presented as follows: (1) child growth and development, (2) guidance, (3) learning environments, (4) social and emotional development, (5) business practices, (6) literacy and numeracy, (7) language, (8) family and community, and (9) health and safety. Each module was assigned two hours for its implementation. The total Relative-Care Curriculum training project lasted 18 hours and was offered every other week for two hours on agreed days.

Participants

Participants in this pilot study were recruited by a local early-childhood training agency from a rural and an urban setting. The participants were mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, cousins, aunts, and uncles, who provided care to children of their relatives. Participants included in the report, which constitutes the basis for this article, were all Latinos from a rural setting.

Twenty participants were involved in the project: 2 males (1 grandfather and 1 uncle) and 18 women (of whom 9 were grandmothers, and the others were aunts and cousins). They provide care for the children of their relatives (sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, cousins). The majority of the families of the children under relative care would be considered as dual parent (mother and father); the single ones were headed by the mother. The average number of children in families was three. The community in which the families live has almost no employment opportunities, making it necessary to commute to a large border city and to a middle-size city for employment in low paying service labor. In the dual families both parents were employed. Because the community where the families live lacks center-based childcare, these families rely heavily on family members for care of their young children. That was the main reason for choosing this rural community to carry out this pilot project. Participants involved in the Relative-Care Curriculum project were between 20 and 70-years old. The participants care for relatives’ children ranging from birth to 13-years old. The first language of all participants was Spanish; 15 of them were first generation Latino immigrants, and the other 5 were recent immigrants themselves.

Setting

The family literacy pilot study took place in a ‘colonia’ located in a rural community in southern New Mexico, and in a middle-size city. In this article we report on the project in the rural community. The community is considered a colonia, according to the federal and state governmental categories. It is defined as: ‘... unincorporated border communities that often lack adequate water and sewer systems, paved roads, and safe, sanitary housing’ (http://maps.oag.state.tx.us/collgeog/colonias.htm). However, this geographic category is different from the
Spanish use of the term colonia, which refers to a neighborhood that is an officially recognized segment of a city. As we can see, the term has been embedded with a negative connotation, which applies also to its inhabitants. This borderland colonia has a population of 6,117 (2000 Census). The median resident age is 28.6 years. The median household income is US$22,692/year. Races in this community include: Hispanic (64.5%); White Non-Hispanic (31.9%); Native American (2.2%); Black (1.3%).

Relative-Care Curriculum facilitators in the rural community
There were three facilitators: the first author (Latino with a doctoral degree in Early Childhood Education) was the leader of the team, with two women (Latinas, completing their masters’ degrees in Early Childhood Education). Their average experience in the field of early care and education was 20 years. Their experience included: center-based childcare, home childcare, resource and referral, training, and out-of-school time. All three members of the team are very committed to working with low-income, marginalized Latino communities.

Inquiry approach of the pilot study The pilot study was set up as an evaluative research. The process was as follows:
1. Identification of parameters and indicators for evaluation: participants’ satisfaction index; participants’ input concerning the organization of the Relative-Care Curriculum modules (units); participants’ and trainers’ input about the usefulness of the content, as well as comments on the appropriateness of the scheduled times and days for the training sessions.
2. Construction and/or definitions of the instruments for data collection.
   The sources of data included participants’ pre-self-assessment, evaluation of each module by participants and providers of the training, field notes by trainers, final evaluation, videotapes of a session, and collegial dialogues among trainers.
3. Design of the plan for collecting information.
4. Gathering data based on the parameters and indicators.
5. Review by trainers and project coordinators of the data collected.
6. Passing the data to an external evaluator to analyze and recommend improvements for the training program. At this point it entered into the bureaucratic process in which the authors are not involved.

Alternative study of the family literacy experience
Actually, this report is a reflective narrative co-constructed through a sustained collegial dialogue between the authors based on their lived experiences in the field of family literacy, especially the experience of the first author in the pilot study described. We understand reflective narrative as the examination of the whole situation toward understanding colonizing mainstream family literacy practices, as well as exploring ways for decolonization.

We conducted a careful examination of the data collected in the pilot study using Paulo Freire’s approach to family literacy. We used this approach as a theoretical framework to analyze the data and organize the emergent themes that included the voices of participants in the culture circle. Succinctly, literacy means that participants learn to read and write the world and the world, starting from their own reality (Freire, 2005). This approach to literacy includes democratic participation in building the curriculum to make it relevant and socially responsive, engagement in a relational and liberating pedagogy, promotion of ‘conscientization’, collective and transformative action aimed first of all toward benefiting the participants and their communities.

We share a mutual interest in the Freirean approach to family literacy as a way of working toward social justice. We have been involved with several community projects targeting family literacy for Latinos. Our work specifically includes the deconstruction of the metanarratives in early childhood literacy, and critical media literacy of children’s literature and media entertainment. We are very engaged in building culture circles in these Latino communities as a means to promote critical understanding of the balance between their own family literacy practices and those imposed on them by the governmental and social agencies, as well as to build their collective conscientization and countervailing power. We believe that this is a good path toward decolonization of family literacy.

Theoretical framework for decolonizing family literacy practices
Decolonizing discourse, as celebrated by postmodernists and post-colonialists, works toward rethinking the Eurocentric systems of thought, reasoning, and ways of knowing and teaching, and making them no longer tenable. Although not completely in the same postmodernist decolonizing frame, we built upon this postmodernist tone using Paulo Freire’s (1970/1992) liberating literacy practices. For him education is not neutral. It serves to domesticate or to liberate from oppression. This notion holds true in the area of family literacy. Liberating family literacy, as conceived and practiced by Freire and his collaborators, acknowledges, values, and promotes diverse literacy practices and understandings through democratic
participation, both in building and implementing those programs through inquiry and in creatively transforming relations with schools.

Working to overcome the prevalent instrumentalist and ethnocentric focus of family literacy programs, educators may embrace the Freirean perspective (e.g. Lankshear, 1993). From this perspective, the overarching goal of family literacy programs should be to create an environment for the growth of critical consciousness of participants by devising opportunities for them to confront and overcome those institutions, ideologies, and situations that keep them from naming and shaping their worlds. In other words, families — parents and children — should be prepared to read the word on the basis of their own reading of their world (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Freire has developed a dialogical-relational pedagogy to achieve that critical consciousness and to move toward collective liberation of those who have been constantly marginalized from the school’s white middle-class culture. We believe that a Freirean-based family literacy project holds promise for the decolonization of those subordinated groups.

In a Freirean-based family literacy project there exists a role for a person to spearhead the project. Freire calls that person a ‘tutor’ or ‘leader coordinator’ (Freire, 1970/1992) or a ‘cultural worker’ (Freire, 1998), while Lankshear (1993) names him or her a ‘co-coordinator’. One of the terms more commonly used for those educators who want to distance themselves from the ‘banking model’ of education and embrace a ‘liberating’ model is that of ‘facilitator’ (Freire, 1992; Horton and Freire, 1990; Shor and Freire, 1987). Freire and Macedo (1987) problematize the real implications of the ‘facilitator’ role. They fear that it may imply a hidden controller, or a laissez-faire teacher, or a messianic redeemer of the poor, weak, and ignorant. The role of the ‘co-coordinator’ is not just ‘banking’ content in participants, according to Lankshear (1993), but helping participants explore contradictions in their own perceptions, to ask questions that create cognitive disequilibrium, and to emphasize the process of co-creation of knowledge based on the reflection of their own daily experiences. We call this ‘co-coordinator’ a ‘decolonizing family literacy educator’. What we have learned from our family literacy praxis is that ‘culture circles’ are in continual re-creation and that this requires a continual reinventing of the role of the ‘decolonizing family literacy educator’.

One of Freire’s key pedagogical features is that of ‘culture circles’. A culture circle is a distinctive learning environment in which ‘participants’ (not pupils) meet to dialogue, in the presence of a ‘co-coordinator’, in order to understand critically their worlds and define the ways they can participate in shaping those worlds and improving their life conditions. The culture circle is rooted in the philosophy of dialogism, which Freire
nature of colonial dominance after independence revolutions, it has had unexpected consequences. Post-colonialism brought the diaspora of free play, multiple-perspectives, polyphony, and language games, which have been promoted to some extent by the fall of communism as an alternative to capitalism. It also generated a large number of restrictions that hold back progressive and emancipatory discourses and projects. Invoking universal humanistic values and truths, achieving consensus to engage in collective transformative actions toward possible dreams and a hopeful future for all, which are central to emancipatory perspectives, became restrictive under the post-colonial 'regime'. Within this framework we consider 'decolonization' of social practices as a vision of post-colonialism, based on Freire's philosophy of life and education using dialogue in culture circles, in order to recuperate the possibilities for discourse and collective actions for liberation from oppressing conditions. People participating in these dialogical encounters can work to enhance their critical consciousness and collective self-empowerment. Thus, we will move from merely polyphony to collective action, which should be planned and carried out with full participation of the families themselves, to avoid the perpetuation of colonization at levels that may be deemed invisible to most people, including the colonized.

The lived experience of the decolonization process and the reinvention of the 'Decolonizing Family Literacy Educator' in the culture circle

As mentioned earlier, the first author, co-proponent and consultant of the family literacy project, accepted his involvement even though he knew it was based on a top-down perspective of family literacy. He had already seen this as a launching pad for moving the program away from family literacy colonizing practices. Under the top-down curricular perspective under which this family literacy program was framed, participants are treated as passive recipients of new information delivered by consultants. Hence participants were perceived in this case as ignorant of this basic knowledge and having no valuable experience in the care of children of their relatives. In the family literacy culture circle reported here, participants were given a pre-self-assessment before the actual training, with the intention to provide the consultants with useful information concerning the degree of familiarity participants had with the various topics of the modules. The general character of the questions and the artificiality of a paper-and-pencil type of pre-self-assessment did not produce the expected useful information - participants marked the highest score on each of the topics they were going to be taught, supposedly indicating a strong familiarity with the curriculum content and practices.

Upon the completion of the pre-self-assessment, the trainers analyzed the participants' responses, and realized that the instrument did not serve its purpose, which was to reveal what the participants really knew or needed to know about the specifics of the modules' content. The data showed that all 24 participants rated their knowledge in the pre-self-assessment questionnaire as level 4, which in terms of the state early childhood competency standards implies 'having a clear idea about the topic and can explain it'.

After implementing the first module on 'Child Growth and Development', it was quite obvious that participants actually did know a great deal about the module's content. As a result, the trainers were afraid that participants were going to be disappointed with the training and the modules already designed, and started to dialogue about what would be the best strategy to address the dilemma they were in: that is, to continue the training as prescribed or to take a new direction, that of co-opting the curriculum. They chose the latter. Co-opting the curriculum implied for the family literacy educators use of the modules to spearhead the examining and the sharing of participants' knowledge and experiences about the subject matter, and to expand them in accordance with their needs and interests.

Engaging in co-opting the curriculum was a painful and somewhat risky decision for the trainers because, among other things, it required them to re-examine their role as trainers and to develop a new one. The word 'trainers' in itself conveys the notion of top-down instruction. They rather wanted to see themselves as 'facilitators' of participants' liberation. In this respect Sidorkian (1999) theorizes that for change to happen in educational leaders, an incident must occur that energizes the actors toward new ways of doing things, toward reinventing their roles.

Standardization of the family literacy curriculum using child development stages

Through postmodern lenses, Canella (1997) refers to child development stages as a western Eurocentric construction, a result of positivist research: 'A language of normality and pathology is generated with the larger universalistic discourse' (Canella, 1997: 41). Thus, 'judgmental surveillance of these populations is justified' (Canella, 1997: 41). For her, this is no less than a means of domination: 'The construction of universal child truth or reality creates a power position for adults and especially psychologists, educators, and other experts who sanction judgment, control, manipulation, correction, and regulation of those who are identified as children'
(Canella, 1997: 41), and by extension their caregivers in the family literacy project reported here. This compatibility between universal child growth and developmental theory and a top-down curriculum manifests itself as a ‘one size fits all’ approach, which facilitates the pathologization and colonization of non-standard family literacy practices. This applies also within the Latino culture. Zentella (2005) problematizes the often monolithic perception of the Latino cultures concerning child rearing including language socialization:

The choices Latinos make about how to raise their children in the United States depend on the information and opportunities they are given and their ability to counteract the damaging language ideologies shaped by the market value of English, English-only campaigns, and a legacy of linguistic purism and linguistic insecurity that is erasing Spanish. (Zentella, 2005: 10)

Thus, we need to recognize that within the Latino cultures there may exist some child rearing practices that are compatible with these universal stages of child development.

Participants in a culture circle resist the top-down curriculum

The process of conscientization cultivated in the ‘culture circle’, on which this article is based, animated participants in it to resist the top-down curriculum. They presented some of the resistance behaviors some authors (Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1995) have considered as passive resistance (indifference, a sabotaging attitude, disengagement) and active resistance (protesting, arguing with the trainers, sabotaging behavior). For example, in the business practices module, participants rejected the notion of ‘business’ as a component of family affairs. In some cultures in Latin America, family affairs cannot be mixed with business affairs; to do so is to downgrade familial relationships. This insensitivity engendered a sense of profanity for these participants. Collegial dialogue helped facilitators understand that the most probable reason for this rejection was that the meaning of ‘business’ in some Latino cultures (coming from Latin America) does not apply in the same contexts as it does for English speaking people. This was seen in the reaction of one of the participants:

Para mí, la razón que cuido a los niños de mi hermano es porque los quiero. Yo no se los cuido por ganancia. Estoy muy molesta con este ‘training’. Lo hago porque amo a estos niños, no porque estoy en un negocio.

[For me, the reason that I take care of my brother’s children is because I love them. I don’t take care of them to get paid. I am uncomfortable with this training I take care of these children because I love them, not because it’s a business.]

REYES & TORRES: DECOLONIZING LITERACY IN CULTURE CIRCLE

When the participant concluded her statement, the entire group of participants, in unison said: ‘We agree! We take care of the children because we love them, not to make money’.

The dialogue between the two facilitators, after facing the participants’ rejection of the business module, started as follows:

Loui:

Boy! This group has really made a problem of this module. Maybe they [participants] are right. What they understand about child care is totally different from that framed in the business practices module.

Cathy (pseudonym):

Yeah, I agree. Maybe we should rethink this [business] module in terms of care instead of a business. I didn’t have any idea how their culture tells them what care of relatives’ children is. Culture plays a real role in this module.

It was quite obvious for the facilitators that the module was framed in terms of business practices without taking into account the participants’ culture. It is clear from these statements that facilitators understood the reason for participants’ refusal of the training. The content of the ‘business’ module was against their familial values, which in this Latino cultural group are not compatible.

Another instance of resistance to the top-down curriculum can be seen in the implementation of the ‘Literacy’ and ‘Numeracy’ modules. The module activities for supporting young children’s literacy and numeracy development were irrelevant to the participants’ literacy practices. Suggested activities included ideas for purchasing books, CDs, and other materials for children without considering that the participants have their own materials and resources. Also, what was missing in the activities was their cultural relevance to diverse populations. The activities required caregivers to participate with the children in these activities; however, the problem was that the caregivers were not familiar with the contextual meaning of the activities, making it impossible for them to participate as the modules suggested. Participants were never asked what areas or ideas they wanted to learn as part of the curriculum; here again what was taught/delivered was not what the participants wanted. When the facilitators made the statement that every parent should read to their children and that a good time to do that is right before bedtime, one of the participants resisted that notion by pointing out the differences that existed between their own literacy practices and those implied in the training:

Es muy importante saber que todos nosotros tenemos diferentes modos de enseñar a escribir, leer, y contar. Todos lo podemos hacer diferente.
This response challenged the facilitators once again because they should have balanced the top-down curriculum by co-opting it, instead of becoming patronizing as seen in the reaction of this participant. The worst thing was that the facilitators were so shocked by this participant’s reaction that they did not take advantage of this opening by participants and failed to engage in this precious learning opportunity. Now we can say that this failure was perhaps because of the facilitators’ inexperience in reinventing themselves and dealing with the emergent issues of the co-option process.

One of the major problems that a top-down curriculum engenders is that of ignoring the topics that participants really want to learn. For example, participants brought up their concern about ‘Spanglish’ as observed in the children they care for:

Lo que sabemos es que nuestros niños no están conscientes de que están hablando en dos idiomas. Creen ellos que así es como se habla. Lo que necesitamos es que nos pueda ayudar a corregir este problema.

[What we know is that our children are not aware that they are speaking in two languages. They really believe that the way they are speaking is correct. What we need is to study more about how to correct this problem.]

Why were the participants resisting the curriculum?
The course participants were finding the family literacy curriculum on childcare and development somehow inappropriate to their own views and values. The facilitators realized this through their collegial dialogues after each ‘training’ session. This was not something new for them, given their long careers in organizing and conducting childcare training events. However, the participants’ resistance to the top-down curriculum was the catalyst for facilitators to come to understand that reinventing their role as ‘decolonizing family literacy educators’ constituted another dimension in the work. The top-down curriculum creates a fertile ground for participants to resist. This was observed when one of the participants candidly asked the facilitator how many children he had. In retrospect the intent of her question was to set the stage for the game of ‘catching the teacher’ since she had 14 children of her own, and cares for her great grandchildren. She really meant that she had vast experience in caring for children, something that the curriculum did not take into account. We may say that this was actually an eloquent way of resisting a top-down undemocratic curriculum.

Reinventing the role of the family literacy educator through a relational pedagogy in a culture circle

Through collegial dialogue, the facilitators took seriously the tasks of rethinking the course curriculum, the pedagogy, and consequently their own roles. Their participation in the culture circle, through a relational pedagogy, started to change. They had understood that the curriculum was written to bring participants up to the awareness level about early childhood care and development, as opposed to the competency level. What they learned was that the participants actually demonstrated understanding at the competency level. The difference between these two levels is that the latter is just empirical knowledge about early childcare and development, whereas the former is demonstrated when the caregiver is also able to explain and carry out the ‘appropriate’ childcare and development practices. For instance, the grandmother with 14 children of her own who now takes care of 4 great-grandchildren demonstrated that she was at the competency level. She shared with the circle her knowledge about the need to ‘burp’ infants after their bottle. She proceeded to demonstrate to the group several ways of burping infants.

The realization that most participants were at the competency level led the trainers to ‘co-opt’ the technocratic instrumental pedagogy tied to the top-down curriculum, and to opt for a relational pedagogy. This implied a leveling of power, which created an atmosphere in the culture circle that supported each participant’s voice and acknowledged participants’ experiences and knowledge. The co-optation included changing the role implied by being trainers, or even facilitators, to that of ‘decolonizing family literacy educator’. Implicit in this new role within a relational pedagogy was to become vulnerable. Being vulnerable means accepting and exposing oneself to criticism and refutation from the participants, who now feel free and safe to do so. His/her vulnerability positions the liberating educator to approach symmetry in power and knowledge relationships, which is at the core of a dialogical and relational pedagogy. Thus, the implementation of the curriculum was negotiated by having the participants name what they knew as a baseline for building the curriculum together. The decolonizing family literacy educators then intentionally created a space to reflect on their work immediately after each session. During the hour’s drive back to their work sites, they used the time to formally debrief and document their reflection on the session. The analysis started by filling out the session’s evaluation form, which prompted them to examine the reactions of the participants, the training process, the course content, and their own new role.
These reflective dialogues led these family literacy educators to realize that they themselves had strong emotions about family literacy, and they became angry and embarrassed that the curriculum was planned without involving the participants. Once the facilitators named the origin of their anger and embarrassment, they intentionally co-opted the curriculum by negotiating it with the participants. They agreed to cover the topics of the top-down curriculum, but from the bottom-up, using a relational pedagogy through a culture circle, from a Freirean approach to family literacy. Continuing the process of reinventing their role as 'decolonizing family literacy educators', they arrived at the conclusion that it was more important in this project to involve participants in building the curriculum than to face the contractual consequences of not following the 'top-down curriculum'. However, they contemplated the possibility that, if they were dismissed, someone else might come in to implement the colonizing curriculum that they refused to implement. They perceived the situation as if they were walking through a minefield. The consequence of taking this position put more demands on their energy for working on the project, since it included additional planning time with the specific purpose of strategizing ways to answer the question: What if the project administrators or the funding agency came to supervise the facilitators' job? The situation undoubtedly was very demanding because, besides the planning, there was a need to deal with high levels of uncertainty. This, in fact, is inherent in the planning process of participatory curriculum development and implementation.

The decolonizing family literacy educators and participants worked in the culture circle with the idea of polyphony, which means that every member of the circle had a voice. They wanted to validate participants' experiences and popular knowledge about early childcare and development. However, early in the process they realized that if no member of the circle would be challenged about their child rearing practices, many children would continue suffering from bad practices such as spanking. The question of who has the power and knowledge about the best practices for guiding children led them to rethink polyphony as simply a literal sharing of practices and values. Although it is important to create a polyphonic environment in which participants feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives about the topic, this is not sufficient because polyphony by itself does not allow for the transformation of practices that participants have with children and other adults.

This is where postmodernists (e.g. Lather, 1991, 1994) fall short. Lather (1994), for example, brings up various tales for the same data-event concerning students' reactions to her liberating curriculum on women studies. We argue that this polyphony in interpreting data is problematic because it not only creates a sense of diversity and multiplicity, but it is also insufficient for changing practices to become more liberating. Inherent in polyphony is the impossibility of reaching any consensus, which leads us to immobility and absolute relativism (everything is contingent to the situation) — what Cole (1994) refers to as the 'poverty of contingency theory'.

A relational pedagogy requires improvement in early childcare and development as a collective work, which implies at least to negotiate a temporal consensus. This means that there is a dialogue in which polyvoicedness is examined in the light of what is best for young children, in order to promote a transformation of childcare practices. This is not an easygoing process. It is tense and conflicting, and produces a great deal of anxiety. In a certain way, the decolonizing family literacy educators were facing participants' anger and frustration as they worked toward temporal consensus. At the same time, these educators started to doubt whether co-opting the curriculum was a good idea, and thought that perhaps the 'expert' role was less complicated.

To illustrate the complexity of implementing a relational pedagogy, the first author remembers a time in which he literally challenged one of the participants by approaching him in a 'maso' man-to-man style. The context of this disagreement was in the area of 'child guidance'. The participant believed that spanking a child was appropriate and a given right as a father. On the other hand, the educator's position was that spanking was not acceptable. He viewed it as violence, whereas the participant viewed it as appropriate for the child's best interest. Both reached the point that their words were full of fury. 'Que macho eres pegándole a los niñitos? Por que no me pegas a mi?' [Hitting children makes you a macho? Why don't you hit me instead?]. What we can see in this illustration is that relational pedagogy is not necessarily a romantic sweet dialogue. On the contrary, there can be strong positions that may clash, and the family literacy educator cannot mediate them because in a relational pedagogy she/he becomes part of the conflict. This is undoubtedly an indication of shared power, which is at the core of a relational pedagogy. In this situation, as a result of cultivation of dialogue, the other group participants became the mediators and were confident in doing so.

Undoubtedly, in a relational pedagogy there is a requirement that the role and power of the decolonizing family literacy educator be shared. In this case he was part of the group, and it was the group that mediated the disagreement between him and the group member. This mediation moved the group toward a temporal consensus about studying in depth the issue of spanking young children. Actually, the energy of the disagreement fueled...
collective work to consider alternatives to spanking. By assuming the risks of co-opting the curriculum and embracing liberating family literacy practices, we need to accept that responsibility by facing our mistakes and trying to amend them publicly with humility. This also makes us vulnerable. We learned the lesson that Freire (1998) refers to, when the teacher becomes the student of his/her students.

As we consider alternative practices rooted in a relational pedagogy, there emerges the question: who liberates whom? Following Freire’s ideas of liberation (1970/1992; Shor and Freire, 1987), it is the people who liberate themselves through dialogical understanding of their ‘limit situations’ and through solidarity, through collective action. The motivation for liberation lies in the hope for a better world; it is not hope for the sake of hope. For Freire (2003, 2005) the main threat of falling into despair and hopelessness is the fatalism and immobility that comes from the neo-liberal ideology and some postmodernists. Hope implies ‘transformation and indignation’, he argues. Liberation in the Freirean sense is not what a messianic person does for others, but an ongoing struggle of collective conscientization and action mediated by dialogical encounters. In the same vein, for Erick Fromm (1970) change for the well-being of humankind cannot happen without hope. For him, hope is neither passive nor violent, but rather being ready for action that transcends the status quo in the search for life alternatives in contrast to death or dehumanizing alternatives. Based on Freire’s and Fromm’s works, we believe that the transformation of family literacy practices rests on hope. But we cannot ignore the power relationships that exist in families and communities and which are deeply rooted in gender, class, and race inequities. For example, in several Latino cultures there strongly persists the concept and practice of machismo, by which young boys are forbidden to cry and encouraged to play aggressively. This may constitute an issue for discussion, study, and action in the culture circle’s future encounters.

What we report in this article is a lived experience of a certain moment of the project’s life. Our motivation to continue working in this borderland community rests on our hope for collective action toward more humanistic, socially and culturally responsive family literacy practices of childcare and development.

Concluding remarks

In reinventing the family literacy educator as a co-opter of family literacy colonizing curricula, there are many issues to consider. First, the liberating educator must problematize the top-down curriculum of universal early childcare and development. Based on Canella’s (1997) critique of universal stages in child development, we can say that the curriculum as first envisioned was an instrument of colonization of participants. The fact that they were considered ignorant and that their experiential knowledge was not worth taking into account constitutes an irrefutable instance of colonization.

Second, in order to create a bottom-up curriculum the decolonizing family literacy educator needs to involve the community in that creative process by using a relational pedagogy that is based on a dialogical philosophy and participatory democracy. The liberating educator cultivates ‘polyphony’, which eventually must evolve into a dialogue conducive to transformation of participants and educators in a dynamic manner. The evolution ensures that participants and liberating educators understand their realities and work toward temporal consensus for collective action that improves their life conditions. Otherwise, polyphony merely generate different perspectives and does not conduce to transformation.

Third, the decolonizing family literacy educator’s role is very demanding and requires exorbitant amounts of energy, both physical and emotional. It is important to understand that educators who want to be co-optors in this manner are not always going to be successful. In addition not being able to follow up on the community developments confront them on ethical grounds.

Fourth, the decolonizing family literacy educators should understand that transformation occurs at different levels. Their role is transformed from sole expert to that of a participant in the project at hand, which requires these educators to reinvent their role continuously. Continual reinvention is the result of the dynamics of the culture circle: polyphonic dialogue, temporal consensus of a shared hope that motivates us to collective transformative action.

Fifth, the limitations of this work are twofold. On one hand, the tremendous demands of the family literacy course implementation caused the decolonizing family literacy educators to lose sight of the utopia of better practices of childcare: responsive to children’s well-being, respectful and loving, and thus free from violence and suffering. These demands include project obligations, the challenges associated with the co-opting of the top-down curriculum, and the involvement with participants. On the other hand, the timeline of the funding agency worked against this liberating effort. What the decolonizing family literacy educators learned was that there is a conflict between the duration/time of the funded project and the timescale of the community. Thus, as the funded project ended, so did the liberating educators’ work. This abrupt ending is an ethical issue from
the perspective of relational pedagogy. At this point we are back in the community and are making this report accessible to participants, to get their feedback and thus recontextualize them as a culture circle.

Sixth, in the context of participatory democracy, the decolonizing family literacy educator is an equal participant in the culture circle. As such, she/he may be involved in conflicts. What is important to know is that if dialogue is cultivated in that culture circle, the mediation of these conflicts is a matter of negotiation among the members in conflict with the participation of the other group members. The resolution of the conflict moves the culture circle to a temporal consensus that allows them to engage in transformative action.

To conclude, we ask the question: why do family literacy educators want to reinvent themselves as decolonizing educators - co-optors in order to de-colonize top-down literacy curricula in early childcare and development? We do not engage in this work with a messianic spirit, that we want to save the poor from their unfortunate conditions, or to appease our necessity for the sake of feeling good. We do it because we know that it is a social responsibility to work as educators with people in order to understand and shape a world that is more just, democratic, sustainable, and peaceful.

References
Picturing economic childhoods: Agency, inevitability and social class in children's picture books

SUE SALTMARSH Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract This article considers ideological, pedagogical and constitutive functions of children's picture books, with particular emphasis on the ways in which these texts construct children and childhood in economic terms. Through an analysis of Lauren Child's "Hetty and the Bitter Bitter Bean" and Anthony Browne's "Voices in the Park", the article interrogates the ways in which these texts' depictions of individuals and families function to locate children and childhood as central to notions of individual, family and social economies. Drawing on insights from feminist poststructuralist research concerned with the textual production of gendered subjectivities, I consider how gendered notions of childhood agency and the inevitability of social class location are implicated in the production of subject positions that are defined by the navigation of socioeconomic circumstances. The argument is made that the subjective, relational, and social processes associated with picture book reading map onto and (re)produce discourses of children and childhood as explicitly economic categories.

Keywords agency; childhood; consumption; economic subjectivities; picture books; social class

Picture books for children are widely recognized as having ideologically pedagogical and constitutive functions that extend well beyond the aesthetic pleasures generally associated with the picture book genre. Picture books are increasingly understood as a literary form through which even very young children are inducted into the conventions that structure modes of representation, the conduct of social relations and the organization of the broader social, political and economic order (Nodelman, 1981; Stephens, 1992), as well as offering potentially useful learning sites (Lewi: