

# Teachers' Roles: Literacy-Related Play of Kindergarten Spanish-Speaking Students

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to provide teachers with a literacy intervention method and to assess the roles teachers of Spanish-speaking kindergarten students assume in the context of literacy-related play and how these roles promote the students' literacy development. The data sources consisted of systematic videotaped observations of teacher interaction during student play. Data were analyzed through inductive content analysis, which identified roles teachers assumed during literacy-related play of kindergarten Spanish-speaking students.

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**Resumen:** Los propósitos de este estudio fueron: proporcionar una metodología de intervención literaria a maestros, revisar los papeles que juegan los maestros de estudiantes de kindergarten que hablan Español en un contexto de juego literario, y señalar como estos roles promueven el desarrollo literario de los estudiantes. Las fuentes de información consistieron en observaciones sistemáticas video-grabadas de la interacción del maestro durante el juego literario del alumno. La información se analizó a través de análisis de contenido inductivo, el cual identificó los roles que los maestros asumieron durante el juego literario de los estudiantes de kindergarten de habla Hispana.

**Keywords:** literacy intervention; Hispanic kindergarten; Hispanic literacy

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**Literacy development of bilingual students,** especially those of Hispanic descent, has become a major concern of American educators. From the time they enroll in the educational system, these students score significantly lower than their non-Hispanic classmates in reading and writing. It has been reported that the nation's Hispanic 17-year-old students still read at the same level as White 13-year-old students (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988). There is limited research on how students in a bilingual classroom learn how to read. This is an important gap in the literature given the criticality of productive literacy skills for all students. Although these students are members of the youngest and fastest growing population group in the nation, there is a

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scarcity of studies that focus on the reading skills of other than standard English-speaking students in the United States. For example, Carter and Cuscoe-Lanasa (1978) examined vocabulary use, Amastae (1982) explored “dialect features” in compositions, and Anderson, Teale, and Estrada (1980) observed the social organization of young bilingual students’ writing at home. Studies are even sparser with respect to young children.

### **The Hispanic Population**

The Hispanic population consists of a group of Spanish-speaking individuals within the diverse Latino population who are either born in the United States or a Spanish-speaking country. Thus, it includes Spanish-speaking citizens or immigrants who reside in the United States. Scholars (such as Valencia, 2002) use this term to refer to Chicanos and other Spanish-speaking individuals. The Hispanic population is one of the fastest growing ethnocultural groups in the United States. Hispanic Americans also compose the largest of the non-English-speaking language groups in the United States (Wolfson, 1989). The future of this nation depends to no small extent on developing a greater understanding of how this diverse population, which has been placed in the contexts of social, economic, and educable risk and vulnerability, can achieve social, educational, and employment competence. This vulnerable population must succeed because new ideas, energy, and resources for the future of society reside in its members who represent an extremely diverse public sector (García, 1992).

The failure to successfully educate Hispanic students has been well documented in studies of delayed education, and numerous theories have been used in an attempt to explain their low educational achievement. One theory argues that Hispanic students of Mexican American descent fail because they face different styles of language socialization at home and at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). According to Saracho (1986), students in this context tend to function in one of the following levels:

*Level 1 (lowest level):* Students become confused when they experience a drastic difference between the two languages and cultures.

*Example:* A series of charts is used to teach the unit of the family. The father usually is blond, has blue eyes, wears a suit, and holds a black attaché case. Dalia, who does not speak or understand English, sees the charts and discovers that the family on the chart does not resemble her family. Her father has black hair and wears greasy overalls because he is a mechanic. This experience confuses her.

*Level 2:* Students deny their language and culture; they pretend that their language and culture is the same as the school’s.

*Example:* Miguel Jimenez, a Spanish-speaking student, changes his name to Michael and may even go a step further and change the pronunciation of his name to “Geemenes.”

*Level 3:* Students adapt to those new or different customs in the culture in which they perceive to have more advanced patterns. Children will assess each language and culture to adapt only the best patterns or customs to make them their own.

*Example:* Juan José enjoys eating the food from his culture. He makes it a point to celebrate birthdays and holidays with his family and friends because he usually gets to eat and has a good time. However, when he is with his English-speaking friends, he refuses to speak his native language and only listens to English-speaking stations on the radio.

*Level 4 (highest level):* Students are able to make the transition back and forth from one language and culture to another language and culture with ease.

*Example:* Juanita is a fluent bilingual student. She speaks her native language and the school's language. She carries a conversation in the language that is used in the group. Her behavior is appropriate in the different situations or settings such as at home, school, or gatherings. (pp. 53-54)

Furthermore, sociocultural factors that contribute to the development of individuals include: child-rearing practices, family styles, sociolinguistic patterns, political and economic systems, and socialization and behavioral patterns. Because individuals' ancestors made major contributions in the development of their culture and history, individuals' sociocultural makeup determine their cultural uniqueness (Saracho, 1986). As long ago as 1850, as many as 1 out of 7 people were immigrants (they were born outside the United States). Students from immigrant families were usually described by characteristics they shared, including a lack of English fluency. They were students who were new immigrants and who were unaware of life in the United States (García & Wiese, 2002). Their diversity underestimated the challenges they would encounter in the schools. In this context, two major issues have emerged and have been challenged:

1. If it is easier and better for children to learn to read in their native language rather than in their second language, should they first be taught to read in their native language with instructional materials that reflect their culture?
2. If children can achieve more general knowledge in subject matter areas in their second language when they are taught these subjects in their native language, should they be taught with instructional materials that acknowledge their language and correspond to their culture?

Such issues need to be resolved. The conflicting environments identify the effects of the social status of the two languages on reading and academic learning. Research studies have reached conflicting conclusions, supposedly due to the broad number of factors involved in the nature of the problem as well as the maximum social, political, and economic importance. It is essential that researchers examine the effects of teachers' instruction in two languages on children's later school performance, particularly on the natural context of reading and writing instruction in the children's first language (Pérez, 1994).

Teachers can develop an appropriate reading and language arts program for young students by building on the interests of the students and by providing a variety of experiences for students to listen, write, read, and speak the language. Such a program should offer young students opportunities to receive and express ideas relating to children's literature (including poetry), storytelling, and creative dramatics (including puppetry). The focus should be on oral language experiences that can lead to the development of written communication skills. Students will learn to recognize the relationship between the spoken and written word. They will learn to receive ideas and impressions as they read just as they are able to do in listening; they will learn to express ideas, impressions, and feelings in writing just as they are able to do in speaking (Saracho, 1993; Saracho & Spodek, 1996).

### **Teachers' Roles in Literacy**

In identifying competent teachers of young children, researchers have established that teaching goes beyond observable actions (Bae, 1991; Saracho, 1984, 1988a, 1988b) and thus have concentrated on teachers' thought processes concerning teaching and the conceptions that underlie these processes (Cho & Saracho, 1997). Saracho (1984) proposed a role analysis of early childhood teachers to identify teacher performance, which requires more than observable teaching skills or personal characteristics. Clarifying the teachers' roles can yield a theoretical framework for determining the quality of effective teachers. The early childhood teachers' roles introduced in Saracho's study consist of diagnostician, curriculum designer, organizer of instruction, manager of learning, counselor/advisor, and decision maker. Saracho (1988a, 1988b) suggested that the descriptions of the different roles could provide insight into the theory, knowledge, and practice that effective teachers need.

Within an emergent literacy program for young children, teachers assume many roles. They function as lecturers, storytellers, group discussion leaders, traffic directors, mediators of conflicts, psychological diagnosticians, custodians, assigners of academic work, and file clerks. They build on the children's interests and provide a variety of experiences for children to listen, write, read, and speak.

Useful descriptions of the roles teachers assume to nurture children's literacy development during spontaneous play are seldom found. Roskos and Neuman (1993) and Schrader (1990) investigated adult behavior in literacy-related play. The limited research available, however, concentrates directly on the disposition of the teacher's role in the children's literacy development during play. Because play as a context promotes literacy learning from an emergent literacy perspective (Hall, 1991), studies that use literacy-enriched play contexts need to be conducted. These studies should incorporate the roles that classroom teachers assume during the children's spontaneous literacy-related play.

The small number of studies that examine adult intervention in children's spontaneous literacy-related play (Christie & Enz, 1991) focus on adults other than the children's classroom teachers. These studies examine literacy-related play outside the natural context of the classroom. The interventions lasted a short period of time (i.e., 3 weeks) and did not allow time to observe the teachers' roles or the strategies they use that contribute to the children's emerging literacy. These studies resemble those in "play training" and do not directly relate to the roles of the teacher in promoting literacy development in the context of play. There is a strong need for studies that show the roles that teachers assume to promote children's emergent literacy behaviors in a context of play, especially with young Hispanic children.

### **Purpose of the Study**

There is limited research on Spanish-speaking children's literacy activities that relate to developmentally appropriate kindergarten programs. The research community has paid much attention to the effects of instruction in two languages on children's later school performance in English. Little attention has been paid to the context of reading and writing instruction in the first language, however (Pérez, 1994). Given the criticality of productive literacy skills for all children, research that focuses on natural contexts reflecting the children's own language(s) would fill a gap in the literature. Research on acquisition of reading among Spanish-speaking children can help us understand how important aspects of first and second language acquisition influence children's reading. It can also suggest the implications of instructional effects on the acquisition of written language by these Spanish-speaking students. The importance of the roles taken by teachers increases when they assume the instructional responsibility for Spanish-speaking students. The lack of research on Spanish-speaking students suggests the need for more research in literacy within this population. Thus, this study addresses this need. The following research questions guided this study:

*Research Question 1:* What roles do teachers of Spanish-speaking students assume in the context of literacy-related play?

*Research Question 2:* How do these roles promote the students' literacy development?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Teachers who participated in the study were volunteers who taught in an accredited bilingual program, provided instruction in both languages to

Spanish-speaking students, and were qualified to teach in kindergarten programs. The sample consisted of 5 kindergarten teachers and their classroom students living in the Southwestern United States. Each teacher had a bachelor's degree in education, a kindergarten endorsement, teaching experience ranging from 2 to 11 years, and fluency in both English and Spanish. Teachers taught reading and writing concepts in both languages, but their focus was in Spanish, gradually moving to English. Their classroom children were 5-year-old Spanish-speaking students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and from homes and neighborhoods in which Spanish was the preferred language. Because the children's primary language was Spanish, they had limited or no knowledge of English.

### **Literacy-Related Play Intervention**

The selection criteria for the participants influenced the development of the literacy-related play intervention. Thus, the following assumptions were used in its development:

1. Because teachers taught in an accredited English/Spanish bilingual program, it was assumed that teachers provided instruction in both English and Spanish.
2. Because teachers were qualified to teach in kindergarten programs, it was assumed that teachers had knowledge about the nature of play and its role in children's learning.
3. Because teachers had taken college courses in early childhood education, it was assumed that they knew how to create interest centers within a learning environment and design developmentally appropriate activities.

The focus of the literacy-related play intervention was on integrating literacy concepts into the children's play. The literacy-related play intervention consisted of workshops where teachers learned literacy activities that could be integrated into the different play areas, strategies in integrating literacy concepts in these play areas, and how to develop culturally sensitive "prop boxes" that encourage literacy behaviors. These are boxes containing materials related to a particular play theme.

The literacy-related play intervention lasted 8 weeks during which time the teachers learned how to enrich the play environment with literacy-oriented concepts, activities, materials, and interactions. The physical environments of the classrooms were modified based on accepted applications of reading and writing for young children that were supported in earlier research that indicates literacy-enriched play centers promote the children's literacy behaviors (e.g., Neuman & Roskos, 1989, 1990, 1992; Saracho & Spodek, 1996). Literate play environments were created to facilitate the children's use of written language for their own functions. In these environments, children were provided with literacy learning alternatives in each play area.

**Source of Data**

The source of data consisted of a set of videotapes of the teachers' actions and interactions with their classroom children during their literacy-related play. Two doctoral students systematically observed and transcribed the videotapes. They recorded verbatim the teachers' and children's behaviors and interactions in the language that they used (e.g., Spanish, English, a mixture of both languages). In addition, they provided precise descriptions of the context in which these behaviors and interactions occurred. Both doctoral students were bilingual (Spanish and English) and had knowledge of the context; one was a doctoral candidate in a teaching of English speakers of other languages program and the other was a Hispanic doctoral candidate in an early childhood and bilingual education program.

**Analysis**

In an initial analysis, parallel patterns for play and literacy were identified by continually examining the videotapes and their transcriptions. Situations that integrated play and literacy were selected to identify the roles that teachers assumed, using inductive content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Berelson, 1952; Krippendorf, 1980), which determines the relationship between the frequency of linguistic units and the text producer's interest. Recurrent units are expected to be more meaningful than sporadic ones. Content analysis helps to systematically identify authentic and objective categories. This systematic procedure was employed to ascribe and eliminate classifications by means of a determined set of criteria (Saracho, 1984). Specifically, Saracho's (1984, 1988a, 1988b) pattern of analysis was utilized to identify and describe the roles of the teachers. This process requires that the transcriptions be read, reread, and deciphered to create discrete units of literacy-related play behaviors. The videotaped transcriptions, which characterized the different functions that the teachers performed, were coded based on category patterns to appropriately identify the teachers' roles and behaviors. Two doctoral students and the researcher viewed the tapes; both doctoral students coded the episodes. The Hispanic doctoral student as well as the researcher classified the categories and themes, and a scholar in early childhood education validated these categories and themes. Such processes generated an agreement that ranged from 93% to 96%.

**Results**

The results identify the roles and behaviors teachers assumed in providing a literacy-related play environment that included literacy-related play activities that were based on the children's language (e.g., Spanish, English, a mixture of both languages). Teachers typically interacted, responded, and provided instruction in the children's language, usually in Spanish. To some

degree, all of the teachers assumed the roles of discussion leader, demonstrator, storyteller, instructor, supporter, and decision maker, which are identified and defined below with specific examples given from the data set.<sup>1</sup> The examples of the dialogue that were provided in the text were articulated by the teacher in both languages (Spanish and English). The original language that the teachers and children spoke is provided in the examples to keep the substance of the original meaning.

### **Role: Discussion Leader**

Teachers interact with the children to introduce, review, or reinforce concepts. They lead the children in a dialogue about their interests and activities and clarify misconceptions through the discussion. On the other hand, the children contribute to discussion by providing the teacher with information to assess their knowledge. Teachers define the purpose of the discussion and interact with the children, often elaborating and extending children's utterances. In this way, the children elaborate new ideas and new lines of play. Their play and language go hand in hand as the teacher engages the children and becomes directly involved in the children's literacy-related play without imposing on them. In joining the children's play and discussion, the teacher becomes a comparable member of the playgroup.

### **Example<sup>2</sup>**

Children are at the science center where they are involved in a cooking experience under the supervision of the teacher, Mrs. Barbosa. They are making gruel by boiling and mixing flour, water, and milk. While they are making the gruel, they engage in the following discussion:<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Barbosa: —Del trigo. De trigo molido. Lo llevan al molino y lo muelen y queda así bien bonito. Entonces tenemos que primero hervirlo. Ya, Armando, tráelo porque no lo están viendo. (From wheat. From wheat. They take it to the mill and grind it and it looks very pretty. Then we first have to boil it. Now, Armando, bring it, because they are not seeing it.)

[Armando returns the bowl to the teacher. Some children are eating at the science center while other children are writing about their experience.]

Mrs. Barbosa: —Okay. Entonces usamos atole, canela, azúcar y lo vamos a poner todo en una ¿Qué? Elvira. ¿Cómo se llama eso? (Okay. Then we use gruel, cinnamon, sugar and we put everything on what? Elvira, what do we call that?)

Elvira: —Cacerola. (Pan.)

Mrs. Barbosa: —Cacerola. El agua se está hirviendo. (Pan. The water is boiling.)



Diego: —Agua, canela, el atole, todo junto y lo vamos a hervir. (Water, cinnamon, the gruel, everything together and we are going to boil it.)

Mrs. Barbosa: —¿Y cuando ya está, Idelfonso? (And when it's done, Idelfonso?)

Idelfonso: —Nos lo comemos. (We eat it.)

The teacher and the children are discussing how to make gruel, including the dishes, ingredients, and procedures they are using. In this role, the teacher is sharing a breakfast dish from the children's culture and extending the children's oral vocabulary when they are discussing how to make the gruel, its ingredients, and its purposes. The teacher continually asks questions to which the children respond. The questions elicit more elaborate answers and require that the children think about what they are doing. In this role, children may feel good about themselves as they are discussing and sharing something from their culture.

#### **Role: Demonstrator**

Teachers use demonstrations to help children learn, in a concrete way, how to use a skill or carry on an activity. They use props, materials, and strategies to help children understand their instructions, concepts, or other types of learning. Teachers usually use physical actions to guide the children's dialogue. Teachers designate a procedure and model the actions for children in specific ways. This provides concrete examples that allow children to carry out a skill or activity on their own. As teachers demonstrate, they also describe the concepts to make sure that children understand their instruction.

#### **Example**

At the writing center, the children are sitting on the carpet and Mrs. Castillo is standing next to the board. She introduces the character and sound of the letter *L* by writing this letter on the board. She demonstrates how to write the letter and calls one of the children to imitate her.

Mrs. Castillo: —Vamos a dejar a Diana que venga a hacer la letra. (We are going to let Diana come and make the letter.)

[Diana takes a pencil, draws a horizontal line, moves the pencil toward the right, makes a vertical line, erases this line and makes it again.]

Mrs. Castillo: —Mira qué bien lo hizo Diana. Thank you. (Look how well Diana did it. Thank you.)

[Diana gives the pencil to the teacher and sits on the carpet.]

Mrs. Castillo: —Los demás lo vamos a hacer en el aire. A ver, pongan su dedo índice. Empezamos arriba, línea derechita para abajo y luego nos vamos hacia el lado derecho, una línea acostada. No tan larga, no más una regular. (The rest, let's write on the air. Let's see, point your index finger. Let's start at the top, straight line down, and then we'll go toward the right, a line lying down. Not that long, just a regular one.)

[During this time, the teacher and the children write the letter *L* in the air.]

In this role, the teacher demonstrates how to write the letter, asks one of the children to demonstrate how to write the letter on the board, and requests the children to write it together in the air. This method helps children learn how to write the letter *L*. The teacher reinforces the correct way of writing the letter *L* by repeating the directions as she involves the children in the activity.

### **Role: Storyteller**

At the library center, teachers read or tell stories while young children listen and respond to them. They encourage the children to predict the incidents in the story, share in telling the story, inquire about the story, provide ample time for children to respond, oversee their listening comprehension, and reread the story to assist them and to check the correctness of their responses and predictions. The children's responses can include predicting events, putting the story's events in sequential order, understanding the main ideas, identifying the characters, and describing the setting. Storytelling usually occurs in the library area where teachers read or tell stories to the children while they sit on the carpet and listen to the story (Saracho, 2002). The teachers are not simply entertaining the children with the stories but are actively engaging them in the process so that the children's thinking is extended as is their language.

### **Example**

Mrs. García is sitting on a chair while the children sit on the carpet in the library area. She interacts with the children as she reads to them a book about dinosaurs. She tries to encourage the children to predict and use their experiences as part of their discussion. When she finishes reading the story, Mrs. García asks the children to write and illustrate their version of the story. The following is a sample of the interactions that occurred:

[The teacher opens the book with the right hand and turns the first two pages.]

Mrs. García: —Los dinosaurios eran gigantes que vivieron hace muchísimo tiempo. Hubo muchas clases de dinosaurios gigantes. [She turns the page.] El tracodón. El tracodón era tan grande como una casa. [The teacher turns toward a table behind her and picks up a picture.] Este es el tracodón y estaba tan grande como el tamaño de una . . . (The dinosaurs were giants that lived a long time ago. There were many types of giant dinosaurs. [She turns the page.] The trachodon was very big like a house. [The teacher turns toward a table behind her and picks up a picture.] This is the trachodon and it was as big as the size of a . . .)

Children: —Casa. (House.)

Mrs. García: —Casa. [She turns the page.] Tenía un pico. Parecía al de un pato. Y por eso también le llamaban pico de . . . (House. [She turns the page.] He had a bill. It looked like the one on a duck. And that is why they called it bill of a . . .)

Children: —Pato. (Duck.)

Mrs. García: —Este era herbívoro, comía plantas. Herbívoro quiere decir que come plantas. El tracodón tenía dos mil dientes. Porque su boca era demasiado grande. [Al decir esto se llevó la mano derecha a la boca y luego extendió el brazo hacia al frente como para indicar el tamaño del pico.] Tenía muchos dientes. (This was an herbivore, he ate plants. Herbivore means that it eats plants. The trachodon had two thousand teeth. Because his mouth was too big. [As she says this, she takes her right hand to her mouth and extends her arm toward the front to indicate the size of the bill.] It had many teeth.)

Eleazar: —Este. . . ¿Dijo que tenía dos mil ahh? (This. . . You said he had two thousand ahh?)

Mrs. García: —Dos mil dientes. Y cuando se le cae uno le sale otro . . . (Two thousand teeth. And when one would fall, then he would get . . .)

Children: —Otro nuevo. (Another new one.)

[The teacher continued with this type of interaction as she told the story. When they finished, she asked the children to write and illustrate their own story.]

As a storyteller, the teacher reads as she displays the illustrations to the children and uses physical motions to help the children understand the characters' features. She encourages the children to participate in the story by predicting events and describing characters. She also encourages the children to become part of the story by having them make predictions (Saracho, 2002) about the story and by monitoring these predictions.

### **Role: Instructor**

Teachers use instruction to tell or teach children facts or concepts or to review familiar ones. Teachers provide instruction while simultaneously en-

couraging the children to use their experiences to contribute to the instructional presentation. The children's contributions give the teacher sufficient feedback to assess the children's perceptions and understanding of the concepts that he or she is teaching. Teachers can then extend or clarify concepts. Thus, the teacher is not merely a lecturer, but one who engages the children in the instruction provided.

### Example

At the language center, the teacher is introducing and reinforcing a series of vocabulary words that relate to items that pertain to the house. She has several pictures that relate to the housekeeping area. Mrs. Torres shows a picture of a room with several items, points to the different items, and asks the children to identify in which rooms these items belong in their house.

[Mrs. Torres shows a picture of a bathroom and asks the children to identify the items that belong or do not belong in the bathroom.]

Mrs. Torres: —Miren, fíjense, este es el cuarto de baño. Todos tenemos un cuarto de baño en la casa, ¿verdad? (Look at this bathroom. We all have a bathroom in our house. True?)

Juan: —Sí. (Yes.)

Mrs. Torres: —Okay, bien. Entonces en el cuarto de baño, yo no veo algo que no debe estar. ¿Está bien este cuarto? (Okay, good. Then in the bathroom, I don't see something that should be there. Is the room all right?)

Children: —No. (No.)

Mrs. Torres: —No está bien. ¿Qué le falta? ¿Qué tiene? (No it is not right. What is missing? What does it have?)

Manuel: —Matas. (Plants.)

Mrs. Torres: —Yo no lo veo. (I don't see it.)

Juan: —Las cosas. (The things.)

Mrs. Torres: —¿Qué tiene? Un vaso, sí debe de haber. ¿Qué es eso? Está la toalla, los cepillos de dientes, el espejo, el lavabo de manos, lavabo de baño. ¿Qué es eso? Yo creo que este cuarto sí está bien, porque es el cuarto de baño y las cosas que hay ahorita ahí pues están bien, pero vamos a ver ahora. [La maestra muestra una página.] Hay. ¿Qué no debe de estar ahí? (What does it have? A glass, it should be there. What is that? The towel, tooth brushes, the mirror, sink, and tube are there. What is that? I think that this room is all right because it is the bathroom and the things are there now, well they are all right, but let's see now. [She shows the children another page.] There. What should not be there?)

Children: —La pelota y la cafetera. (The ball and the coffee pot.)

Mrs. Torres: —El tostador es para ¿Qué? (The toaster is for what?)

Children: —Para el pan. (For the bread.)

Mrs. Torres: —Para tostar el pan. Y esta patineta, ¿Para qué se usa? (To toast the bread. And this skate. What is it used for?)

Eleazar: —Para patinar. (To skate.)

Mrs. Torres: —Para patinar. ¿Adentro de la casa? (To skate. Inside the house?)

Children: —No. (No.)

[The teacher continues with this type of instruction asking children to identify items that belong or do not belong in each room in the house. Then she tells them that when they go to the writing center, they need to write a book about the items that do not belong in the different rooms.]

In this role, the teacher uses pictures to teach vocabulary words about the nature of the different rooms and items found in rooms throughout the house. She encourages the children to use their analytic skills by asking them to find and identify the items that belong or do not belong in a specific room and the purpose of these items. The teacher relies on the children's prior knowledge and extends that knowledge by getting them involved and by encouraging them to make contributions to her instruction.

### **Role: Supporter**

Teachers encourage children to continue doing good work or to call attention to others about what is acceptable behavior. They show support for the children's efforts by praising them. They use praise to show approval and support for a specific behavior to motivate other children to imitate this play behavior. By providing support, the children learn what is appropriate in the classroom without being punished for behaving inappropriately. Because kindergarten is the child's first experience in the elementary school, the teacher's support is especially important.

### **Example**

At the writing center, children are circling all the pictures that begin with the letter *L*. The teacher is reviewing the letter's sound, monitoring the children's work, and giving them guidance on how to write the letter.

Mrs. Cruz: —Sí, muy bien. Ven aquí a circularlo, por favor. Qué bien, Jessica. Así me gusta que se pongan a pensar antes de contestar. Es muy importante escuchar el nombre del dibujo para oír el primer sonido. Luego me pueden decir si oyen el sonido de la *L*. El círculo no tiene que estar perfecto niños. No más que lo circulen. . . . Muy bien . . . y esté todo cubierto. Jessica, thank you very much. Y ahora vamos a dejar a Jorge que haga la que sigue, pero vamos a decir todos juntos el nombre del dibujo. (Yes, very good. Come here to circle it, please. Good, Jessica. I like that you think be-

fore responding. It is very important to listen to the name of the picture to hear the sound. Then you can tell me if you hear the sound of the *L*. The circle does not have to be perfect, children. As long as you circle it. . . . Very good . . . and it is all covered. Jessica, thank you very much. And now let's have Jorge do what is next, but let's all say together the name of the picture.)

In this role, the teacher encourages vocabulary development by teaching them the words and sounds that begin with the letter *L*. She praises the children's work to motivate and encourage them. She politely thanks them to model good manners and to follow correct directions.

**Role: Decision Maker**

In the role of decision maker during children's play, teachers generate spontaneous or reflective decisions concerning the children, materials, activities, and educational goals. Reflective decisions are those made in advance, such as during instructional planning and the selection of instructional materials. Instantaneous decisions are made at some point when instruction is ongoing, such as when children are confused about a concept and teachers decide to engage in an activity to clarify a concept.

**Example***Reflective Decision Maker*

The environment suggested that the teacher planned a thematic unit on dinosaurs. There were pictures, literature books, and toys of dinosaurs all over the classroom. For example, in the writing center, pictures of dinosaurs were displayed to encourage children to write stories about what they had learned about the dinosaurs. In the block center, several small dinosaurs, plants, grass, and mountains were placed along the shelves where blocks were stored. These block accessories encouraged children to build structures related to dinosaurs and to use the small block accessories in their structures. For story time, the teacher selected a book about dinosaurs to read to the children. As the teacher read the story, she was faced with the need to make some instantaneous decisions.

*Instantaneous Decision Maker*

The teacher asked the children to sit in a circle on the carpet. She went to her desk, picked up a book on dinosaurs, and sat in front of them. As she looked at the children, she noticed that some of the children had trouble looking at the book. At that point, she assumed her role as instantaneous decision maker. She decided to sit on a chair to help the children see the book.

Then she noticed that some children were still having trouble seeing the book, which lead her to make several rearrangements until all of the children were able to see the pictures in the book and listen to the story.

Mrs. Garza: —Los niños que están en frente. .Un momento. Los niños del frente se van a tener que acostar. Enrique, acá te sientas, por favor. Los niños de atrás sentados o acostados, no importa, pero los del frente sí deben estar acostados, los de atrás no deben Ahh.. Miren a Carlos, qué rápido se acomodó él, no está peleando, no está quejándose, gracias. Jesús, gracias. Catalina, thank you. ¿Te puedes mover, Ismael, por favor? Ahora sí, qué bien se ven todos. ¿Listos para comenzar? Vamos a leer un libro que se llama *Los dinosaurios gigantes*. Al terminar el cuento vamos a discutir lo que pasó en el cuento o la información que aprendimos del cuento y luego vamos a hacer un cuento nuestro que vamos a escribir y después van a poder hacer su librito en el cuento que ustedes mismos escribieron y ustedes mismos van a dibujar su cuento, su libro. Los dinosaurios gigantes. Este libro fué escrito por Ernard Roe y ilustrado, la persona que dibujó el libro, se llama Merlin Smith. (The children who are in front. One moment. The children in front are going to have lie down. Enrique, sit over here, please. The children behind sitting or lying down, it is not important, but the ones in front should lie down, the ones behind should not. Ahh. Look at Carlos, how fast he made himself comfortable. He is not fighting, is not complaining, thank you. Jesus, thank you. Catalina, thank you. Can you please move, Ismael, please? Now, you all look so good. Are you ready to start? We are going to read a book that is called *The Giant Dinosaurs*. When we are finished with the story, we are going to discuss what happened in the story or the information that we learned in the story, and then we are going to make our own story that you write yourself and you are going to illustrate your story, your book. *The Giant Dinosaurs*. This book was written by Ernard Roe and illustrated, the person who colored the book, is named Merlin Smith.)

As a decision maker, teachers make reflective decisions, which are made before their instructional day begins. In the example above, the teacher had made a decision about developing a thematic unit on dinosaurs. She seemed to have developed a set of lesson plans for this unit. She had selected the objectives, strategies, materials, and activities to teach the concepts on dinosaurs. She had also set up the environment for the unit and the activities of the day. She had displayed materials in the different learning centers to encourage the children to learn more about dinosaurs. She also selected a story (*The Giant Dinosaurs* written by Ernard Roe and illustrated by Merlin Smith) to read to the children about dinosaurs. In the lesson plans she had developed, she had decided that when they were finished with the story, they were going to discuss the events in the story or the information that they had learned from the story, and create, write, and illustrate their own book, *The*

*Giant Dinosaurs*. This type of planning and selection requires the teachers to assume their role of decision maker. Because this planning occurs without the children, they are able to reflect on their decisions.

Instantaneous decisions occur when the teachers are actually teaching and making decisions on the spot. When the teacher was ready to read the story, she noticed that some of the children had trouble looking at the book. In her role as instantaneous decision maker, she decided to sit on a chair and hold the book above the children's heads. Because some children were still having trouble seeing the book, she decided to sit the children in a different sitting arrangement. In this process, some children became disruptive. Therefore, she selected the appropriate ways to modify their behavior. Once she decided the children were ready to listen to the story, she began to read. Because most of these decisions were made on the spot, the teacher assumed her role as instantaneous decision maker. According to Spodek and Saracho (1994), teachers undertake the role of *thinker and actor* when engaged in decision making. Their thinking determines their actions. In short, teachers make reflective decisions, thinking and acting as they assess the strengths and needs of their classroom children, when they plan and consider (a) the content to be taught, (b) the materials to be used, (c) the learning schedule, (d) the expected goals, and (e) the anticipated performance of the children. They make instantaneous decisions, thinking and acting in circumstances that require their immediate attention, when they are faced with unanticipated circumstances.

## Discussion

The present study identifies and describes the roles that teachers assume in promoting the literacy development of Spanish-speaking children in a kindergarten classroom. In the literacy-related play intervention, teachers learned how to promote young children's literacy development through play. The teachers constructed literacy-related play environments in their classrooms that integrated learning centers, which included reading and writing activities. After the literacy-related play intervention, teachers were observed functioning in the roles of discussion leader, demonstrator, storyteller, instructor, supporter, and decision maker. In these roles, teachers applied the theories of literacy and early childhood education to practical situations, such as those observed in earlier research (e.g., Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Saracho & Spodek, 1996; Schrader, 1990) where early childhood teachers enhanced the children's literacy during their play.

In the present study, teachers integrated several of the roles to promote children's play and the children's emerging literacy interests, skills, and needs, especially those related to the children's language. For instance, teachers used Spanish in most of their instruction because that was the children's language. They also encouraged children to use spoken and written



language in both English and Spanish (a) by concentrating on play experiences that helped children distinguish between print and nonprint, (b) by helping them understand the relationship between letters and sounds, and (c) by providing them with many opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Spanish-speaking children need to engage in a variety of such activities to meet their linguistic needs and cultivate their emerging literacy skills.

The identification of the roles of teachers has important implications for the instruction of young Spanish-speaking children and for the preparation of teachers who work with these children. In developing meaning, teachers need to engage the Spanish-speaking children in active involvement in their learning. They also need to base their literacy instruction on the student's language, culture, experiences, knowledge, and values to help them construct meaning when reading a text.

As teachers better understand their roles, they can consciously improve the way they perform in the classroom, learning to flexibly use the skills they have in a diverse situation. Teacher preparation programs can help novices become aware of the different roles they have in the classroom and help them become more flexible in their performance—relating what they think and do for each particular role that they must assume.

In conclusion, early childhood teachers need to understand their roles to effectively provide young children with constructive instruction that improves their learning in literacy-related play without misconstruing the children's spontaneous play. To better educate teachers, it is essential that the roles that teachers assume to promote literacy in the children's play be studied further using a variety of groups of teachers and children, including those of different languages and ethnic groups. They also need to modify their roles to acknowledge the cognitive, cultural, and language needs of Spanish-speaking children so that they obtain an acceptable achievement level and relevant thinking skills that are essential for their academic success.

## Notes

1. The names of the children and teachers are fictitious to protect their anonymity.
2. Spanish dialogues are translated into English at the end of each statement and placed within parentheses. Descriptions of concurrent physical actions are provided in brackets.
3. The original language is used to keep the substance of the original meaning.

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