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Building Culturally Sustaining Learning Spaces with Immigrant Families and Young Bilingual Children During Pandemic Remote Learning

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract:

This practitioner inquiry provides a critical reflection of my teaching practices as a multilingual immigrant early childhood educator who attempted to build partnerships with immigrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This partnership allowed me to collaborate with 39 caregivers and 42 emergent bilingual children from the Metro and Greater Boston Areas to design and implement a family engagement and remote learning program called Home Connection. Using culturally sustaining pedagogy to guide curriculum design, pedagogy, and family engagement, this paper presents what I have sought to sustain while teaching in the Home Connection program. The findings reveal that through the Home Connection program, I have learned to: (1) affirm the diversity and pluralism in my students' learning interests, lived experiences, identities, and home lives, (2) foster intergenerational connections and collective learning, (3) recognize embodied learning through multiple spaces across family homes, and most importantly, I have learned to (4) embrace healing-centered teaching and learning that helps pave the path for collective healing within this learning community.

Problem Statement

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced school closures across states and put the US education system through a severe test. Unsurprisingly, this test revealed and turned a spotlight on existing educational inequities in school districts across the nation. While wealthy White students and families were sheltering in place and forming learning pods with abundant resources (Moyer, 2020); racially minoritized, disabled, and disenfranchised students and families struggled to engage with schools and fight for survival, often in isolation (Walters, 2020). Recent research has shown that families of Color faced much higher risk of COVID-19 exposure, infection, and death (Hooper et al., 2020), struggled to make ends meet (Clark et al., 2020), and encountered multiple barriers to gain access to remote learning for their children (Chen, 2021). Ignoring the diverse needs of students and families, most school districts transitioned to remote learning with minimum preparation and often without including educators' voices in the decision-making process (Bartlett, 2021). Schools trembled to sustain what was deemed most important even in times of crisis: the schooling hegemonic structure (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). The common structure of school-provided remote learning often includes fixed classroom schedules, multiple online learning sessions with participation guidelines, printable worksheets, and online

learning apps that heavily expected teachers to teach, families to assist, and students to “learn” in a global crisis like they had always been doing in brick-and-mortar classrooms pre-pandemic. Moreover, some studies reported that discrimination, punitive discipline, and family disengagement practices against nondominant students and families continued to be perpetuated in remote learning spaces making student learning even more problematic (Bruhn, 2022; Chen, 2021; Cioè-Peña, 2022).

While acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated educational inequities, this paper argues that the COVID-19, as disruptive and challenging as it is, has also created a unique opportunity to remind educators that families and communities are important educational stakeholders and that building strong collaborative relationships with families and communities is essential for student learning.

For this reason, I conducted this practitioner inquiry to reflect on my role as a multilingual, immigrant, early childhood educator who attempted to build partnerships with immigrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This partnership has allowed me to collaborate with 39 caregivers and 42 emergent bilingual children from the Metro and Greater Boston Areas to design and implement a family engagement and remote learning program called Home Connection. Through the Home Connection program, me and the families formed a learning community and worked together to provide meaningful remote learning experiences for our children and support each other during the pandemic. This paper shows how we collectively built culturally sustaining remote learning spaces that were centered on love, care, and solidarity. Using the theoretical frameworks of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), I examined my own teaching practices to reflect on what I have learned, or more specifically, what I, a teacher-researcher, have purposely sustained while working with immigrant families and teaching young bilingual children from diverse backgrounds during pandemic remote learning.

Theoretical Frameworks

Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner inquiry is defined as systematic, intentional study conducted by educators of their own professional practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). It is grounded on the concept of “inquiry as stance” or “a critical habit of mind” that often pushes teachers to continuously question and critically examine the construction of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009, p. 121).

Challenging mainstream education research that often centers around objective knowledge generated by outside researchers, most of whom are university-based, practitioner inquiry legitimizes teachers' insider knowledge generated in local contexts. The main purpose of this line of research is to establish a dialogic relationship between theory and practice, research and action, conceptual and empirical, and to commit to the continuous search to improve practices (McAteer, 2013). Most importantly, it disrupts the hierarchy of knowledge generation and positions teachers as knowers and knowledge creators, whose agencies can drive positive changes, transform learning contexts, and advance educational equities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

I entered this project as a multilingual, immigrant, early childhood teacher co-designing a remote learning curriculum with 20 immigrant families and teaching 43 young bilingual students in 10 continuous weeks via Zoom during the pandemic. Like other teachers, remote teaching was completely new to me. Working on this project required me to continuously learn, experiment, reflect on my own teaching, and revise instructional materials as much as I could to improve student and family engagement—the type of work that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2015) referred to as “consequential but invisible, except to its immediate participants” (p. 6).

Different from other practitioner inquiries focusing mainly on single teachers' classroom-based practices, this practitioner inquiry is nested within a community-based action research project. It expands the definition of “practitioners” or “educators” to include families as *home-based educators*. As a collective project, it is aligned with Cochran-Smith and Lytle's definition of practitioner inquiry as “a way of knowing about teaching and what teachers and communities come to know when they build knowledge collaboratively... useful both locally (in the village) and more publicly (in the world)” (2009, p. 3). Specifically, this project embraces both “local knowledge” generated from the Home Connection program and “public knowledge” shared by a learning community consisting of me, my students, and their families.

This practitioner inquiry is also grounded on critical action research (Tripp, 1990) that emphasizes teachers' transformative agency and connects to a larger sociopolitical agenda. Recognizing the disruptions and challenges of pandemic schooling, I worked alongside community organizers and family partners to implement the Home Connection program. The main goals of this program were to mitigate the negative effects of pandemic schooling and to offer a more equitable remote learning program to better serve young bilingual children.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Rooted in the paradigm of resource-based research, culturally sustaining pedagogy “seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88). It sharply contrasts with the dominant deficit-based approaches in education that function to devalue, marginalize, and eradicate cultural linguistic practices and ways of living and being of nondominant communities (Gorski, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Smitherman, 1977; Valdés, 1996).

Legitimizing the diversity of students’ repertoire of practices, culturally sustaining pedagogy “disrupts a schooling system centered on ideologies of White, middle class, monolingual, cisheteropatriarchal, able-bodied superiority” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 13). Through connecting and integrating students’ diverse linguistic and cultural ways of learning and living into the daily curriculum, culturally sustaining pedagogy helps counter negative forces of social oppressions and foster students’ sense of belonging. Another aspect of culturally sustaining pedagogy is its resistance against cultural essentialism. Instead of seeing culture and language as static and unidirectional, culturally sustaining pedagogy embraces how communal linguistic and cultural practices change and evolve over time and pays close attention to how youth of Color contribute to that process.

Most importantly, culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for scholars of Color to take an “inward gaze” (Paris & Alim, 2012) to critically examine our own communities’ cultural practices. The purpose is to identify and eventually eradicate problematic residues of internalized social oppressions within each community. Paris and Alim (2017) posed the important question of “what if the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but rather was to explore, honor, extend, and at times, problematize their cultural practices and investments?” (p. 3). For this reason, culturally sustaining pedagogy also aims to foster students’ critical consciousness and build students’ capacities to critique and address social injustices.

In this project, I used culturally sustaining pedagogy to guide curriculum design and pedagogical practices while partnering with immigrant families and bilingual children in the Home Connection program. Bearing in mind the struggles of these immigrant families and their needs to support their children’s education in an educational crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, I embarked on this pedagogical journey and asked how we, teachers and families, could possibly teach and learn

together in a way that centers our cultural and linguistic diversity. The goals of this project were to explore and honor the students' and families' diversity in language and culture and connect their home lives with the curriculum rather than extend and problematize communal practices. While recognizing the importance of taking the inward gaze, I had to prioritize what the Home Connection could achieve realistically within the constraints of pandemic remote learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the main site of inquiry was the 10-week remote learning and implementation of the family engagement and remote learning program called the Home Connection. The research participants included 20 immigrant families from diverse backgrounds and 42 young bilingual students from six different school districts across the Metro and Greater Boston Area. During the program, each family received 10 Family Interactive Learning Boxes that included:

- A bilingual text-set with one central picture book and supplementary texts.
- An integrated curriculum with detailed instructions, illustrations, and materials needed for the learning activities.
- The learning activities including reading discussion questions, vocabulary games, writing projects, arts & crafts projects, science experiments, and sensory play.

This integrated curriculum provided culturally and linguistically responsive reading materials and centralized play-based, hands-on activities to enhance students' learning engagement. The curriculum was also available in different language pairs to fit the needs of the family participants.

Procedure

The students participated in weekly online learning sessions with the teacher-researcher via Zoom. These sessions were conducted with flexibility in terms of scheduling, duration, structure, and language of instruction. These sessions were specifically designed to foster meaningful caregiver-child and sibling interactions. While most sessions were conducted with one single family at a time, some online learning sessions were in a small-group format to encourage family to family and peer interactions. The structure of these learning sessions evolved over time to suit the changing needs of each family.

Data Sources

Data sources included 137 video recordings of online learning sessions, written teacher reflections, and 125 photos of student learning artifacts (e.g., tinkering products, art works, writings, completed worksheets, etc.) taken and sent by the families. During these online learning sessions, short conversations with the families happened frequently and are considered short family interviews. These short interviews helped me gather family feedback to better understand student learning as situated within a family unit and in a home-based context. These short interviews also provide the family's continuous evaluation of the Home Connection program that helped me revise the curriculum, reflect on my teaching practices, and apply new teaching strategies throughout the program.

For the purpose of this inquiry, I selected four focal student cases¹: Cami (6 year-old), Hi (5 year-old), Khoa (5 year-old), and Zoe (6 year-old), to represent the diversity of students' linguistic (Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cape Verdean), racial backgrounds (Latino/a American, Asian American, and Black Latino/a), cultural backgrounds (El Salvadorian, Vietnamese, and Cape Verdean/Ecuadorian), home settings, and learning needs (see Table 1). These students were also emergent bilinguals who just started their first or second year of formal schooling during the pandemic. Their families were highly engaged with the Home Connection program and their experiences represented the varied learning with the curriculum and pedagogical practices used during the project. They also contributed greatly to the curriculum design process, which means many selected learning themes and texts were based on the students' learning interests, identities, and home lives.

Data Analysis

For each student case, I selected two video recordings of the online learning sessions. I selected the videos that represented both successful and disruptive learning moments while also considering engagement by family members and topics of interest that target the particular cases. I re-watched and analyzed a total of 8 videos (video length: 45-60 min). During my first round of analysis, I paid close attention to the similarities among my student cases and focused on "successful learning moments" that were closely aligned with the culturally sustaining pedagogy framework and yielded high student and family engagement. I flagged these moments in the videos and used the short family interviews and photos of related learning artifacts to gather more information and seek more meaning for these learning moments.

¹ All student names are pseudonyms.

In the second round of analysis, I focused on the uniqueness of each case. I looked for “disruptive learning moments” that forced me to redirect my teaching, make spontaneous changes, or completely put me at a deep pause. I flagged these moments in the videos and used my written reflections to seek more meaning for these disruptive learning moments.

After two rounds of analysis, I organized these learning moments into larger categories and further considered themes related to what I, as a teacher, have learned from and sought to sustain through these learning moments, both successful and disruptive, across student cases and within each case. Within the scope of this paper, I will report on four themes that I think were salient in the findings and most useful for my own learning and for other teachers to consider while implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy in their practices.

Table 1

Student Cases

Student Cases	Age/ Grade Level	Family’s Country of Origin	Home Languages	Household size	Housing Arrangements	Mother’s and Father’s Jobs	Family Income
Cami	6 years old 1st grade	El Salvador	Spanish, English	5 family members (two siblings, two parents)	3-bedroom house	Homemaker/ Bioinformatics Specialist	\$75,000- 99,999
Hi	5 years old Kindergarten	Vietnam	Vietnamese	13 family members (two siblings, two parents, seven extended family members)	5-bedroom house	Manicurist/ Driver	\$20,000- 29,999
Khoa	5 years old Kindergarten	Vietnam	Vietnamese	8 family members (two parents, two grandparents, three extended family members)	3-bedroom condo	Manicurist/ Factory Worker	\$20,000- 29,999
Zoe	6 years old 1st grade	Cape Verde/ Ecuador	Cape Verdean Spanish	4 family members (One sibling, two parents)	3-bedroom house	Patient Coordinator/ Realtor	\$50,000- 74,999

Focal Student 1: Cami

Cami was a 6-year-old first-grader, middle child, El Salvadorian emergent bilingual student. She lived with two siblings and her parents in a 3-bedroom house located in a Green Zone neighborhood². Cami's mother, Camila, was the first family partner of the project, making Cami the very first student to join the Home Connection program. Cami's father had a full-time job as a bioinformatic specialist that allowed him to work remotely and support the family financially. Cami's mother stayed at home full time and was available to provide care to all three children during the pandemic.

Cami was described by her mother as a quiet and shy child who did not make friends easily. She loved listening to music and played with her siblings, a 5-year-old, and an 8-year-old. Pandemic remote learning was especially hard for her as the ESL language support that she previously received was no longer available. She showed very little interest in joining school-provided remote learning sessions. She often stayed idle and did not verbally participate in these sessions even though her mother was fully present to support her. As reported by her mother, Cami started to become irritated and cried more often during remote learning.

Focal Student 2: Hi

Hi was a 5-year-old kindergartener, youngest child, Vietnamese emergent bilingual student. She lived with two siblings, her parents, and extended family members in a multigenerational 5-bedroom house in a Red Zone neighborhood³. Her parents worked full time as a manicurist (mother) and a driver (father). For that reason, the parents could not support Hi and her siblings with school-provided remote learning. Her older siblings, a 7-year-old and 9-year-old, could log into Zoom sessions independently, but Hi needed substantial support to use her iPad,

² The low-risk category of Green Zone includes small-sized communities with populations under 10,000 with less than or equal to 15 COVID-19 cases; mid-sized communities with populations between 10,000-50,000 having 10 cases per 100,000 residents and more than 10 total cases; and large-sized communities of more than 50,000 having more than 10 cases per 100,000 residents and more than 15 total cases. See <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting?dfgsgsddgfs>

³ The high-risk category of Red Zone includes small-sized communities with populations under 10,000 with more than 25 COVID-19 cases; mid-sized communities with populations between 10,000-50,000 having 10 or more average daily cases per 100,000 residents and if the positivity rate is greater than or equal to 5 percent; and large-sized communities of more than 50,000 having a daily average of 10 or more cases per 100,000 residents and a positivity rate of 4 percent or higher. See <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting?dfgsgsddgfs>

navigate the learning schedule, and stay focused during school-provided learning sessions. Her siblings often helped Hi log into Zoom but could not stay to help her as they had their own learning sessions to attend.

Described as a very active child with a great imagination, Hi started her first formal schooling experience during the pandemic. She often got teased by her brother and sister for not being able to speak English, which made her very nervous about kindergarten in the first place. The lack of parental support and language support made remote learning even more difficult for Hi. As reported by her parents, she did not fully understand what was going on in these sessions and could not fully participate. Her parents often received phone calls from her school complaining that Hi sometimes slept during sessions or left the online sessions without notice.

Focal Student 3: Khoa

Khoa was a 5-year-old kindergartener, Vietnamese emergent bilingual student. He lived with his parents in a multigenerational household with 8 people in a 3-bedroom condo in a Red Zone neighborhood. Similar to Hi, the pandemic school year of 2020-2021 was Khoa's first year of formal schooling. Before joining the Home Connection program, Khoa's parents lost their jobs as a manicurist (mother) and a factory worker (father). The family could not afford to pay rent and had to move in with another family. Most of Khoa's family members got infected with the COVID-19 virus and Khoa's grandfather passed away during the pandemic. This adversity took a hard toll on Khoa's family and affected his learning experiences.

Described as a very active child who loved cars and Marvel superheroes, Khoa did not engage well with school-provided remote learning sessions. These sessions were conducted fully in English without language support that made it extremely hard for Khoa to understand, hence, unable to participate. In addition, he was not used to sitting and listening for a long period of time. Even though his mother was fully present to support him during school-provided online learning sessions, these sessions were described as "terrible" and often turned into a "big fight" to keep him seated.

Focal Student 4: Zoe

Zoe was a 6-year-old first grader, Cape Verdean-Ecuadorian multilingual student. She lived with a sibling and parents in a 3-bedroom house in a Red Zone neighborhood. Zoe was part of the METCO program, the largest school

desegregation program funded by the state of Massachusetts. Through this program, students of Color like Zoey got bussed to a different district pre-pandemic. During the pandemic, Zoe's parents decided that Zoe would join a fully remote learning program provided by the same school district to avoid taking the bus.

Described as an active and social child, Zoe made friends easily and loved playing with her friends in school. Unlike other student cases in this study, Zoe engaged quite well with school-provided online learning sessions in the beginning of the school year. With her mother's support, Zoe attended these sessions diligently, listened carefully, and often raised her hand to contribute her ideas. However, Zoe started to show less interest in these sessions as the semester progressed. Zoe quickly realized that she did not get to speak with her friends during these sessions. In addition, there were a few times Zoe got disciplined by her classroom teacher for talking to her mother and/or seeking help from her mother during remote learning. These incidents completely demotivated Zoe and damaged the home-school connections.

Findings

This section presents the findings of what I have learned from and sought to sustain in the Home Connection program. Emerging themes from both successful and disruptive learning moments have shown that, as a multilingual early childhood teacher, I have learned to (1) affirm diversity and pluralism in relation to my students' learning interests, lived experiences, identities, and home lives, (2) foster intergenerational connections and collective learning, (3) recognize my students' embodied learning through multiple spaces across family homes, and most importantly, (4) embrace healing-based teaching that helps foster collective healing within this learning community. In the following sections, I will provide more details for each finding with examples from my curriculum design, my pedagogical approaches, and my reflections of the learning moments.

Affirm Diversity and Pluralism

In this project, I worked with a racially, socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse group of immigrant families and emergent bilingual students. To meet my students' specific learning needs, I purposefully implemented culturally sustaining pedagogy to affirm their diverse cultural and linguistic identities and practices and connect their home lives and home cultures with the curriculum. Specifically, I selected and used a variety of picture books for the learning boxes that reflected the diversity of students and families. These picture

books needed to be aligned with and relevant to the students' learning interests, their racial/ethnic/cultural identities, and their home lives. For more details of the selected books and their connections to each student case, please refer to Table 2.

It is important to note that most of these picture books were not available in different languages. For that reason, I collaborated with the family partners to translate the texts and add the translated texts to the hard copies of the books before sending them out to the families. The design of the learning boxes and the pandemic remote learning setting set certain constraints for the curriculum design process. I had to prioritize using versatile texts with multiple themes that allowed me to develop full units of study cutting across subject matters and, at the same time, would be of interest to young bilingual children across grade levels.

While attending closely to differences among families and students, I also tried to find the common threads across homes and communities. For example, I used picture books that center on home-based practices such as shopping for groceries (*The Good Egg*), cooking and sharing food (*Dragons Love Tacos*, *Too Many Mangos*), growing plants and trees, gift giving and receiving (*When Grandma Gives You a Lemon Tree*). These stories also embrace intergenerational relationships (*When Grandma Gives You a Lemon Tree*) and community building (*Too Many Mangos*). Overall, I have learned that using high-interest, culturally and linguistically responsive, and home-connected texts helped me establish a good foundation to effectively engage my students and families during the remote learning sessions.

Table 2
Sample Books and Connections

Student Cases	Learning Interest	Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Identities	Connection to Learning Interests	Connection to Identities	Connection to Home Lives
Cami	Animal stories Koalas Tacos Music	<i>Latinx</i> <i>El Salvadoran</i> <i>- American</i>	<i>The Koala Who Could</i> (Writer: Rachel Bright, Illustrator: Jim Field)	<i>Dancing Hands: How Teresa Carreño Played the Piano for President Lincoln</i> (Writer: Margarita Engle, Illustrator: Rafael López)	<i>Dragons Loves Tacos</i> (Writer: Adam Rubin, Illustrator: Daniel Salmieri)
Hi	Animal stories Funny stories Mangoes Pets	<i>Asian</i> <i>Vietnamese</i> <i>- American</i>	<i>How to Wash a Woolly Mammoth</i> (Writer: Michelle Robinson)	<i>Going Home, Coming Home</i> (Writer: Truong Tran, Illustrator: Ann Phong)	<i>Too Many Mangos</i> (Writer: Tammy Paikai, Illustrator: Don Robinson)
Khoa	Animal stories Funny stories Cars Marvel superheroes	<i>Asian</i> <i>Vietnamese</i> <i>- American</i>	<i>Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus</i> (Author: Mo Willems)	<i>Going Home, Coming Home</i> (Writer: Truong Tran, Illustrator: Ann Phong)	<i>The Good Egg</i> (Writer: Jory John, Illustrator: Pete Oswald)
Zoe	Animal stories Funny stories Cooking Math	<i>Afro-Latinx</i> <i>Cape-Verdean-</i> <i>Ecuadorian</i>	<i>Dragons Loves Tacos</i> (Writer: Adam Rubin, Illustrator: Daniel Salmieri)	<i>Counting on Katherine: How Katherine Johnson Saved Apollo 13</i> (Writer: Helaine Becker, Illustrator: Dow Phumiruk)	<i>When Grandma Gives You a Lemon Tree</i> (Writer: Jamie L.B. Deenihan, Illustrator: Lorraine Rocha)

During remote learning sessions, all four focal students quickly recognized that the selected books were closely connected to them, and these recognitions were often affirmed by their mothers. For example, during the session on the book *The Koala Who Could*, Cami showed a lot of excitement working on the key project of making the koala house. She kept saying that koalas were her favorite animal and that she had seen one in the zoo before. Cami's mother shared with me: "Cami really loves koalas. It's her favorite. How do you know that? It was such a good book and she kept asking me to read it for her many times!" and I answered: "I learned from talking to her in the beginning of the program. I also noticed that she drew koala pictures at home when you showed me her learning corner" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Cami's Koala Drawing - The Koala Who Could

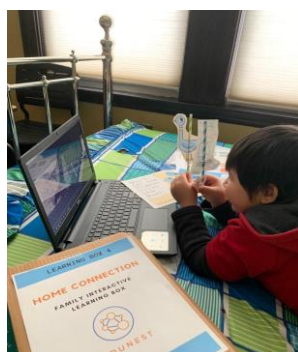


Similarly, Zoe loved seeing the main character with big Afro hair on the cover of *When My Grandma Gives Me a Lemon Tree*. While working on a family-guided learning activity, her mom pointed to the book cover and told Zoe that “this girl looks exactly like you, she has hair like you!” This made Zoe feel very happy and helped her gain more confidence in learning.

As a Vietnamese child who often went to the supermarket with her grandmother, Hi knew most of the tropical fruits and could even pick them herself. She got to showcase her special knowledge of how to choose the best mangos and named most of the tropical fruits when we learned the book *Too Many Mangos*. Khoa became much more engaged with the theme of transportation given his interests in cars and buses and could work on the bus design independently in *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Khoa and His Bus Design



Learning about and bringing students' interests and lived experiences to the center of learning and teaching certainly paid off. These learning sessions often took a longer time to design and implement than usual and yielded much higher student engagement.

To center the learning sessions around the students' linguistic strengths and leverage on their existing family resources, I worked together with the mothers or other language brokers within the families such as older siblings to honor the use of home languages. I often repeated my instruction in both English and home languages (Vietnamese and Spanish) to help students access the content easily and foster bilingual vocabulary building. To support bilingual students across all learning sessions, I also incorporated a lot of visual aids such as photos, videos, and used the Whiteboard function to draw pictures to provide step-by-step instruction.

When I worked with Vietnamese-speaking students like Hi and Khoa, I could leverage my own bilingual language skills to communicate with them in Vietnamese. When I worked with Spanish-speaking students like Cami and Zoe, I always made sure that I had translation apps opened on my iPad and translated all key vocabulary into Spanish beforehand. Even though it created some challenges for me as a teacher, these sessions often reminded me that, like my students, I was, too, a language learner. That, in return, allowed the families to step up and take on more responsibilities as home educators and allowed the students to gain more autonomy as learners and experts in their own language. Spanish-speaking students sometimes corrected my Spanish or helped me learn new vocabulary, which resulted in their linguistic strengths being recognized and affirmed during the program.

Foster Intergenerational Connections and Collective Learning

Working in the Home Connection program also taught me the importance of fostering intergenerational connections and collective learning, which is certainly an essential part of the curriculum design and implementation of the Home Connection program. While the mother-child dyad seems to be the most common pattern across student cases, learning with siblings happened most frequently and engagement with other family members such as grandparents also happened occasionally.

The participating families had multiple children at different grade levels, and some shared the living spaces with immediate and extended family members. All four focal students, for example, had siblings. For that reason, the design of the learning boxes took into account the diversity of family settings and contained

learning materials that can be shared among family members including multiple activities suitable for all children. The children from each household engaged in the same key projects together but they took on different tasks. For example, in the online learning session of *How to Wash a Woolly Mammoth*, Hi, her older sister (6-year-old), and her older brother (9-year-old) worked collaboratively on the project of building the mammoth habitat (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Hi and Her Siblings Making Woolly Mammoths



Below is an excerpt from the learning session:

Hi: Aunty, can you give me the scissors, please? I want to cut this! [holding the box with both hands]

Hi's aunt passed the scissors to her. After many tries, Hi realized that she could not cut the box by herself.

Hi: It is so hard. The box is hard. I could not do it! I could not do it! [said with frustration]

Hi's brother: No, give me, give it to me, let me cut the box, you glue the mammoths with P. (Hi's sister).

Hi's sister: Let me glue the thing. Hand me the glue! [said firmly to Hi]

Hi's aunt handed the glue stick to Hi. She passed it to her sister and watched her make the first mammoth.

Hi: That's not right. This piece goes here [giving her sister the correct piece of the mammoth's head and pointing to her sister where to put it]. Can I make another one myself?

Hi's sister: Here you go (passing the glue to Hi). Let me find the white part (the tusk) for you.

Hi: Where is the head? Is it the tail?

Hi's brother: Can you pass me the stringy thingy? I am making the bushes.

Hi: No, the bushes are paper. The brown paper. Here it is. [passing the paper to her brother]

Hi's sister: No, it is not the tail. The tail is this one [giving Hi the brown yarn].

Hi: Thank you. I got this. Is it correct? [showing the mammoth to her sister]. Mine is bigger than yours. I am drawing an eye.

Hi's sister: You don't draw eyes, there are googly eyes, here, you can use them. They don't stick easily.

(Translated from Vietnamese)

As shown in this excerpt, the students discussed and decided on different tasks: Hi and her sister made the paper mammoths; her brother was responsible for cutting the box and making bushes with craft papers. While working together, they relied on each other to complete the project. For example, Hi had not learned to use scissors skillfully yet, so she needed her brother's help in cutting a hard carton box. Hi's sister could not figure out which parts of the mammoths would go together and Hi assisted her with that. Sometimes the children asked for help from their aunt, who was around in the same kitchen space, to gather necessary materials such as scissors and glue sticks.

These online learning sessions were often very interactive and filled with students' laughter and excitement that encouraged family members to participate. There were many instances of family members entering the "learning space." If I saw them on the screen, I would encourage the students to talk to them or ask for their help if needed.

For example, in one learning session on *Two Many Mangos*, Hi and her siblings did not know the Vietnamese words for 'mangosteens,' they turned to their grandmother who was cooking in the kitchen and asked for her help.

Hi: Bà ngoại oi, how do you call this? [showing the picture of a mangosteen to her grandma]

Grandma: măng cụt

Hi's sister: Can you say it again?

Grandma: măng cụt, măng cụt, the fruit you eat the other time, remember? Hi's sister ran to get a piece of paper and handed to her grandma.

Hi's sister: Here, bà ngoại, you write it down, we don't know how to write it. You write it down for us.

Hi's sister passed the piece of paper to Hi's brother.

Hi's sister: You type it, you type the answer.

Alisha: This is correct. One point for each of you. Can you all say thank you to bà ngoại for helping you?

Hi and her siblings: Thank you bà ngoại, you are the best! [saying loudly]

While making a lemon tree card for the learning box *When Grandma Gives Me a Lemon Tree*, Zoe told me that her grandmother was visiting and that she was in the kitchen. Zoe's mother reminded us that Zoe's grandmother's birthday was coming up. At that moment, I immediately checked in with Zoe's grandmother, said hi to her, and wished her happy birthday. I also showed Zoe's grandma some of Zoe's previous projects and complimented Zoe on her excellent work. After that, I asked Zoe if she would like to change our project into creating a birthday card for her grandmother, which made the learning session very engaging and meaningful for the whole family. Small collective learning moments like these examples demonstrate how I was able to establish a stronger intergenerational connection between the students with their family members and honor the students' home spaces.

Recognize Embodied Learning through Multiple Spaces

Another key finding from the project is that I have learned to recognize my student's embodied learning through multiple spaces in their family homes. Teaching students online via Zoom can sometimes give the illusion that learning only happens within the constraints of what can be seen on screen. However, my students showed me that there were many learning moments and possibilities for home-based learning spaces. For example, Khoa learned on his bed in the shared bedroom, Zoe learned with her mother at the kitchen table, and Hi and Cami learned with their siblings at dining tables (Figure 5). The students often did not sit still and stay on screen all the time as could be expected given their developmental ages. Seeing the great potential of home-based learning spaces, I often encouraged my students to move around their homes to gather learning materials, to find resources, to get their stuffed animals and other favorite toys, and family photos to show me.

There was one time Hi and her siblings went to another room for 10 minutes to look at their family photos hung on the wall and count their family members. I could hear their voices in the background, counting and exchanging stories about each family member, but I could not see these students on screen. These moments reminded me that learning is embodied and indeed happens in a diversity of spaces and interacting within spaces plays an important role in student learning.

Being aware of the students' home learning spaces helped me design the curriculum that connected to the students' homes and encouraged them to use

home-based resources to support their learning. For example, while working on a science experiment of making a green dragon breathing bubbles as in *Dragons Love Tacos*, Cami's family used vinegar and dishwashing soaps found in their kitchen. To figure out if they could adopt a mammoth as a pet as depicted in the book *How to Wash a Woolly Mammoth*, Cami and her siblings measured their front door and bedroom door and evaluated if they were large enough to fit a mammoth (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Cami Measuring Her Bedroom Door



Even when the students and their families worked on the same project, they interacted and used the materials in their home spaces in different and creative ways. For example, when my students prepared for a spaceship launch related to the book *Counting on Katherine*, they needed a large enough space for their balloon spaceships to blast off from one corner to another. Cami's family moved the project to the garden, Khoa's family used the chairs found in their basement to set up their station and all the projects were a success (see Figure 5).

Figure 6

Launch Spaceships at Home



Embrace Healing-Centered Teaching and Learning

The last important theme that I was able to identify in this project is how I have learned to embrace healing-centered teaching and learning while working with my students. I will zoom into the case of Khoa to illustrate this finding. Khoa's family had to deal with multiple adversities during the pandemic: both parents lost their jobs, and the family could not afford rent, which forced them to move out of their family home and live with family. While joining the program, Khoa's family members got infected with the COVID-19 virus and Khoa's grandfather passed away at that time. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the family could not organize a traditional Vietnamese funeral that often involves a large gathering of family and community members to say their last goodbye to the deceased. Instead, the family organized home-based praying sessions that happened for days. During that time, Khoa often participated independently in online learning sessions with me without his mother accompanying and supporting him. There was one session when we learned about the book *The Good Egg*, Khoa's favorite book. We were discussing the topic of emotions and Khoa was drawing different facial expressions on the plastic eggs to show their emotions. Suddenly, he stopped. He showed me the sad face on the egg and said to me: "Ms. Alisha, my grandfather died. They sang and it was noisy. They cried. They are sad like the good egg." I asked him: "Who were sad?" He said: "My mom and my grandmother" [translated from Vietnamese]. At that moment, I was dealing with my own loss and Khoa's words suddenly forced me to stop teaching and acknowledge that aspect of my life and our shared experience. This moment put me in a deep pause. I looked at Khoa on the screen and saw him not only as a student but a child whose family went through a whirlwind of loss and grief. I finally said to Khoa: "My grandfather passed away too. I am sad too. Like the good egg. What do you think we should do when we are very, very sad?", and Khoa answered me: "We cried" [translated from Vietnamese].

After this session, I thought of how I could help Khoa and support his family's healing process. I decided to engage other families and students participating in the Home Connection program to create cards and send gifts to Khoa's family to help them move through this difficult time. By carefully listening to my student and validating his experience, I formed a trusting relationship with him that strongly impacted Khoa's learning experiences. As our work together continued, Khoa made good progress and became more and more independent and engaged through all learning sessions.

Disruptive teaching moments like this reminded me, a teacher, that the pandemic was a traumatic experience for all of us and that healing-centered pedagogy is essential for pandemic teaching and learning. I was not only teaching

content to my students but also creating and sharing a communal space with them and their families through the Home Connection program. In our sessions, we laughed and cried, we danced, sang, and shared stories in different languages, and honored different home lives and cultural practices. Working in the Home Connection somehow fostered my own healing. As shared by the participating families, seeing their children experience joyful learning certainly gave them hope and made their days much less difficult to bear. In short, as a learning community, we entered the path to collective healing through this program.

Discussion

Partnering with immigrant families and teaching bilingual students in the Home Connection program taught me many things. I learned to affirm the diversity and pluralism in my students' learning interests, lived experiences, identities, and home lives. Guided by culturally sustaining pedagogy, I selected suitable texts and designed learning activities that were aligned with my students' interests and closely connected to their home lives and cultures. The program enhanced the students' engagement during online learning sessions while also providing many opportunities for learning that were content rich and developmentally appropriate. Moreover, my pedagogical approaches were grounded in pluralism: all instructional materials and instructions were given in multiple languages and multimodality (i.e., the use of visual aids and sensory-based activities) was at the heart of all learning sessions. However, all of these "teacher moves" would not have made the lessons come to life without the great help of the families and home educators who provided support to both the students and me. Working with linguistically and culturally diverse families and students helped me adopt a learner stance and created a co-learning space for me and my students, similar to what Martinez and I (2020) wrote: "when students' language and culture are valued and when students are respected as experts for their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, educators and students become co-learners and co-owners in learning and teaching." It certainly disrupts the traditional model of teacher-centered classroom by fostering student autonomy. It is important to note that many of the successful teaching moments were largely determined by students' input and their strong influence on the curriculum since they had control over the key projects. This type of pedagogy sent a very different message to the students that their voices matter and their ideas were important drivers of the learning experiences. To these young bilingual children who have been marginalized and silenced in their online classrooms, having their voices and ideas centered helped foster a "deeply held sense of identity and social belonging" (Bucholtz, 2017, p. 45).

Another lesson from the program is the importance of intergenerational connections and collective learning. While traditional schooling approaches often encourage home-school separation and devalue families' involvement and engagement, I took a different approach with the Home Connection program. I acknowledged the rare opportunity created by the pandemic that allowed us a glimpse of our students' home lives and recognized families as home educators. Home-based remote learning creates multiple opportunities to foster intergenerational connections and relationships, which is closely aligned with the cultural ways of living and being of many immigrant families. In addition, students got to learn together with their siblings, which created a robust interactive and relational learning environment. Intergenerational learning helps my students see themselves as part of their families' and communities' traditional ways of knowing and being, see their grandparents, parents, and siblings as teachers and co-learners, and see their homes as potential spaces for knowledge generation and circulation. If educators see cultural practices as a continuum filled with "elder epistemologies" (Holmes and Gonzalez, 2017) and youth cultures (Alim, 2011), then we can recognize "the necessary intergenerationality of culturally sustaining pedagogy" and "push for teaching and learning contexts which include multiple generations" (Alim et al., 2011, p. 266).

While working with my students across family homes, I have also learned to embrace my students' embodied learning through multiple spaces during remote learning. This finding not only disrupts the false Cartesian dichotomy of mind versus body but also confirms multiple theories of early learning which posit that children learn through multiple senses (Adams, 2016), and that bodily moments and sensorimotor abilities are connected with learning (Anderson, 2003). In addition, this finding aligns with research that has shown how home spaces can generate multiple learning opportunities for young bilingual children from immigrant backgrounds (Li, 2009; Reese, 2009). Within the Home Connection program, the students' home spaces like bedrooms, kitchens, dining tables, and living rooms became learning spaces with valuable resources for students to explore family cultural practices (e.g., what food we cook and share, what gifts we give and receive), learn family histories (e.g., who the family members are and their stories), and interact with others (e.g., gardens are where we play, dining tables are where we eat and learn together). In the strangest way, the pandemic created a rare learning opportunity for an educator like me to see the richness of my students' home lives and to critically look at space as a crucial part of learning design.

Finally, I have learned to embrace healing-centered teaching and learning through sharing loss and grief with my students and their families. I have come to realize that healing is always at the heart of culturally sustaining pedagogy. The

framework acknowledges not only bilingual immigrant children of Colors' individual trauma caused by multiple social oppressions (Crenshaw, 2017) but their historical and intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart et al., 2011) caused by land dispossession, dislocation, racism, language loss, and linguistic violence. Hence, healing-centered teaching means focusing on students' strengths and resilience while restoring the values of their identities and their communities' cultural ways of learning and being. As explained by Ginwright (2018), "a healing centered approach is holistic involving culture, spirituality, civic action and collective healing." By offering an alternative learning space not centering "ideologies of White, middle class, monolingual, cisheteropatriarchal, able-bodied superiority" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 13), the Home Connection program allowed me, my students, and their families to collectively heal and from there, to dream and hope in the midst of chaos.

Conclusion

As an immigrant early childhood educator, this practitioner inquiry has confirmed the importance of holding on and dreaming with culturally sustaining pedagogy while working with families in crisis. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a "nice-to-have" package for teachers to pick up or randomly sprinkle in when we have extra time in the classroom. Culturally sustaining teaching is not for showcasing how "diverse" students and families are or how we, teachers, briefly celebrate these students and families during heritage months. Taking a culturally sustaining stance is an approach that is integrated and relevant to everyday teaching and the lessons we design and implement centering on the lived experiences of our students and families. Moreover, I argue that this pedagogical stance is a prerequisite for good teaching and learning to happen. It certainly requires deliberate learning, systematic planning and implementation, and continuous reflection from teachers. During challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic, our collective struggles constantly remind us how connected and interdependent we are and how we need to lean on each other. That means as teachers we must prioritize establishing trusting relationships with students and families, affirming our students and families' cultural ways of learning and living, and implementing healing-centered practices that aim to support our students' and families' mental health and wellbeing. Teaching in this way, in return, helps us reclaim the humanistic aspect of the profession and gives us hope in the most difficult times.

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