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Stephanie Wessels
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, swessels2@unl.edu

Socorro G. Herrera,
*Kansas State University*, sococo@k-state.edu

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# Drawing Their Way into Writing: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students Finding Voice Through Mini-Novelas

Stephanie Wessels, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Socorro G. Herrera, Kansas State University

**Abstract**

Writing can be a difficult task for many students in today's classrooms; however, for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), writing can be especially difficult. These students often are in the process of developing their facility with the English language, and they possess cultural backgrounds that differ from those of many of their peers and teachers. In addition to these challenges, they face the typical difficulties of selecting ideas to write about for their stories. One way to tap into the cultural backgrounds of Spanish-speaking CLD students is through the use of a strategy called the mini-novela. A mini-novela allows students to initially draw their stories and then write an accompanying narrative. It also allows students to use their cultural knowledge and the process of visualization as bridges to images and words that transform writing into a personally relevant, meaningful experience.

For Saida, writing stories was a painful, difficult task. She would often spend her time erasing the few words she would put down on the paper or write nothing at all. When she did write, she had trouble sticking to a single topic. One of her stories began with her cousin Jasmine, then shifted to her pets, and finally

ended with what she was going to do after school. Saida was one of the culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students who participated in a family literacy program designed to bolster CLD students' literacy skills while also developing their parents' storybook reading skills in English and Spanish with bilingual books.

Two other students, Sondra and Fernando (all names are pseudonyms), also struggled with writing a personal narrative. They seemed to have what has been termed the *blank page syndrome* (Cowan & Albers, 2006); they struggled with getting their thoughts and ideas down on paper. For CLD students, writing is the most challenging of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to master (Juel, 1994). This difficulty could be influenced by many factors—perhaps a student is afraid of writing due to a lack of ideas, unfamiliarity with the English language, or a fear of writing in general. Any of these factors can lead to CLD students feeling defeated before they have written a single word on the page. To help prevent such moments of frustration, we wanted to tap into the students' cultural backgrounds as a way to provide purposeful learning experiences in the writing process.

The purpose of this article is to describe a writing project that connects to the cultural backgrounds of Spanish-speaking CLD students through the use of a strategy called the *mini-novela*. The project was part of a larger 2-year study in which children's biliteracy was the focus. We both have experience as teachers and researchers in elementary school classrooms. One of us, a Latina university professor, has been involved in several other studies of bilingualism and literacy. The other, an Anglo-American university professor, has had several years of teaching experience as an English as a second language educator.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The writing experiences of these three students are explored within the context of a family literacy program that was created to support literacy development for both CLD children and their parents. Students from CLD families possess a wealth of cultural knowledge and experiences that can be used to enhance

their literacy development (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Research has shown repeatedly that CLD students bring assets to the classroom that can be capitalized on and used to help them learn English (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Reyes, 2001; Valdés, 2001). However, many times mainstream classroom teachers do not know how to identify and use these assets in their instruction (Dantas, 2007).

This underpreparation of mainstream teachers to support CLD students is especially problematic given the ever-increasing diversity of the U.S. elementary student population. The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reports that the number of school-age children (5–24 years old) who speak a language other than English at home rose from 3.8 million to 9.9 million between 1979 and 2003. Spanish is the home language of 72% of students who are nonnative English speakers (August & Shanahan, 2006). Spanish-speaking English learners can be first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants to the United States from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Because reading and writing skills in English are critical to the academic success of CLD students, teachers need to find new approaches to promote CLD students' meaningful connections to literacy instruction.

As a way to connect with Latino families, and in the hopes of bridging the home–school communication gap for CLD parents and the educational gap for CLD children, a family literacy program was established in the elementary school that Saida, Sondra, and Fernando attended. This midwestern U.S. elementary school had been identified as needing improvement in reading for three subgroups: Latino students, students with low socioeconomic status, and refugee and immigrant students. Working in conjunction with the local university and a community-based organization, the lead author established the family literacy program to reach Latino students. Information gained from the family literacy program was shared with the school's administration as well as the classroom teachers of the students in the program.

The family literacy program met once a week for 90 minutes after school for a total of 10 sessions each semester. Nine CLD families volunteered to participate in the family literacy program

the semester that writing samples were collected and analyzed for this project. While CLD parents focused on storybook reading activities to be implemented at home, their children participated in small breakout groups for 45 minutes to work on various language and literacy activities. One community-based instructor worked with a group of children ages 3–6; we worked with the group comprising children ages 7–9. Children in the latter breakout group worked on a writing project that focused on using visualization before the writing process as a new approach to writing.

Visualization, as it is used here, can be described as the process of creating a mental image and drawing that image before writing (Douville, 1999). Ernst (2001) asserts that, when drawing is part of the writing process, the picture becomes the tangible image. Drawing gives the author the ability to see it clearly, add details, and revise both thinking and writing. As Kendrick and McKay (2004) note, "Children naturally move between art … and language as ways to think about the world" (p. 109).

## WHY A MINI-NOVELA?

The literature has long documented the effects of using visualization as a springboard for the development of ideas and for taking thought to written text. Taking into consideration the student's culture and contextualizing writing tasks within the realm of what is familiar or known to the student also increases the student's organization of thought in the writing process. The mini-novela strategy provides a platform for these two important factors to become part of the writing process in any classroom setting. In its initial development, the mini-novela was a twist on the mini book (Zike, 1992) and the result of our work in schools with large populations of Spanish-speaking students. For the teachers in these schools, motivating CLD students to write had been a nearly impossible task. For many of the families, after-school time consisted of watching afternoon *telenovelas,* or Spanish soap operas with a cultural distinction. *Novelas* have a distinct beginning, middle, and end, with the climax having a pronounced outcome. Telenovelas last only a short time and are usually shown 1 hour every weekday for 2–3 months. After the

telenovela is over, another show takes its place. Each telenovela is like creating a storyboard of images that translates into a story for television.

Understanding this cultural connection, which was particular to the learners and the community in which we were working, we decided to make connections between visualization and the writing process. The cultural connection that all the students in the family literacy program had in common was telenovelas. When the CLD students in the breakout group were asked what they knew of telenovelas, all eight students indicated that they not only knew what a telenovela was, but that someone in their home watched a telenovela on a daily basis. One student in the group commented, "My mom and grandma watch them every night. The people are always kissing and yelling and then punish each other—just crazy." The mini-novela utilized a culturally familiar concept to scaffold the writing of CLD students in a way that would also lower the students' overall anxiety about writing in English.

According to Wong-Fillmore (2000), CLD students' previous cultural and educational experiences provide a sense of belonging as they learn to read and write in the new language. We used the concept of telenovelas as a hook for encouraging CLD students to write a mini-novela story, using pictures and words based on the model of this familiar cultural phenomenon. Specifically, a mini-novela is a storyboard graphic organizer that consists of 6–9 boxes with writing lines underneath each individual box—a format that allows students to create a concrete visual and written record of their story. Initially, CLD students make sketches in the boxes to create a visual storyline. After their stories are drawn, the students then create a verbal description for each sketch, slowly developing a sequenced written story. Finally, students write a full story based on their drawings and descriptions.

The following three principles guided the development of the mini-novela writing project: (1) student writing should be a personal experience; (2) students should choose their writing topic; and (3) students should be encouraged to combine written expression with elements of the arts, such as drawing (Cowan, 2001). Drawing allows students to conceptually organize ideas

(Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1975) while at the same time develop a tangible product that they can use to guide their subsequent thinking and efforts. In the context of a mini-novela, CLD students used drawing as part of the prewriting stage, which led to meaningful writing. Routman (2005) believes drawing could occur before writing, but also includes "drawing to spur writing" (p. 179). According to Olshansky (1995), when students' stories are driven by visual images, their writing is transformed in many powerful ways, which enriches the story and enhances the finished product. Drawing is one manner in which students gather and organize ideas for writing. Mini-novelas provided CLD students in this program with a starting point for writing personally relevant stories.

## STRUCTURE OF THE MINI-NOVELA SESSIONS

In the writing breakout sessions of the family literacy program, we sought to create a learning community environment that fostered writing development through cooperative learning and positive reinforcement. Mindful that this was an after-school program, we tried to create an atmosphere in which the students felt comfortable, engaged with an academic task, and yet never pushed to the point of academic frustration.

Initially, we modeled how to brainstorm ideas to draw and write about for the CLD mini-novela stories. We talked about how the telenovelas they watched on the television were initially created by using a storyboard (drawings), just as they were going to draw their story before writing the story. After discussing the brainstorming process, CLD students were given the opportunity to brainstorm in their journals their own lists of possible writing topics. The writing journals allowed the students to keep all of their mini-novela story ideas in one place to refer back to and also supported our ability to monitor students' writing progress. In the beginning of the mini-novela writing project, students were provided with their own individual box of pencils, crayons, and markers and were given a writing journal to decorate and personalize.

After the students had brainstormed their potential story ideas, we modeled for the whole group the writing process of using one

of the brainstormed ideas to draw or sketch six different pictures to create a storyline on the mini-novela storyboard. During this drawing time, the students were free to communicate with each other, share their pictures with the other students in the group, discuss possible storylines, or discuss other events that were happening in schools. This open line of communication created a cooperative learning atmosphere among the students. Because all the students attended the same elementary school, they were very familiar with each other and their families, and it was easy to build a sense of community and trust among the group, fostering new friendships.

Once students had finished drawing their pictures for the mini-novela, they used their sketches as the basis for writing text on the corresponding lines below each box to describe each picture. Students either described what was happening in each sketch or started to form a comprehensive storyline based on the drawn pictures. Students were continually reminded to check their drawings and writing to ensure there was correspondence between the two. The final step was for students to write the final story in their writing journals. As the CLD students were drawing or composing their stories, we worked alongside them, encouraging them to get their ideas on paper and not to worry about correct spelling and grammar. In conversing with the students, we were able to help them avoid getting frustrated with the task and instead gave them supportive attention.

CLD students were able to work at their individual pace—they simply needed to be somehow engaged in the writing process during each meeting. As the students completed their mini-novela stories, they were individually showcased in front of the other students and families involved in the larger study. Each student shared his or her final drawings and story as a celebration of the student's accomplishments as a writer.

## SAIDA, SONDRA, AND FERNANDO

Saida, Sondra, and Fernando were three students who struggled with writing a personal story. We have chosen to highlight the work of these students because each of them had different needs and struggles with the writing process. The following sections de-

scribe each CLD student's background information and experience in drawing and writing during implementation of the mini-novela project.

### Saida's Story

Saida was 7 years old and in the second grade. She was at the *speech emergence* stage in her English language proficiency development. Saida did not perceive herself as a writer, so she tried to avoid writing at all cost. Initially, she was hesitant to draw pictures for her mini-novela story because she was unsure about her drawings. She would stop and start frequently in her drawings on the mini-novela storyboard and erase anything she had just drawn on paper. Although Saida had an idea for her story, she was so unsure of herself that she struggled with drawing.

To help Saida get past this hurdle, we suggested that she use only markers or pens so she would not be tempted to erase her work. Once she realized that she could not continually erase, she started to use the brilliantly colored writing utensils with ease, recording her ideas on paper. When the drawings were complete, she used them to inspire her writing of the accompanying text (see Figure 1). Saida's writing began to flow more naturally, and her ability to write the story improved dramatically from the few words per page (or blank pages) she initially produced. The following is Saida's completed mini-novela story:

> One day a men and a women name was Paula and the men's was Roberto. There was another guy named Daniel. She got in loved with the both. OOOOHHH! She said I don't know which one to choose she said. I well choose Daniel and get merry but Daniel left out of the church because somebody wanted him to be boy friends. Roberto was sad and bud the wedding dress of Paula. Paula left with her grandma and was really sad and then Roberto went with Paula and told Paula that Daniel said to him that he didn't like her no more but Daniel did like her then Paula called him and he did answer and then lived happily ever after.

In Saida's mini-novela, she used the traditional sense of the Spanish telenovela, which involves dating and other relationship

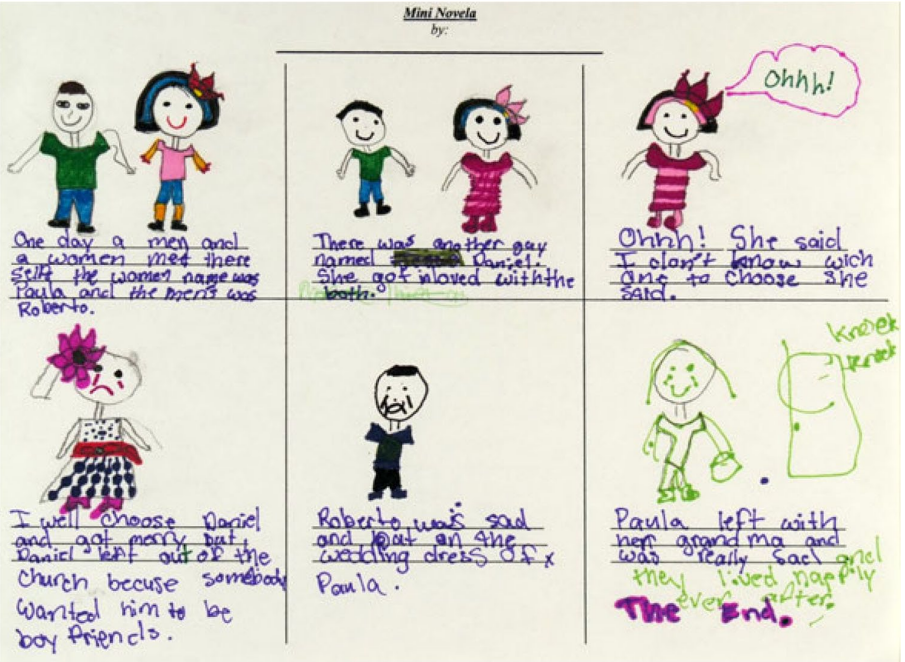


**Figure 1.** Saida's storyboard

topics. When she was writing her final story, she added more details to the final product, such as Paula calling Daniel at the end of the story. She used her drawings and brief corresponding sentences as a starting point, which allowed her to visualize the whole story and add essential details to enhance the storyline.

## Sondra's Story

Sondra was 8 years old and in the second grade. Her English language proficiency was at the *speech emergence* stage. She had trouble getting a story started. However, she mentioned that she liked to draw and color in her free time. Often Sondra would pause to stare at her pictures, deep in thought about what to draw next. After she had finished drawing her story, she wrote the story very quickly. Her words poured out on the page because the ideas had been well rehearsed in the drawing stage of the writing process (see Figure 2). Using this new approach to writing, Sondra easily could describe a plot to the story that was influenced by her original sketches. She

**Figure 2.** Sondra's storyboard

demonstrated a high level of engagement in her mini-novela writing. Sondra's completed mini-novela story follows:

> One time my dad promised me that when we go to Mexico he was goin to buy me a horse. And it's goin to be a boy. And he's goin to be brown and big. I am goin to ride it when ever I want. My dad said that my brother David is goin to ride it too. So I needed to ride my horse with him. My horse is goin to live in a red barn. My horses name is goin to be Alerto. My hors is goin to eat hay and grass.

When Sondra was asked about the process of drawing before writing her story, she responded, "It was easier to write after I drew and colored it in. Everything is right there to see." The drawings served as a scaffold to help her recall the ideas for her story.

In Sondra's mini-novela, she was able to write about her favorite animal and all of the responsibilities in caring for the horse.

She added more details from the original mini-novela to her final product, such as *My horse is goin to live in a red barn, My horses name is goin to be Alerto,* and *My hors is goin to eat hay and grass*. She was able to spend more time on her final product because she already had an outline of the story.

### Fernando's Story

Fernando was 9 years old, in the third grade, and at the *intermediate fluency* stage in his English language proficiency. He had no trouble coming up with a story idea. He watched a lot of movies, which influenced the topics he wrote about when developing his story. Fernando used the mini-novela in a different way from the other students in the group. He knew how he wanted the story to end, but he did not know how to begin the story. So he drew the last box in the mini-novela first and then proceeded to draw the beginning and middle sections of the story, making sure that all the details he wanted would be included (see Figure 3). Fernando's mini-novela story is as follows:

> Hello is me Cesar and I am going to tell you this story about weak greg turns into strong greg then weak then weak then stronger then super super strong ok here it is. Once upon a time it was a sunny day ther was a kid called greg but they call him wimpy kid for his nickname then he said I wish I was strong then he was getting stronger then he went inside to play videogames. Then he went to the gem and work out then few months later he wore a blue shirt then he went to get a yellow shirt from his bedroom then it was cracking then suddenly Ripe then he had big shirts so they don't ripe agin.

When asked about drawing before writing, Fernando commented, "It was like starting the story backwards." In his mini-novela, he was able to detail the sequence and events of the story through his drawings. The pictures encouraged him to visualize what he was writing before he put pen to paper to write the words. The drawings provided Fernando with the ability to see the storyline clearly, write the narrative, and refer back to the drawings throughout the writing process. He was less confused about how the story should end because that was his starting

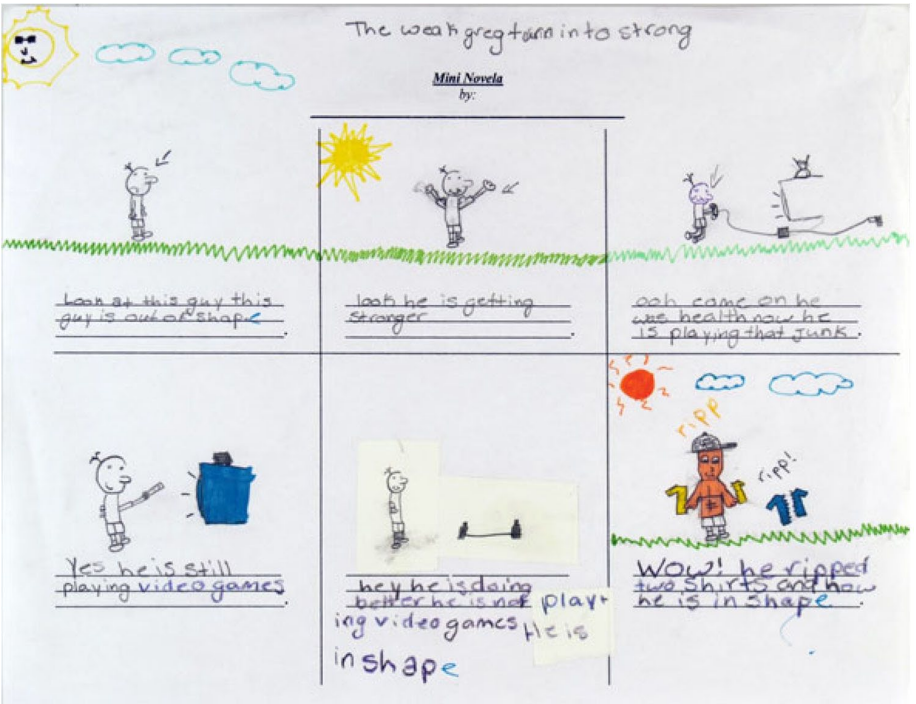


**Figure 3.** Fernando's storyboard

point and he was able to work backwards in his thought process. Fernando was able to make a link between his drawings and the text because the pictures were a springboard for his story.

## INSIGHTS AND LEARNINGS

As seen through these short mini-novela stories, visualizing as part of the prewriting stage can lead to meaningful writing with CLD students. The mini-novela strategy allowed the students in the breakout group of the family literacy program to tell their story with pictures first instead of becoming frustrated and overwhelmed as they thought about what they needed to write on a blank sheet of paper. When the students' stories were driven by visual images, their writing was transformed. The drawings helped them develop their writing plan, and it enhanced their ability to create a story full of details (Olshansky, 1995).

Mini-novela stories encouraged the CLD children to use their imagination, create visual images, and actively participate in the writing process. Drawing lowered students' writing anxiety and provided them with the ability to see their story clearly. Using the storyboard as a scaffold, they were able to revise both their thinking and their writing, adding details for clarification. The students were able to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts in their stories by drawing, which allowed them to participate fully in the writing project while still in the process of learning the English language.

Teachers of CLD students can use the mini-novela strategy as a springboard for developing additional strategies to infuse the writing process with students' cultural background knowledge. By drawing on the assets students bring to the classroom, teachers can support students' development of English literacy skills. Even students in the early stages of English language acquisition can engage in strategies such as the mini-novela by dictating their story to the teacher or, if needed, to a peer or paraprofessional who speaks the students' native language. Teachers who encourage students to use their cultural knowledge and resources in the learning process do much to ensure that students have meaningful learning experiences that lead to academic success.

## About the authors

**Stephanie Wessels** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her teaching experience includes working with ESL students in the classroom as well as serving as a consultant for a state educational agency. Her research focuses on bilingual family literacy programs.

**Socorro G. Herrera** is a professor in the College of Education and director of the Center for Intercultural and Multilingual Advocacy at Kansas State University. Her K–12 teaching experience includes an emphasis on literacy development, and her research focuses on teacher preparation for diversity in the classroom.

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