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Feminisms: Relationships, Mentorships, and Professional Growth among Members of a
Longitudinal Intervention Research Team

Sallie G. Helms, ABD

Research Assistant

USDOE Project English Language Literacy Acquisition (Project ELLA) Grant

Center for Research in Counselor Education

sgh002@shsu.edu

Beverly J. Irby, Ed.D.

Professor and Chair, Educational Leadership and Counseling

Sam Houston State University

Huntsville, TX 77341-2119

edu_bid@shsu.edu

Cindy Guerrero-Valecillos

Lead Coordinator

Project Middle School Science for English Language Learners (Project MSSELL)

cguerrer@aldine.k12tx.us

Kathleen Cox, Ph.D.

Aldine Independent School District

katcox@tamu.edu

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, “management and leadership models are based on theories of male leadership behavior” (Irby & Brown, 1995, p. 1). Similarly, work organizations tend to be informed by masculine models of growth that privilege separation and independence rather than interdependence and collectivity (Fletcher, 2004). As members of the research team of a controlled and structured English as a second language longitudinal intervention, we have been privileged over the past four years to work in an environment, which we have come to appreciate as uniquely relational and transformative. Such work environments, according to Fletcher, are revolutionary: “I think this challenge to hierarchy and competition,” said Fletcher, “is what makes this work ‘feminist’” (2004, p. 296).

Bailey (2006) observed that “any improvement in women’s lives is directly tied to the quality of care and education available to children” (p. 26) and Fletcher’s (2004) charged that “challenging hierarchy and competition is what makes this work ‘feminist’” (p. 296). Both in our collaborative workplace relationships and in our research design, practice, and intentionality, we attempt to situate Project ELLA within the context of many *feminisms* (Mize, 2003; Narayan, 1997). In this paper, we describe our practices and relationships, which are oriented by this concept of feminisms.

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Traditionally, “management and leadership models are based on theories of male leadership behavior” (Irby & Brown, 1995, p. 1). Similarly, work organizations tend to be informed by masculine models of growth that privilege separation and independence rather than interdependence and collectivity (Fletcher, 2004). As members of the research team of a controlled and structured English as a second language longitudinal intervention, we have been privileged over the past four years to work in an environment, which we have come to appreciate as uniquely relational and transformative. Such work environments, according to Fletcher, are revolutionary: “I think this challenge to hierarchy and competition,” said Fletcher, “is what makes this work ‘feminist’” (2004, p. 296).

Our study was part of an on-going longitudinal randomized trial project, which targeted Latino English learners’ English language and literacy acquisition (Project ELLA), from kindergarten through third grade.¹ Project ELLA was situated in nine elementary schools across a large, urban, and recognized school district in southeast Texas. Demographically, the school district is 65% Latino and 89-98% low socio-economic status (Irby, et al., 2008). By the final year of the intervention (2008), 265 limited English proficient (LEP)/English Language Learners (ELLs), populated the Experimental group.

In the process of gathering data for the projects concluding qualitative research project, the ELLA BRICOLAGE (Helms, Irby, Lara, Guerrero, & Cox, 2009), we interviewed Latino parents who had children being served by Project ELLA in either a structured English immersion classroom or a transitional bilingual education classroom. In addition, we asked the project’s

¹ These data were gathered as a part of the Federal research grant, R305P030032, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Educational Science.

paraprofessionals and research coordinators to share their thoughts with us about how they contributed to Project ELLA, and how participation in the project has impacted them.

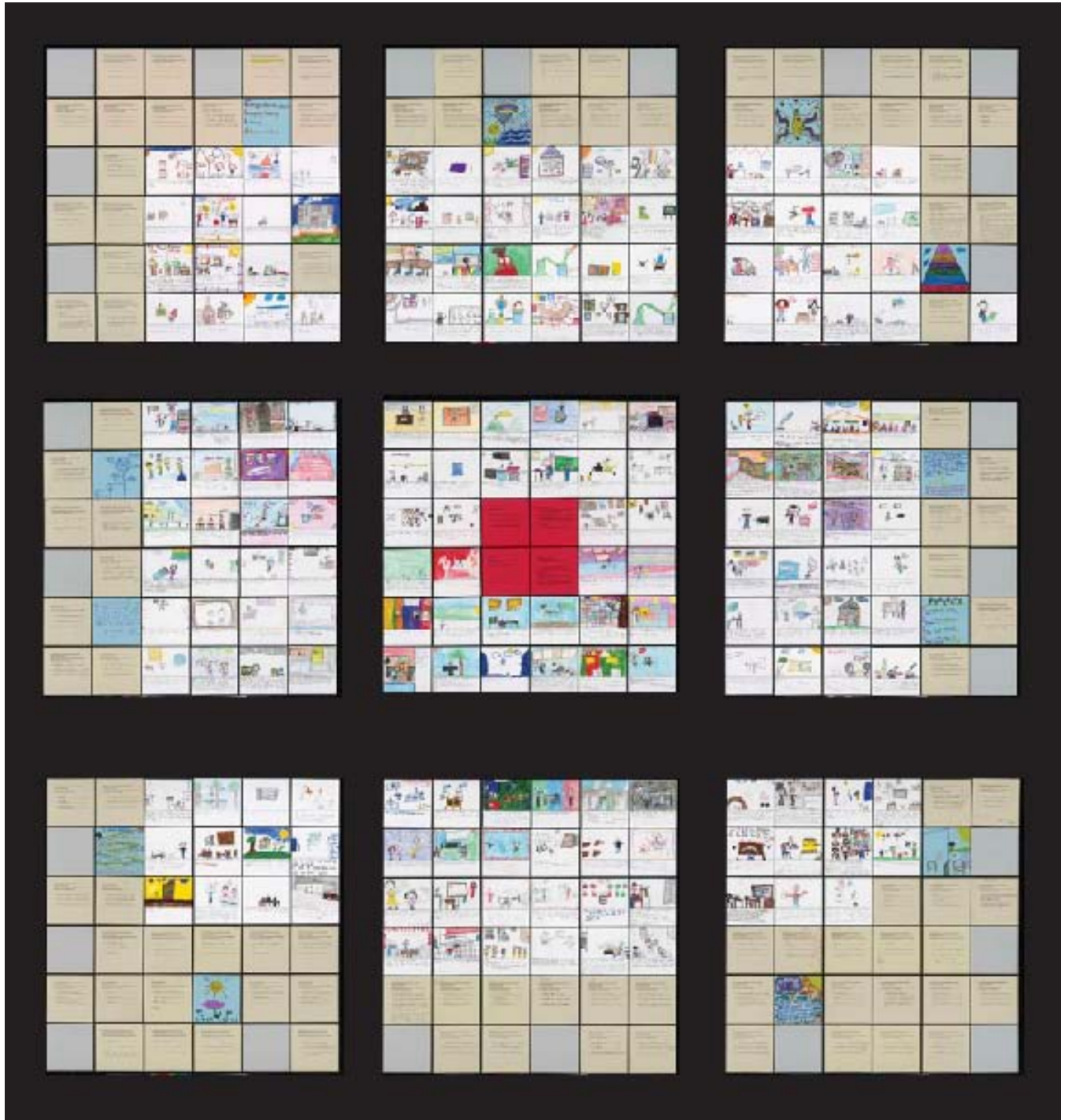
Reflections from these interviews were remarkable in their resonance with relational models of development (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), as well as gendered workplace (Fletcher, 2004) and leadership theories (Irby & Brown, 2005; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2002).

In order to avoid confusion, we would like to distinguish the *bricolage* as research methodology (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005, 2008; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) from the *ELLA BRICOLAGE*. Schwandt (2007) provided the following definition of bricolage methodology:

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (*The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, 1994, p. 2) describe the multiple methodologies used in qualitative inquiry as *bricolage* and the qualitative inquirer as *bricoleur*. . . . As a *bricoleur*, the qualitative inquirer is capable of donning multiple identities – researcher, scientist, artist, critic, performer – and engaging in different kinds of *bricolage* that consist of particular configurations of (or ways of relating) various fragments of inherited methodologies, methods, empirical materials, perspectives, understandings, ways of presentation, situated responsiveness, and so on into a coherent, reasoned approach to a research situation and problem. (p. 25)

The ELLA BRICOLAGE is an artifact of qualitative data and Point of Entry Text (Berry, 2006; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) for interpretive analysis of statements and drawings of parents, students, and paraprofessionals regarding their experiences and perception of the effects of Project ELLA longitudinal study (see Figure 1). It is an assemblage of 298, seven inch by seven inch data cards, 26 blank cards that signify the multiple entryways of interpretation by an

Figure 1. The ELLA BRICOLAGE



ongoing, active audience. The interpretive process of our bricolage is informed by hypertext theory, originally conceived by Ted Nelson (1974). According to Nelson, “We no longer *have* to have things in sequence; totally arbitrary structures are possible (p. 160). We view the individual data cards as metaphorical hyperlinks. As with a hyperlink, it will be up to the “reader” of the “text” to skip-over, or to read and engage with any of the 298 data cards.

Theoretical Framework

You should change 20% of your thinking each year.

– Goolishian [as cited in Andersen & Epstein, in press]

Harry Goolishian, a pioneer in the development of social constructionist thought and family therapy practice, famously instructed his trainees, “You should treat your theory as a lover; be passionate toward it but be prepared to give it up!” (Andersen & Epstein, in press). Such is the continuing evolution of our thinking regarding gender, relationships, and the workplace. The overarching theoretical framework that consistently has informed how we conceive of the mutual contributions of the research community and the longitudinal study was that of *postmodernism* – with its emphasis on the generation of meaning through language and the relational nature of language (Anderson, 1977). Within that framework, three specific theoretical orientations maintain central influence: (a) *social constructionism* – which emphasizes the generative nature of social exchange (Anderson, 2007a), along with relational responsibility and the transformative potential for all participants (McNamee & Gergen, 1999); (b) a *narrative* approach to training and research – which centers people as experts in their own lives, assumes competencies, and is characterized by a collaborative, respectful, and authentically curious approach to inquiry regarding individuals’ narratives (Morgan, 2000); and (c) *Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)* – which suggests that “all growth occurs in connection,

that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” (Jordan & Hartling, 2002).

Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), one of the mainstays of our metaphorical three-legged stool, however, is the site of our current shift in thinking. RCT departs from traditional psychological theories by focusing on the development of growth fostering relationships, mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, authenticity, and movement toward mutuality in relationships (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). RCT’s definition of *power* as “the capacity to produce change” is contrasted with the more traditional Western notion of power, in which differences are stratified along multiple dimensions. According to RCT, relational competencies of empathic attunement, authenticity, and accountability foster resilience and mutual empowerment (Walker, 2002, p. 1) and help transcend the false dichotomies of “power-over” relationships (Surrey, 1987). Related theories regarding women’s ontological development, including Gilligan’s (1982/1993) notion of *listening into voice*, and women’s epistemological development, including Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s (1986) investigation of *women’s ways of knowing*, have informed our vision of opportunities for both relational research (Feinsilver, Murphy, & Anderson, 2007; Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007) and professional development (Irby & Brown, 1995).

Feminisms

With numerous doubts about past practices, many feminists have sought ways of working that would capitalize on the strengths of each of these positions, but would at the same time, alter our understanding of how they can contribute to the field. . . .

– Gergen & Davis [1997, p. 4]

A quote from Mize (2003) introduces our discussion regarding our theoretical evolution, which we think of as “troubling the contours” (Slattery, 2003) of earlier feminist emancipatory discourse regarding *empowerment* (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Surrey, 1987) and *voice* (Gilligan, 1982/1993; Jack, 1991). As Mize noted:

In these postmodern times, we need a story more complicated than the original. Indeed, an array of stories needs to be told through lenses of race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and other currents, which contribute to the formation of cultural identity. . . . We see it as critical to explore through conversations with one another the conflicts and alliances that we share, and to make room for the patchwork of overlapping alliances that may not be circumscribable by a single identity (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). (2003, p. 122)

Postmodern feminist theorists, then, are distinguished by their recognition that feminism as a discourse has been shaped by culture and politics over time (Mize, 2003). For example, the deconstruction of feminist texts into many *feminisms* has focused upon the failure of White feminism, Westernization, and competitive individualism (Mize, 2003; Narayan, 1997), *uneasy readings* of emancipatory pedagogy and male-authored critical pedagogy (Lather, 1992; Luke & Gore, 1992), and concern regarding the “dilemmas of power that emerged from critiques of problematic representations of *voice* within feminist research” (Jackson, 2003, p. 693).

Rhizovocality

Jackson (2003) introduced her “invented signifier” of *rhizovocality* in order to interrupt and reference the “excessive” and “transgressive” voices in feminist research, including (a) early feminist emancipator research that assumed an authentic, silent woman’s voice in need of liberation; (b) dilemmas of power that emerged from critiques of problematic representations of voice within feminist research; and (c) postcolonial feminist response to imperial uses of voice in

feminist research (pp. 693-707). After mapping the evolution of *voice* in qualitative feminist research, Jackson identified “rhizovocality as a conceptual, deconstructive tool for working the limits of voice in qualitative research” (p. 693). As Jackson described the etymology of the term rhizovocality:

Rhizo, a prefix I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) image of the rhizome, captures the heterogeneity of vocality in a spatial figuration, accentuating its connection to other things through its very diversity. *Vocality*, in music theory, emphasizes the performative dimension of voice, its expressive power, its tensions of dissonant counterpoint, and its variations on thematic connections; it challenges our attention and demands deep concentration if we are to hear its nuances. (p. 707)

To Jackson, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizome theory, with its “image of a rhizome composed of plateaus, intensities, and multiplicities connected to other multiplicities by underground stems” was a helpful figuration for not only *textual analysis* of voice in feminist discourse, but also for imagining the *function* of voice in feminist qualitative research (Jackson, 2003, p. 693).

Nearly four years ago, when we began our research with the paraprofessionals and parents of the Project ELLA, we were influenced by critical feminist theory. More recently, we have been moving towards a poststructuralist deconstructive paradigm. As Jackson (2003) noted, feminist qualitative researchers working from the latter position “consider voice not as a problem to be solved but as a concept to be problematized” (p. 703). Moreover, we are interested in the possibilities of augmenting the process of problematizing the research text by applying Gadamer’s ((1974/2004) notions of *strengthening* and hermeneutic interpretation.

In our conversations with women in our Project ELLA research community, we came to experience that the concept of *empowerment* as one which tends to situate research participants, and even colleagues in mentoring relationships, into stratified positions of *otherness*. In our experience, the divergent implications of empowerment versus collaboration (Anderson & Gehart, 2007) and appreciation of local funds of knowledge (Moll, Amante, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Villenas, 2001) are significant.

Research Questions

The research questions that we present in this paper reflect the complexity of the qualitative methodology of the ELLA BRICOLAGE. In our AERA 2009 paper discussion regarding our application and further development of Kincheloe and Berry's (2004) bricolage methodology (Helms, Irby, Lara, Guerrero, & Cox, 2009), we noted that Lincoln (2001) described the evolving bricoleur as "searching for the nodes, the nexuses, the linkages, the interconnections, the fragile bonds between disciplines, between bodies of knowledge, between knowing and understanding themselves" (pp. 693-694).

We further described the bricolage as a research metaphor for what Gergen (1999, p. 167) called a postmodern "profusion of practices." In bricolage, these practices include:

. . . multiple *theories* and *methodologies*: multiple ways to collect, describe, construct, analyze, and *interpret* the object of the research study; and finally multiple ways to *narrate* (tell the story about) the relationships, struggles, conflicts, and complex world of the study that maintains the integrity and reality of the subjects. (Berry, 2006, p. 90).

We, therefore, present five sets of research questions, which informed differing aspects of our research as bricolage, and relate to the present topic of feminisms in the Project ELLA community. First, we asked the paraprofessionals, our co-researchers in the various modes of

inquiry of the ELLA BRICOLAGE, to write or draw something that would help illustrate an example of (a) your most meaningful contribution to Project ELLA, or (b) what about Project ELLA has impacted you the most. Second, in recorded interviews with the research coordinators, we asked and discussed the same questions. (Because we conceived of the ELLA BRICOLAGE as an artifact that privileges the voices of those constituencies not traditionally sought-out by researchers, we did not ask the research coordinators to write or draw their responses.) Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with parents of Project ELLA Experimental students. (See Table 1 for parent interview questions.) Fourth, at the conclusion of the parent interviews, we asked the parents to please answer the question listed on the parent data cards: “List three ways your child’s participation has improved her/his English.” Fifth, after collecting all of the written and recorded data from Experimental students and their parents for the ELLA BRICOLAGE, we interviewed the Project ELLA paraprofessionals. Schön’s (1983, 1987) notion of *reflective practitioners* and their positionality in action research informed the questions we asked in conversation with the paraprofessionals (see Table 2). Herr and Anderson (2005) noted that the distinctive feature of action research is that “. . . it shifts its locus of control in varying degrees from professional or academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of the research” (p. 2); this very sensibility of action research oriented how we conceived and contextualized our research questions.

Methods

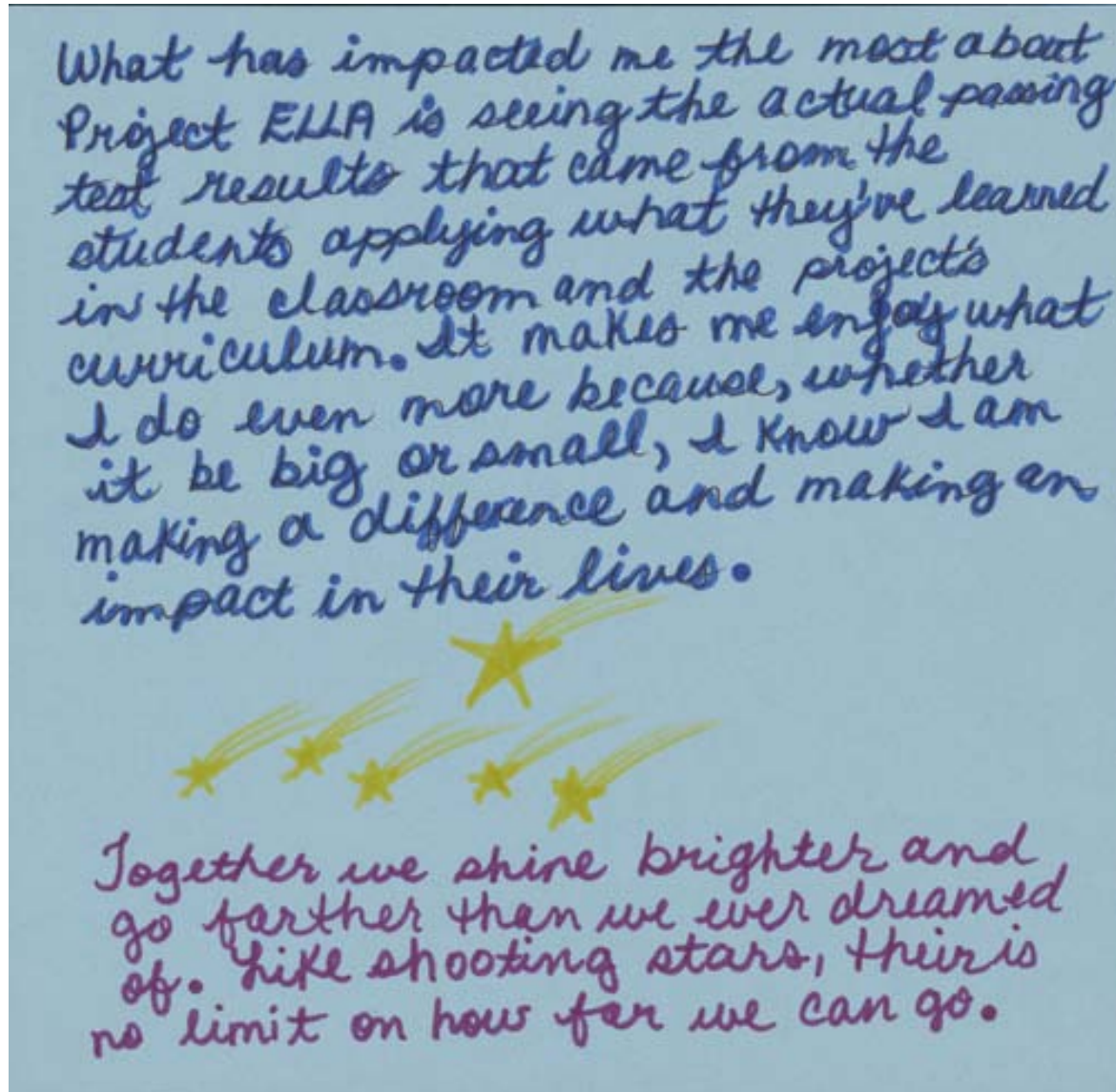
Action scientists/researchers work collaboratively with participants in order to solve problems within their respective organizations and learning contexts (Schwandt, 2007, p. 4). Situating action science within unique contexts of research and methodology, Schön (1983) noted:

The development of action science cannot be achieved by researchers who keep themselves removed from contexts of action, or by practitioners who have limited time, inclination, or competence for systematic reflection. Its development will require new ways of integrating reflective research and practice. (p. 320)

According to Herr and Anderson (2005), process validity in action research is determined, in part, by “the quality of the relationships that are developed with participants” (p. 55). As we envisioned each of our methods and constituencies, we were guided by our commitment to relational, dialogical, reflective, and collaborative practices (Anderson, 2007b). Even given the hectic pace of a longitudinal study and school year nearing completion, the notion that “relationships and conversations go hand-in-hand” guided our careful consideration of how we might best convey our dedication to valuing research as a process of learning from the participants themselves (Feinsilver, Murphy, & Anderson, 2007, p. 280).

During a research meeting, which turned out to be a crash course in bricolage theory and practice, we invited the project paraprofessionals to join us as co-bricoleurs. Summarizing key points from the Kincheloe and Berry (2004) model, we introduced the bricolage by elaborating upon orienting concepts of Kincheloe and Berry’s bricolage methodology: relationality, interdisciplinarity, multiplicity, complexity, and criticality for social action and justice. After mapping out our research strategy and receiving valuable input from the paraprofessionals regarding our plan for the students’ classroom bricolage activity, we shared a good lunch. Afterwards, we asked the paraprofessionals to write our draw their reflections for the ELLA BRICOLAGE, as described in the previous section. We then, invited the paraprofessionals to share their own, and reflect upon each other’s renderings. We include an example of one of the paraprofessionals’ data cards (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. The ELLA BRICOLAGE: Paraprofessional's data card



As Herr and Anderson (2005) so aptly noted, “The realities and timelines of the practice setting often collide with the researcher’s desire for more time for reflection and meaning making” (p. 80). Respecting the impending timelines of the research coordinators as they were involved with the final assessments, records, and reports of a four-year longitudinal study, we adapted the questions that we asked the paraprofessionals, to conversational inquiry during times convenient to them, individually and collectively. For example, a transcript of a joint interview with the project’s lead coordinator and director of testing begins with one of the authors of this paper, Sallie Helms, asking the following questions:

1. What do you think has been your most significant contribution to Project ELLA?
2. What stands out for you as a benefit of Project ELLA? How has it benefitted you?

What have you learned? How do you think it will help you professionally?

We invited parents to come to their child’s school for interviews with the project’s research assistant for qualitative data analysis and/or their child’s classroom paraprofessional. Nine parents came to their child’s campus for individual interviews, and two groups of parents (one group of six, and one group of seven parents) met with their respective Project ELLA paraprofessionals and the project’s qualitative research assistant. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and for the most part conducted in Spanish. At the conclusion of the interviews, we discussed with the parents the following:

A part of this research will be a large canvas, almost like a large quilt, of the ideas of parents, students, paraprofessionals, and research coordinators who have been involved in Project ELLA. It will look something like this: [We showed the parents a photograph of a composite of children’s art, similar to our vision of the ELLA BRICOLAGE.]

We then asked the parents to please answer the question listed on the parent data cards: “List three ways your child’s participation has improved her/his English.” We offered parents the option of writing the answers themselves or of telling the interviewer(s) their answers, which the interviewer(s) then recorded on parent data cards. Hoping to maximize our parent data, we also sent parent data cards home with students, along with letters (written in Spanish on one side and English on the other) asking parents to complete and return them. (See Figure 3 for a sample parent data card.)

Finally, at the conclusion of this collaborative qualitative endeavor, we interviewed each of the paraprofessionals individually. This aspect of the data gathering, perhaps more than any other, was representative of Shotter’s (1999, 2005, 2006) approach to dialogical inquiry, which he termed *witness*-thinking, as compared with *aboutness*-thinking. From Shotter’s (2006) perspective, the monologic *aboutness*-talk/thinking associated with traditional research methodology is “unresponsive to another’s expressions: it works simply in terms of an individual thinker’s ‘theoretical pictures” (p. 599). Of *aboutness*-talk/thinking, Shotter surmised, “Such representational-referential talk does not engage us. . . . Such talk leaves us ‘cold’, we say” (p. 55). Our questions for our reflections with the paraprofessionals were inspired by Cooperrider’s (1995) concept of *appreciative inquiry*, and Geertz’ (1973) idea of *thick descriptions*. As Geertz (1999) observed,

To discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives. (Changing the Subject, ¶ 11).

We hoped not only to learn from the paraprofessionals and their experiences as co-researchers,

Figure 3. Sample Parent Data Card

Please list three ways your child's participation in Project ELLA has improved her/his English.

Favor de escribir tres maneras en las que su niño(a), por la participación en el Proyecto ELLA, ha mejorado su Inglés.

- ❖ El Proyecto Ella ha ayudado a mi hijo ser más responsable.
- ❖ He notado que mi hijo habla los dos idiomas bien que es Español y Inglés.
- ❖ También veo que mi hijo tiene mucho interés en leer libros todos los días.

Translation:

- Project ELLA has helped my son to be more responsible.
- I have noted that my son speaks both languages well, Spanish and English.
- I also see that my son has a lot of interest in reading books every day.

but to join with them in appreciative dialogue regarding their agency and contributions as co-researchers.

Results

Regarding researchers' choices of questions (even by the most egalitarian and collaborative researchers!), Hare-Mustin (2003) noted:

The question . . . is always about the choice of question. . . . What biases of ours affect our seeing and hearing? What does our social location cause us to know and not know? What end does a particular view serve? Who benefits? Who loses? (p. xiii)

And so, in approaching the difficult task of segmenting, selecting, and categorize the rich narratives of our conversations and interviews with the research coordinators and paraprofessionals, we acknowledge the inherent inequities of the selection process, as well as the inherent inadequacies of writing *about* “the spontaneous, living, bodily responsiveness” (Shotter, 2003, p. 435) of our research conversations.

Co-researchers

The title *paraprofessional* enjoys widespread use in the district in which we have been privileged to house and conduct our research. We ascribe to the postmodern view that “language creates reality” (Bruner, 1986), and prefer the title *co-researcher* as more accurate, and perhaps more respectful, description of this aspect and role of the work of the Project ELLA paraprofessionals. We understand that changing the title might cause confusion for educators who are more familiar with the term paraprofessional. At the same time, we are mindful, as Walker (as cited in Fletcher, 2004) eloquently stated that, “. . . naming is a very radical act. . . . But if we start naming what it is that women do and naming it in strong language, that is radical because it is a direct challenge to the status quo” (p. 296).

Shotter's (2006) views regarding participants as co-researchers in collaborative inquiry oriented our training and research conversations with the project's paraprofessionals:

We have here, then, a process of inquiry in which practitioners become co-researchers, and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been 'struck by' in the unfolding process. It is a process in which researchers and practitioners alike are engaged in creating *with* each other an 'action guiding' sense *from within* their lived and living experience of their shared circumstances. (p. 601)

The following excerpt from an interview with Marta² (ML), one of the paraprofessionals of Project ELLA, illustrates the fluid nature of this notion, as well as the self-agency which Marta expressed as a result of our collaborative process of research as bricolage.

INT: First of all, thank you for everything that you've done with this research.

ML: Oh, it's been my pleasure.

INT: I really thought today . . . you know how people say, "I really couldn't have done it without you"? I really just couldn't have done it without all of you. This is so huge. So much information, so much data about students . . .

ML: Oh, well thank you. It's a precious learning experience for everyone.

INT: Oh, thank you. Thank you. How was this part of Project ELLA for you? I mean like the parent interviews, contacting parents, the student activity?

ML: It was a very positive experience for me. That I feel helped me know a part of me that I didn't know. I thought it was asleep! I felt like I woke up.

INT: Which part?

² For the purposes of this paper, names are changed, except in references in the text to the authors of the paper and to the Principle Investigators of Project ELLA.

ML: I always considered myself very shy. And keeping away and apart, and . . .

INT: Oh!

ML: I actually felt very relaxed, after the first interview.

INT: Interesting. So, what helped you “relax”? Was it just . . .

ML: I think that it was just comfortable being the fact that it was all moms. I don’t know if a father would have come if I would have been a little more closed up. But I felt like, out of my shell. It was fine to be an interviewer.

INT: Um hum. And I wondered, too. I felt a little nervous before we started, and then honestly I thought, nobody could be more nervous than the mothers. Because they probably wonder . . .

ML: What it is going to be about.

INT: Yeah. So, that’s wonderful. So there may be a part of you that is a researcher. Because it’s a little bit different role, isn’t it?

ML: Yes, it’s different. I learned that. Um . . . and then the parents, and the response. You were expecting a response from them, and they’d go into wanting to speak about their child in the classroom.

INT: Yeah.

ML: And then, you didn’t know whether to go on, and go on, and go on, and not interrupt them. And get back to the question.

INT: What did you do?

ML: I decided to just let them unwind, however they wanted to.

INT: Yes.

ML: And, I always asked them if they had any questions.

INT: That's wonderful. And you know that's what . . . you know I'm a family therapist . . . That's what therapists do!

ML: [Soft laughter]

INT: Sometimes in just telling a story, and talking, talking, talking, they get to, kind of the core of the matter that we're looking for.

ML: Yes, yes. True.

INT: Yeah, so that's wonderful. You know, you just let them talk. Very respectful, I think.

ML: Yes, um hum...

INT: Instead of saying, "No, no. Question number three" . . .

ML: I was very respectful. Very open minded and flexible.

INT: That's wonderful. That's quite a natural gift you have for research, then.

ML: Thank you.

Mentoring

In one form or another, *mentoring* is a theme that emerged in our interviews and research conversations with paraprofessionals and research coordinators. Fletcher (2004) mentioned that the usual connotation of mentoring is "very hierarchical and one-directional." (p. 194). In her research regarding women engineers, relational theory, and the workplace, though, Fletcher observed a more generalized, more informal kind of mentoring: "These engineers wanted *everyone* to succeed, and their everyday, ordinary interactions with people were geared to enable whomever they were with. It's different from formal mentoring where you are training and protecting a specific person" (p. 295).

This aspect of relational mentoring (in contrast with a more hierarchical, power-over arrangement) was articulated by many of the paraprofessionals. Following is an excerpt from our interview with Catalina (CT):

CT: Yeah, Carla [one of the research coordinators]. She's, you know, she's taught me a lot in the way she presents herself. And the way she even writes an e-mail and the way she thinks before she does take action. I learn just . . . just by looking at her. Sometimes she doesn't even know I'm learning from her.

INT: Isn't that nice?

CT: In every aspect I can go to Carla. Like a friend, too, you know, AND like a professional. And I think we'll continue even though the project is coming to an end. And then I'll be [teaching] next year.

INT: OK.

CT: I just know that I'm going to keep a good communication with Carla. And any questions – she said, “If you need me.” Because I'll be a first grade teacher; you know first year teacher. She said, “If you need me to go to the classroom and show you something, you can call me.” And I definitely will.

INT: How nice.

CT: Yeah. So that's an advantage.

INT: An advantage that might make you feel more confident, that might let you try things on your own? Even when she's not there?

CT: Um hum.

INT: Yeah . . . Carla. That's a nice description of her. You know, I get an e-mail and it cuts through. It's simple, respectful and very professional.

CT: Exactly. And I didn't know how to do that until she showed me. And sometimes I don't have to ask her anymore. I know how to do it.

The Demands on Women at Higher Levels

Fletcher (2004) stated, "I think we as women put extraordinary demands on women at higher levels, expecting them to be all things feminine and *also* to demonstrate all the masculine competencies that will advance them in the organizations. It's a lot" (p. 295). Similarly, in a joint interview with the project's lead research coordinator (CG) and the director of testing (KC), we were reminded that even the most collaborative research communities experience the stress which results from the demands of large, government-sponsored research projects:

KC: She was the testing coordinator before me, so that helps. She's the lead coordinator now, so she's out there on her own [laughter]. She's making the path.

INT: It can be lonely out there. . . .

KC: In the front. . . .

INT: Uh Huh

CG: So I think it has given a lot of opportunities. And challenge. Big challenge. And meeting that challenge. Socially. Personally. Also in your job. How you do things with tasks. And sometimes we're just kind of pushed out there. And [the principle investigators] have very high expectations. I think the more we showed the researchers that we could handle the jobs, they gave us more responsibility and more trust. And then we have more things to do. It's a double-edged sword.

KC: They push us to our limits. It's like they can see that we can handle more, or that we're willing to say "OK, I'll do it." But then they ask us. Then we realize ourselves, that we can handle what they ask us.

Mentoring as Contrasted with Narcissistic Interaction

Surrey (as cited in Fletcher, 2004) proposed the following:

I also think that mentoring for men is somewhat different. What I've seen is that when men mentor, it's sometimes a narcissistic interaction. It's not so much a focus on the needs of the other as it is just feeling good about being in a superior position where you can pass on your knowledge and wisdom. So it's a different definition of what it means to enable someone else – you are doing it because you are getting credit for doing it.

(p. 295)

One of the most consistent themes in our interviews with paraprofessionals and the research coordinators is an appreciation for the shared commitment of the principle investigators is of providing research team members opportunities for advancement through education and experience. This is so woven into the fabric of the research process, that Surrey's reference to the narcissistic mentorship was not even part of our research conversations. Further excerpts from our interview with Catalina (CT) reflect her appreciation for the opportunities which the principal investigators have provided for both institutional and practical education:

CT: Dr. Rodriguez, she's amazing. She's a good lady and she has helped me to get the scholarship that I have now.

INT: How wonderful.

CT: And Dr. Lara and Dr. Irby: "If you need anything, let me know."

* * *

CT: Then we go through the [paraprofessional] trainings. And I'm like, "Wow!" And *they're* like, "Wow, I really *do* make a difference." And [the principal investigators and research coordinators] tell us, "This does help me." And we're just not like any other para in the district. It's very different. We're lucky to be part of this project. Because we have learned so much, that's going to help us in the future: as educators and administrators. Who knows what all these paras are going to be in the future.

One of the project's research coordinators (CG) elaborated upon the themes of practical and institutional educational encouragement, support, and opportunities:

CG: Basically, one big opportunity or benefit for many people on every level in this project has been the opportunity for education. Like paraprofessionals who, not only learn through training through the project, but are also into "Grow Your Own: Becoming Teachers" [a university scholarship program for paraprofessionals]. Their education is paid for. And we have teachers who have been offered . . . teachers who have become coordinators. Like I was a teacher and became a coordinator. Mary became a coordinator.

INT: Um hum. Right.

CG: And then they offer you, "OK! Are you interested in a master's degree?" And we have coordinators who have become "doctors." So, it's the educational opportunities also. Because they really. . . .

INT: Open doors. Um hum.

CG: I think too that, because of the opportunities. I don't really want to say "promotion." It's been a help for me because . . . I didn't realize I could do this. I was in the classroom, and I love the classroom. But I never saw myself in this job. And it's like, things happen. And it's in the right order. And more opportunities come, and I guess it is

kind of promotion . And so, they're challenging me. But as I meet the challenge, I feel like, I learn a lot about myself. "Oh, I can do that!"

Mentoring and Cultural Differences

Shin (as cited in Fletcher, 2004) articulated a further consideration regarding mentorship in our research project:

I want to add that I think we can't ignore the issue of cultural differences. I think that in this culture it is not only women that have difficulty, it is people from different cultures as well. I am struck by the fact that some of the men who worked relationally came from other cultures. So I am struck by how *Western* male this focus on individualism and autonomy is. It is not just gender. (p. 295)

It is worth noting that two Latino men – Dr. Rafael Lara-Alecio, one of Project ELLA's principle investigators and Vicente, one of the project's paraprofessionals – populate this research community, comprised mostly of women. We do not presume to impose preconceived notions regarding widely diverse Latino cultures upon our analysis, but we do appreciate the collaborative presence and approaches of Dr. Lara and Vicente.

Following is an excerpt from one interview, which refers to Dr. Lara and his relational approach to his work:

CG: It's a great team because between Dr. Irby, Dr. Lara, and Dr. Rodriguez, because of the way they balance each other out. And from three institutions. It's really kind of a . . . I don't want to sound "cheesy" but it's really kind of a magical thing the way it happens. Because you usually don't have that kind of relationship, where they're friends, but they're also professionally connected. And really their goal is for the children.

INT: Yep.

CG: They had to sit and spend hours and days writing this grant . . . you know, that got this money. And how to begin to get a grant like this. How's it really going to start?

It started with two coordinators in a closet.

INT: Is that right?

CT: Yeah.

CG: And it just evolves, and they're learning, too. And they're amazing!

INT: Yeah.

CG: The three of them together. They've really contributed a lot together to the field.

During our interview with Vicente (VM), we reflected upon his perception of himself as a role model for the male students in his classes:

INT: What worked for you, and what didn't work [in the bricolage research process]? I mean, what could I have done differently? What could I set up differently, or . . . What was good?

VM: Well, what was good was that the students learned a lot from the stories in Project ELLA. And the experiments and the science reading part, which is Crisella.

INT: Um hum.

VM: They learn a lot, you know. Actually, my SRA, the small *grupo*? . . . The small group?

INT: Yeah, yeah.

VM: They passed the TAKS, and I was so happy. They scored 72%, 78%, and 79%.

INT: Golly.

VM: So I was *really* happy. And that showed how Project ELLA was helpful for them.

* * *

INT: Yeah. What a good role model, too, I thought, when I observed you in class. You dressed so professionally, with a shirt and tie. For young men to see a male teacher . . .

VM: Exactly.

INT: I bet you, some of those boys will think about being teachers someday. Like the parents said, too.

VM: Yes. Most of them, you know, I ask them what did they want to be when they grow up. They say, “I want to be a teacher like you.” So, we have to be like a model, you know.

INT: Wow.

Collaborative Revolutionaries

If they can be sustained, then, in such forms of cooperative, synergistic, or collaborative practices, it is possible to develop self-reflecting, self-critical, self-researching, and thus self-developing practices. But to say this is not to say anything very revolutionary, for such a form of ‘research’ is already part of everyday practices; it is only revolutionary to recognize the fact.

– Shotter [2006, p. 601]

As we previously mentioned, Fletcher (2004) provocatively stated, “Actually, I do think we are talking about revolution. And I think this challenge to hierarchy and competition is what makes this work ‘feminist’” (p. 296). We are proud to situate ourselves within a group of fiercely dedicated and collaborative revolutionaries – each in her or his own way.

An excerpt from our interview with Elena (EM) illustrates the mutually unfolding (Shotter, 2006) and mutually informative experience of non-hierarchical co-research processes:

INT: How would you describe your experience as co-researcher? Was it different for you to be in a research role instead of teaching?

EM: Yes, it really was. *Yo creo que sí, porque . . .* I feel like another part of your team, you know?

INT: That's the way I feel.

EM: Like, asking the parents the questions, and explaining to them, "I need your help with this survey, because I need your opinion. So that I can have your ideas about have you seen your child improve through Project ELLA's education? And it's, I feel like, very important.

INT: Yeah!

EM: Some of the parents, I called them, but they said, "Miss Elena, I wish I could help you, but I don't have a car, and my husband works. And, if you can come over here, it would be nice, and, you know, I can help you."

INT: That's important, too.

EM: You know, "Just let me know." I don't know how to say this, but they said, "*Las portas de me casa están abierta para usted.*"

INT: *Sí.*

EM: And some of them said, "Since I've known you since first grade." It's like, I have very . . . since I know those parents, I have very . . .

INT: *Confianza?*

EM: *Sí. La confianza. Me dieron la confianza.*

* * *

EM: See, some of the parents were very nice. Very nice.

INT: And much research is done that way. I think to go into people's homes where they feel comfortable. . .

EM: Uh huh.

INT: And it just makes me think, it's about people having conversations – that's what this type of research is. You know the parents are helping us, and YOU have helped me tremendously.

Following are the concluding remarks by the research coordinators, whom I interviewed together:

CG: I mean it's not just talking about the coordinators, and researchers, and paras and the teachers, but really, it's focused on the kids. You know, it's really . . . I hope we can see how the intervention affects them in the future.

KC: I think it's made a difference. And I REALLY think it's made a difference for those kids who were struggling.

INT: Yes.

KC: The ones that got small group instruction, and that was only a small percentage. But I think that there are kids that didn't get pulled out for small group who were helped by the intervention, and that would not have been helped if we hadn't given their teachers the tools to help them. I think that not only do we help the students, but we help some teachers become better teachers by giving them the curriculum that we gave them.

CG: I don't think we'll ever see all the effects of Project ELLA. We had one para that was using her reading kit to teach other second language learners – I mean adults – how to read in English because they are working on their citizenship. We're never going to know all of the. . .

INT: Like the stone with rings in a lake . . .

CG: Or like the paras learning to teach reading. That will help them with [their own] children.

INT: Oh, yeah, so . . .

CG: I mean as far as the data we have so far . . . It's like you said, intuitively there's a difference. Like science . . . some kid really gets excited about science, and he may end up a scientist. You know the TAKS, someone passed who maybe wouldn't have passed and now they don't have to be retained in 3rd grade.

* * *

INT: Is there anything else that you'd like to say about, anything that maybe came up in your mind as we were talking?

CG: I think one thing that I'd like to say is that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. And I don't really want to use the word "luck" because I don't really like that word, but I think that we're all fortunate, because I think that it was supposed to be this way. But, this opportunity is rare. To have this type of funding, this type of opportunity where so many people were affected. So, I think it's interesting how it all happened that we all became a part of it.

KC: I agree.

INT: I do too. It's almost like an era, you know.

CG: It's like it began, it ended . . . but it really never ends.

Parents

People are not heard in research projects when they are the subject of a search for similar behaviors, characteristics, or typologies. Their experiences and stories are reduced to

coded bits of data (Bateson, 1990). Nobody likes to be considered exactly the same as anyone else, (Tannen, 1990) nor could it possibly be accurate to consider them so.

– Levin [2007, p. 113]

The spirit of our research with the parents of Project ELLA students was inspired by a patchwork of unrelated comments that we've discovered along the way, and tucked into our hearts for future reference. We share them with you now, in no preferential order: (a) "I later learned a Yiddish word, *naches*, the swelling heart a parent has for a child's accomplishments, an experience we did not label so well in my Anglo-Saxon family" (Layton, 1989, p. 23); (b) "He went down with them then and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and with people" (Luke 2:51-52, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1990); "There are small acts of heroism, too, that occur without regard to the notoriety that you attract for it. For example, a mother does it by the isolation she endures on behalf of the family" (Campbell & Moyers, 1998); and "'Here at the [Wellesley Centers for Women] we have always acted upon the belief that any improvement in women's lives is directly tied to the quality of care and education available to children" (Bailey, 2006, p. 1).

Either with the Project ELLA research assistant for qualitative data analysis, or by themselves, the paraprofessionals interviewed the parents. In this section, we provide a few comments from paraprofessionals regarding their relationships with their students' parents and their reflections regarding the parent interview process. Linda (LM) a soft-spoken and dedicated paraprofessional, stepped-up to facilitate the largest parent group interview of the bricolage research. Following is her take on that experience:

LM: Well, me being not someone to stand in front of a big group of people, I think it was a good experience for me. In a way like taking charge a little bit there. And it gave me more confidence as I went along. And just spoke to the parents and addressed their questions. And it just made me feel good. And how they were responding to me, and I saw that they were satisfied, or happy with the program. And that made me feel good, as a para. You know, doing my part.

Regarding the parent data cards, one paraprofessional, Margarita (MM), expressed our research team's dedication to inviting as many parents as possible to participate in the bricolage research process and the ELLA BRICOLAGE. Further, her comments are eloquent testimony to the power of hypertext theory, and the value of each participant's interview and written/drawn data, regardless whether emergent themes are imposed by researchers:

MM: I wanted to make sure that all of the parents participated because I know that they have so many things to do. And so they can't go to school for interviews during the day, because they work.

INT: And so, to get their voices is the whole purpose of this research.

MM: Yes, the whole purpose. We wanted to know what they thought, how it had helped the children. And it is good to know.

INT: And that what they have to say is important, you know? It's like ... there is so much in the literature about parents not participating. And I don't think it's from any lack on their part

MM: Right.

INT: I just think . . .

MM: It's sometimes hard. Actually, one of the parents told me that she felt like it would be sort of her fault that her child could not read well. Because when she was small, she wasn't good at reading.

INT: Oh, interesting.

MM: She wasn't good at it. And she had to get tutoring in reading at home. So, she thought that it was sort of her fault. And that it was probably from her genes.

INT: Oh, right.

MM: And the student has dyslexia, and she had to get the overlay. And she just got tested, like right before the TAKS . . . like a month before? And she passed the TAKS. She was the one who left crying. Because she was afraid that she wasn't going to pass, but she did pass! We were so happy for her.

INT: Well, this may change the way the mother looks at herself, and the child looks at herself.

MM: Right. And she was also telling me that sometimes she thinks that her child understands English better than she understands Spanish, even though she is in a bilingual set-up. But, she feels that her child understands English better than she understands Spanish.

Collaborative Learning

By knowledge, I mean that which is new and unique to each participant. This view is based on the premise that knowledge is not imparted by another or a knower who bestows on a non-knower. Rather, knowledge is fluid and communal, yet personalized. . . . Whatever the outcome, it will be something different than either started with,

something socially constructed.

– Anderson [2000, first ¶]

Finally, the following transcript from our interview with Elena (EM) illustrates the fluid nature of knowledge – who is educating, and who is learning – in a dialogical interview process. In it, Elena described the active co-construction of knowledge and understanding, on the part of the parents, and herself as researcher:

EM: You know, Sallie, one of the questions on one of the surveys that we asked the parents? I put a little note to myself to explain about “*afectado*,” because I know it has two meanings.

INT: Really??

EM: Um, because I should have called you about this . . .

INT: No, that’s ok! What does it mean?

EM: *Afectado* means . . .

INT: Affect?

EM: Well, *es como*, “*que la niña no está afectando*.” She’s not improving “nothing.” You know?

INT: Ohhhhhh.

EM: So, I explained to the parents when we got to Question 4, when I read, “*Podría pensar en cualesquiera otras capacidades o actitudes de su hijo en que el Proyecto ELLA le haya afectado?*”

INT: Um hum.

EM: They answered correctly [according to the Spanish context], “Miss Elena, no, it’s not affecting my child. *Al contrario*, it’s been *helping* my child a lot!”

INT: So, there's an opposite meaning, almost?

EM: Yes. And I explained it to them, and, you know, they got it, because "*Al contrario!*" – like, "On the other hand, it's been helping a lot!"

INT: I see! The nuances of language are interesting. Because Marietta [a Latina research coordinator, who is fluent in Spanish, but whose first language is English] is the person who translated it for me.

EM: Um hum.

INT: And Spanish is not her first language. So, I think it is very different if you learn some Spanish maybe from family, but mostly from school? You know?

EM: Yeah. *Pero, yo creo que sí, de contestaron muy bien.*

INT: Um hum.

EM: So, *es lo que cuenta, de que en realidad, el Proyecto ELLA no le afectó. Al contrario, le ayudó muchísimo*, you see, through the school year, so . . .

INT: Oh, yeah. So *afectado* can almost mean like a *mál influencia*, o . . .

EM: Um hum.

INT: See . . . that's just very good that you are telling me this.

EM: And I had my little note to myself: "OK, I have to tell Sallie this."

Conclusions

Although dialogue and interpretation of the parents' responses and data cards are ongoing, and writing regarding this process will be addressed in the future, we would like to close the present discussion with comments excerpted from our ELLA BRICOLAGE parent interviews. These excerpts illustrate the paraprofessionals' skills as collaborative co-researchers. The parents' comments highlight the significance of inviting them to participate in the ongoing

research dialogues regarding their children, and how they perceive their children's experiences with our longitudinal study.

Following are excerpts of group and individual interview formats, from both structured English as a second language (ESL) intervention classrooms and transitional bilingual (BIL) classrooms.

Group Interview. ESL Classroom Parents

INT/LM: Project ELLA is designed to impact children's learning. Can you think of any other abilities or attitudes of your child that Project ELLA may impact?

PARENT 1: As I was saying about Mario, I am very happy because I know he needs to read a lot and in this program. . . . In Project ELLA they have taught him how to pronounce words. I am very happy with that, and I wish the program would continue. I am very grateful with everyone in the program, because they detected a problem in my son that I didn't know he had. I wish it could continue.

Mario didn't know how to pronounce many words and would get confused with letters. He would confuse "s" and would say it as "c" (like *casa*), and when it was a different sound. Now that he is being helped, he has learned a lot, and I am very happy with that.

INT/LM: Are there other areas where your child used English more than others, like with their friends?

Parent 1: Practically, he speaks more English than Spanish.

Parent 2: My son when speaking English would always think of the words before saying them. He was insecure; especially because they would make fun of him, mostly my older son. But there was a sudden change, and it was as if they [Project ELLA] knew that he

was having problems, and helped him. Because, well, I don't speak English; and he now expresses himself in English very well and is much more confident. He comes to me and tells me "Mom, I can say the words now." I see he is very happy.

*Individual Interview. BIL Classroom Parent*³

INT/MM: Can you provide specific examples of your child's growth in speaking English, since s/he has been in Project ELLA? With your daughter since Pre-K, what examples do you see?

PARENT: I do notice a difference between my daughter Terésa in Project ELLA and my other daughter Olga, who was not in the Project. Terésa speaks English more fluidly because she was taught so.

INT/SH: So there is a big difference? More confident?

PARENT: More clear, and you can understand her better than her sister. She corrects her sister and tells her how to say things.

INT/MM: And what about reading English? Do you see any difference between your daughters?

PARENT: She pronounces words better than the other one who has not had that help.

INT/SH: Does she read better than your other daughter?

PARENT: Yes.

INT/SH: Do the children notice a difference, by any chance?

PARENT: Yes and my husband also says that her English sounds better than my other daughter. She is less embarrassed maybe.

³ Qualitative research assistant (SH) and paraprofessional (MM) co-facilitated this interview.

Individual Interview. ESL Classroom Parent

INT/MG: Well, then, thank you, again. The thoughts and ideas that you shared are important to Project ELLA, and they will help us make your child's learning experience even better.

PARENT: I just have one small opinion: I want to thank the project because it really has helped the children. I would like for more parents to be involved in this because of what you have done in this past year. Because my child has now been in this for three years now and it has really helped him. Thank you for everything.

Concluding Reflections

Lincoln (1993) observed, "First person authority is largely absent from most literatures on minorities and other 'invisible' subcultures in the Western world" (p. 44). Lincoln went on to underscore that "feminist research is polyvocal" (p. 44). We interpret Lincoln's allusion to polyvocality as a reference to both the multiple entryways of feminist scholars to interpretive dialogue and analysis, as well as feminists' commitments to privileging the voices of their participants.

We conclude with a return to Bailey's (2006) conclusion that "any improvement in women's lives is directly tied to the quality of care and education available to children" (p. 26) and Fletcher's (2004) charge that "challenging hierarchy and competition is what makes this work 'feminist'" (p. 296). In our collaborative workplace relationships as well as in our research design, practice, and intentionality, we attempt to situate Project ELLA within the context of many feminisms (Mize, 2003; Narayan, 1997).

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Table 1

ELLA BRICOLAGE Parent Interview Questions

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1. Can you provide specific examples of your child's growth in speaking English, since s/he has been in Project ELLA?
 2. Can you provide specific examples of your child's growth in reading English, since s/he has been in Project ELLA?
 3. Project ELLA is designed to impact children's learning. Can you think of any other abilities or attitudes of your child that Project ELLA may impact?
 4. What have you done to support your child's learning that has made the biggest difference?
 5. In 10 years your child will be 18? What dreams do you have for your child and his/her education at that time – 10 years from now?
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Table 2

ELLA BRICOLAGE Paraprofessional Interview Questions

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1. I am interested in understanding your perspective of this research we have done together since March 10, 2008 – the paraprofessionals’ group activity, the parent interviews, and the student classroom activity.
 - What has this research been like for you?
 - What has worked for you?
 - What has not worked?

 2. How would you describe your experience as co-researcher?

 3. As you think back to the cards your students created, which ones stand out for you? Why?
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