

RESPECT AND EMPOWERMENT IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Culturally responsive second language instruction requires educators focus on more than language. Language holds only part of the messages conveyed in intra and inter personal communication. Effective lessons focus on the cultures of the speakers of the target language of study when they explore learners' funds of knowledge, and then use the information this provides for the design of empowering curricula. This case study examined lessons prepared by 21 practicing teachers, representing 15 school districts in the northern Illinois area of the United States. Participants conducted an ethnography which was a required assignment in a post-graduate course focused on literacy instruction for emerging bilinguals. This work investigated educators' ideologies of biliteracy and learner empowerment, and examined teachers' visions of advocacy in reactions to course readings, in lesson design, and in the philosophy of multiliteracy statements.

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Preparing Teachers for Advocacy

Courses focused on multicultural education aim to prepare educators to adapt standard curricula to address and validate learners' diversity (Gay, 2010). Mobility across the world due to war, discrimination, and/or economic needs impacts students' schooling. Teachers may not feel free to advocate for themselves about the support they need to become informed of the challenges that students and families face in their communities due to migration issues, or feeling as *the other* (Bourdieu, 1991). There is a need for second language education to incorporate a focus on the cultures of the people whose languages they teach. Learners whose families have crossed cultural borders struggle to understand their place in societies when the language of schooling is not their home language and where cultural norms are unfamiliar. These students need differentiated curricula that address their affective needs and academic backgrounds (Daniel & Riley, 2018; Daniel, Riley, & Kruger, 2018; Dan-

iel, 2017a; 2017b; 2016). Teachers' professional development has to consider the impact of students' socio-emotional well-being on their academic achievement (Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

Educators need to learn ways to engage in ethnographic research that informs and helps them deliver instruction that is relevant for all the learners in their classrooms. Committed teachers design effective lessons when they investigate the diversity in their school populations and come to understand how the sociocultural context delineates access to academic success (Giroux, 2006; Freire, 2002). Such educators go beyond identification of explicit cultural norms and ensure they have insight into the implicit components of culture. They make no assumptions that their students may be ready to master the language and content objectives of lessons only because they might represent a geographical area, have similar socioeconomic levels, appear to have the same phenotype, and speak the same language. Research suggests that at all grade levels, students' prior schooling,

and familial networks prepare them to function in academic settings (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

As the demographics has changed in the United States (U.S.), it has become evident that the nation is a plurilingual society that is strengthened by the diversity of the numerous living languages that immigrants pass to their children and grandchildren. Teachers in both rural and urban areas of the country are challenged in designing instruction for students acquiring English, the dominant language of U.S. society, who are also studying content specific material. Teachers are challenged and enlightened by their experience working with groups of learners who may not share a common language but who are growing up celebrating their diverse norms and traditions. In the current millennium educators, regardless of their field of expertise, are successful when they envision themselves as teachers of language whose key objective is to assist learners to negotiate comprehension across lexicons.

This case study examines lessons prepared by 21 practicing teachers, representing 15 different school districts in the northern Illinois area of the U.S., after they participated in an ethnography and conducted a home visit with a family of an emergent bilingual. The teachers who participated in this study completed the ethnography as a requirement of a graduate level course focused on biliteracy paradigms and learners' funds of knowledge. All participants were completing coursework towards a post-graduate degree with a focus on Bilingual/English as a second language teacher preparation. Upon graduation from this program, the teachers are considered highly qualified to teach multicultural and multilingual groups of emergent bilinguals. The teachers recruited participants from their circles of influence, meaning families from the area of the schools where they were employed.

The university where this course was taught is situated in a rural/urban area in the State of Illinois approximately one hour from the city of Chicago. Graduate programs draw educators who represent the diversity of the city and its surrounding suburban communities, including farming communities. In any graduate class the teacher population includes ed-

ucators working at levels pre-K through secondary levels. The course where this work was conducted focused on building a scaffold of knowledge so the teachers could explore and embrace the philosophical stances necessary to differentiate instruction in ways that lead all learners to academic success. The work begins with teachers because they are the key to fostering positive socio-emotional environments that begin with culturally responsive instruction. The ideas shared in the groups highlight the creativity required of educators who work with multilingual multilevel learners from across the world. This work examines teachers' ideologies of learner empowerment and equity in schooling, and teachers' advocacy as evidenced in their reactions to course readings, in their lesson design, and in their philosophies of multiliteracy.

Purposes of Literacy

Teachers' literacy practices are influenced by their interactions with students. Hybridity in instructional methods reflects teachers' intent to empower diverse students through differentiated child-centered instruction. Teachers' pressing challenge in the U.S. is that learning platforms used as a response to the Covid-19 school shutdowns in spring of 2020, did not acknowledge the disparities in students' access to technology. Five months later, learner empowerment is delimited by government leaders who wish to open schools, while not addressing the financial burden of internet connectivity for families nor teachers' readiness to deliver full online instruction, should a return to traditional instruction become impossible. Attaining educational equity is a complex goal when there is no vaccine to stop an easily transmissible air borne virus whose lasting effects are not understood by scientists.

Liberating literacy practices address the politics of culture and the goals of academic study (Vygotsky, 2002; Darder, 1998). They offer balanced and culturally responsive literacy paradigms that validate the lives of diverse families. In order to acknowledge students' contributions at school, educators need to be informed of how their methods validate non-standard literacies and non-schooled knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Teachers' ideologies either support learners to become contributing cit-

izens of the world or replicate systemic beliefs that only those from higher socioeconomic levels deserve access to the right type of education (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004; Vygotsky, 2002; Freire, 2002). Past ideologies of functional literacy fell short because they prepared learners for lower level jobs while not encouraging critical analysis of text. Culturally based literacy models were slightly wider in their scope but reflected banking models of education centered on transmitting knowledge approved by the dominant society (Leistyna, Woodrum & Sherbloom, 1996; Giroux, 2006; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Hirsch, 1988). Banking beliefs assume the learner is akin to an empty goblet that needs to be filled with the teacher's and the dominant society's espoused norms. In contrast, going back in time to 1916, John Dewey (1997) introduced progressive literacy, a constructivist educational model based on validating children's ideas, experiences, and lexicons. Constructivist ideologies support learners to become critical thinkers and contributing citizens, first in the society of their democratic classrooms, and then in the world (Freire, 2002). Whole language methods of the 1980s reexamined and expanded Dewey's philosophy to argue that reading is for the purpose of learning and making meaning. Whole language ideologies proposed that reading is not only mastering how to decode but consists of learning how to express one's ideas and apply one's home literacy as a scaffold to higher levels of mastery. Whole language supporters did not ask students to engage in skill-based tasks before exploring their understandings and nurturing their emerging literacies in reading and writing development (Goodman, 2014: 1996).

at home from their family members and other individuals in their communities. Before any child begins school and every year thereafter, they observe others and participate in tasks that may never be addressed in the school curriculum but that are valuable to responsible citizenry. Teachers' ideologies acquire the breadth of knowledge about students that they need after they conduct ethnographic research in their school communities. Observations and one on one interviews with families facilitate developed understandings of diverse families' norms and modes on interaction. Through research teachers come to experience first-hand the reasons that cultural pluralism makes schooling exciting. They see that interculturality is legitimized when classrooms mirror the hybridity of its student populations, its discourses, social networks, and the power structures outside the school setting (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ruiz, 1984; Edelsky, 1991). In this process educators explore culture and also go beyond generalized perceptions of culture to grasp the variability within populations.

Educators who question the word and the world (Freire, 1985) design lessons that engage students in dialogue and inquiry. In dialogue learners experience and envision their future contributions to equitable societies. Teachers who embrace ideologies of cultural pedagogy (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Giroux, 2006) implement critical literacy paradigms that take learners to action within their circles of influence through the questioning, the judging, and their interpretation of what they hear, see, and read (Aronowitz, Clarke, & Freire, 1998). Exploration of the funds of knowledge thus leads to revelations and validation of the uniqueness of all learners' cultural capital and diverse identities (Coney, 2016; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011), and to a transformation of the standard curriculum (Daniel & Burgin, 2019; Daniel & Riley, 2018; Daniel, 2017; 2016).

Methodology

This case study examined lessons designed by 21 teachers enrolled in a graduate education methods course who conducted an ethnographic study with a culturally and linguistically diverse family. Course readings focused on the topics of cultural capital, the funds of knowl-

Culture is a positive and never a deficit in literacy.

Funds of Knowledge

When teachers explore their students' and their own funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), they uncover the significance of these in understanding and furthering the education of all students. This exploration takes the educator beyond functional, cultural, and progressive literacy models to appreciate students' non-schooled literacies (the students' funds of knowledge). Funds of knowledge refers to what students learn

edge, translanguaging, development of biliteracy, culturally responsive pedagogy and language as a right. Recurrent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were identified in data collected throughout the course in the five required interpretations/reflections of course readings which were prepared in triads, in the lessons the teachers planned after the home visit, and in their written philosophy of multiliteracy statement. The following questions were used in the analysis of all documents.

- Q.1: What are teachers' ideologies of learner empowerment?
- Q.2: What do teachers perceive are the purposes of literacy?
- Q.3: How do teachers support equity in schooling?
- Q.4: What are teachers' visions of advocacy?

Findings and Discussion

Recurrent themes documented in the data analysis strongly suggest the teacher participants redefined their ideologies and their position as educators of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Three themes emerged: (1) teachers' responsibilities as educational leaders, (2) the value of researching learners' funds of knowledge and, (3) teachers' understandings of literacy in schooling.

Theme 1: Teachers' Responsibilities as Educational Leaders

Teachers' comments demonstrated teachers' awareness of the diversity in their student populations and what this requires from them: "I need to remember that cultures change over time. I may speak a student's language and have been born in the same country yet lived an entirely different experience"; "Much of what students know does not show up on paper. It is our job to see the cultural capital that lives in our students' hearts and minds". Support for equity in schooling was evident in statements such as: "Topics that are relevant to students' lives make the learning easier and support self-esteem. Unless we teachers plan classroom activities keeping in mind students' lives, and their families' languages, we will lose them."; "Could teachers be more flexible in assessment practices? Yes! Could we value a product made by a small group enough to assess it and accept that it reflects the work of all the

students in the group? Yes!"; "Students like to learn from their peers so let's let them do this!"

The teachers' voiced why it is key to focus on empowering learners. Their sharing suggests they will be strong advocates for their students, and their words highlight their belief that teachers have a responsibility that extends beyond teaching content: "Students are consumers and producers of information in their role as learners"; "I have to give students choices of assignments"; "Students need opportunities to practice leadership skills". In reference to the course readings and the home visit, the following statements seem to represent opinions across all participants; "Before this course I focused way too much on products rather than on the processes of learning"; I now see that students' interpretations of what I teach them begins in their social world and their families' world views".

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Theme 2: Value of Researching Learners' Funds of Knowledge

Many of the teachers shared that they were afraid of not behaving as a co-learner but as an overbearing interviewer during the home visit. However, reflections after their home visit revealed teachers' new-found realizations related to learners' non-schooled knowledge, plus their acceptance of teachers' role in designing culturally responsive curricula. This theme carried over from the teachers' reflections after course readings, to their home visits, and to their philosophy of multiliteracy statements. The teachers said, "I now think about what my teachers could have discovered about me if they had visited my home. They would have changed their expectations for my schooling! If only they had taken the time to get to know me"; "Families are such a source of information"; "What parents have to offer their children in literacy and knowledge is much more than

I gave them credit for before the visit”; “My student’s father started a franchise. What this student knew and told the class about business was surprising given his level of academic knowledge”.

The teachers’ comments offer contrasts between their past, present, and future pedagogy such as: “What we have all lost in the past when we did not understand how to use families as a resource for the classroom! When we did not have a glimpse of how families’ funds of knowledge are vital to making lessons that support student growth and self-worth!; “When I identified the funds as a way to see the unique selves that learners bring to school, I thought the concept was absolutely beautiful”; “Once I learned about my student’s funds in a home visit, I saw that I can change my instruction. What is more important to me is that this student is now part of my family and I of hers”; “My grasp of all of this funds stuff is at a different level now. I believe this work has helped me to better define my views of language use in and out of the classroom”; “Student centered learning allows for students to take ownership of their learning which enhances their involvement and motivation in what they are learning. What a concept! This was always right there in front of me but I never saw it before this class and the visit!; “The distinguishing factor between *background knowledge* and *funds of knowledge* is this idea of cultural identity. Our students’ cultural identities are tied to their funds of knowledge, which includes the languages that are part of their daily lives. What else could they stem from?”. This awareness lets me know that “It is all right to not have every lesson planned and to see where the students’ funds take us in class!”

Theme 3: Literacy in Schooling

The third recurrent theme in the data analysis revealed the teachers’ thoughts about literacy and the rights it gives or prevents learners from accessing. The teachers became aware that literacy instruction is never neutral. A teacher stated that “Literacy is not technical, it flows from exchanges between students and their teachers”. A teacher across the room added, “We can’t teach from the book. We have to use students’ funds”. Another colleague shared, “When teachers validate the literacies of diverse house-

holds, parents have increased access to their child’s school”. The teachers shared ideas such as that in their communities, “Semiotic systems, in signs and symbols mediate thinking and meaning making”. They now grasped “Why culture is a positive and never a deficit in literacy”. They stated that “Literacy is dynamic within families and communities and exists for children before they begin formal schooling” and they reluctantly yet openly accepted that they had “...never read about local literacies and how these are not in books but in communities’ social practices”. Finally, participants excitedly agreed that during the home visits they were “... impressed with the student’s funds!” and know they will use what they learned “... to supplement the curriculum”.

Ideas from the participants that summarized their revised definitions of literacy presented new world views reflecting acceptance of difference. A secondary school teacher said, “A vital step in multiliteracy development that was brought to my attention throughout this course is to allow students to drive the lessons.” A younger colleague with whom he had collaborated in completion of course assignments added, “I had not previously thought about the value of families’ literacies, or of how I could incorporate them into my language arts curriculum. I now see how children’s literacy emerges from the home and community and my pedagogy has been redefined”.

Implications and Conclusions

Data from this work suggests that teachers are optimistic and committed to their students. They want school districts to invest in their creativity and ability as researchers. If teachers were given time to plan and conduct home visits, they would be better able to personalize the curriculum for each academic year’s crop of students (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). As such, their outreach would result in curricula that exceed top-down mandates and gain high levels of personal satisfaction for teachers and students as co-creators of improved schools. Three comments from teachers in this study help define future actions for all educators. A teacher concluded that, “For sure personal relationships develop when teachers get to know students and their families during home visits”. Another educator shared his belief that all teachers,

Questions for Thought

1. Do you remember a time when you were a young student and one of your teachers reached out to you in a way that got to you? Why did you listen to this teacher? What did this teacher do that went beyond the norm? What did this teacher know about you that made the difference? How did this teacher demonstrate a commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity?
2. In what ways might you already be teaching language in a discipline specific class such as mathematics and science?
3. Identify why exploring your learners’ funds of knowledge will help you support their language acquisition and take them to higher levels of academic achievement?

“...must tap into the resources of their students’ communities to help them and their teacher make meaning of academic lessons”. A third teacher repeated a refrain heard across the world: “If I want my students to be successful in the classroom, I need to create culturally relevant experiences”.

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