



In Consideration of Latino Children: a sociocultural perspective of literacy skills development using Literature Circles

Stephanie A. Bryant, M.A.

Abstract

This article, reflecting a sociocultural perspective and connections to current research, presents a discussion about the importance of engaging Latino children in literature circle discussions using culturally appropriate, meaningful, and relevant children's literature in classrooms in the United States. In addition, teachers are encouraged to be reflective practitioners and to consider a "funds of knowledge" perspective by taking time to understand the literacy practices of the families at home and how they may contribute to success in school for Latino children.

Key words: Latino children education, literacy development, children literature.

Resumen

Desde una perspectiva sociocultural que relaciona investigaciones actuales este artículo presenta una discusión sobre la importancia de involucrar a niños Latinos en discusiones de círculos de literatura que usan la literatura de niños culturalmente apropiada, significativa, y relevante en aulas en los Estados Unidos. Además, los profesores son animados a ser practicantes reflexivos y a pensar que una perspectiva pedagógica basada en "los fondos de conocimiento" de los niños que consideran las prácticas de lectoescritura de las familias en casa pueden contribuir al éxito del aprendizaje y la escolaridad de los niños Latinos.

Palabras clave: La educación de los niños latinos, desarrollo de la lectoescritura, literatura para niños.

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Introduction

Changing demographics in today's schools have impacted how teachers are approaching their classrooms. It has become a more critical time for examining their students' literacy skills and valuing a sociocultural perspective. A teacher implementing this approach to education recognizes that "higher mental functioning" originates in social interactions reflecting the culture of those participating, and thus encourages conversation in the classroom (Wersch, 2001, p. 113 citing Vygotsky, 1978).

Diaz & Flores (2001) also citing Vygotsky (1978) call attention to the fact that through such meaningful interactions, "knowledge is socially constructed" and children are able to develop their language and literacy skills (p. 43). Literature circles, a practice that allows for such peer interaction and the use of authentic Latino children's literature, contribute to this development of higher cognitive thinking and literacy skill development. For the purposes of this article, literacy will be defined with respect to the development of reading skills as "a language process in which an individual constructs meaning through a transaction with written text" and through that transaction the reader interprets the text in relation to "past experiences, language background, and cultural framework" (Baker, 2001, p. 322 citing Hudelson, 1994).

While there are recognizable limitations to the research reviewed with respect to the group sizes observed and observations specific to one group of children, the organization of the research and information gathered from the qualitative methods used, give useful insights into important classroom practices in the literacy development of Latino children. Additionally, it is important to note that while the emphasis of the research reviewed in this article focuses on Latino children in the United States, the theoretical foundation and recommendations for practice can be adapted and applied in any classroom setting.

According the Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003b), a characteristic of successful teachers is their knowledge of students' lives and the awareness of needing to educate themselves about different cultures, traditions, and histories. It is important that teachers take the time to learn about their students. With the shifting cultures in the classroom, educational practices by teachers need to be changed and adapted to fit the needs of students. Gutierrez (2002) asserts that often the expectation of conformity to the norms of the established



curriculum keeps teachers from adapting the curriculum to meet their student's needs. Jiménez (2001) feels this creates a disconnect between school literacy tasks and the realities of students' lives, and for this reason teachers should be willing to be flexible with practices that work for students. Osterling (2001) also emphasizes the need for teachers to redefine their approaches and methods in the classroom and beyond.

Different paths to literacy

Research indicates that there is not one specific route to literacy (Goodman, 1979; Reyes & Halcón, 2001; Jiménez, 2001). The paths are varied and unique amongst individuals, and language learning is motivated by "functional need" (Goodman, Goodman, & Flores, 1979, p. 21). A learner must see the learning process as functional and purposeful in order to understand its relevance (Goodman et al., 1979; Reyes & Halcón, 2001). Huerta-Murcias (1998) states that unfortunately "literacy is often interpreted within the classroom in the narrow sense of reading and writing skills," and in doing this, teachers negate the depth and breadth of literacies that Latino children bring to their classrooms (p.39). Therefore, it is important to begin to make the connections between home and school. Taking the time to know the Latino culture and its literacy practices reveals an environment for children with varied interactions involving listening, relating, and writing language (Huerta-Murcias, 1998).

With the current trend in education towards high-stakes testing and packaged literacy programs in the United States, there is a shift away from considering the individuality of each child towards an approach to education that attempts to fit all students into the same structure for becoming literate. However, current discussions amongst educators and researchers indicate that there are many ways of becoming literate. Cline & Necochoa (2003), professors at California State University-San Marcos, talk about their experiences growing up in environments with a rich oral storytelling tradition. While they did not have access to books, the language use in the home was influential to their language development. Chapetón (2004), in her discussion of developing a reading group for adults learners in Bogotá, Colombia, recognized the influence of society and life experiences on becoming literate because "reading strictly can't take place without the implication of socially derived knowledge" (p.123).



Community strengths

It is important to look at the strengths of Latino families and understand their experiences rather than immediately make assumptions based on socioeconomics and language. With the majority of teachers being white, middle class women who do not share the same cultural identity as their students and choose to maintain the attitudes upheld by mainstream society, power struggles can occur between the teachers and students (Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla, 2003a/b; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Diaz & Flores, 2001). Therefore, it is important for teachers to begin each school year as learners with questions about their students rather than approaching students with the idea that they already have answers and know where the student is coming from (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

This brings in the idea of “funds of knowledge” that can be viewed as a means to “understand the ways of the households” (Moll, 2001, p. 17). This important concept involves looking at all aspects of how a family negotiates life and how the literacy practices at home can serve as a resource at school (Moll, 1988; 1992). When teachers are willing to be ethnographers of themselves and their students, and work to create a community of learners built in trust, then a greater connection will occur and learning will take place (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Putting funds of knowledge into practice involves considering the fact that “what Latino children bring to school is who they are, what they believe, how they feel, and how they behave in a culture” (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, p. 10).

It is unfortunate to think of the number of students who become more disadvantaged at school because of teachers who are not willing, or do not have the awareness of appropriate methodologies for addressing their needs. While there are certainly other approaches to meet the students need, this article is centering its focus on a sociocultural approach with the implementation of literature circles in the literacy development of Latino children.

John-Steiner & Mahn (1996) in their discussion of Vygotsky’s (1978) work, express the importance of including culture and language in the education of students and using a collaborative approach to learning as important tenets of the sociocultural perspective in education. The need for teachers to tailor instruction to meet the needs of their students is an important step towards creating an “engaged pedagogy” that relies on empowering student through



cultural references (Osterling, 2001, p. 11). According to Osterling (2001) citing the work of Moll (1988; 1992), the Latino community in the United States is an enormous untapped resource for educational change and teachers need to “understand their students’ background and be willing to build a bridge between students’ home and school communities” (p. 12). Based on observations by Gutierrez (2002), teachers often view home as a “physical context rather than an integral part of a student’s learning and ignore opportunities for bilingual children to reveal their communicative and academic competence centered within their respective funds of knowledge” (p. 50). Understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and valuing the culture of students will create a connection between home and school that is becoming necessary in today’s educational system.

Home and school partnerships

Based on research by Giroux (1992), Huerta-Murcias (1998) states that schools are not meeting the needs of “culturally different students because they do not provide a social context for learning” that allows access to curriculum content familiar to students (p.31). The socialization process for Latino children is central to their culture and built upon the idea of “cooperation rather than competition” (Huerta- Murcias, 1998, p. 34 citing Nieto, 1992). Huerta-Murcias (1998) emphasizes the importance of culture being considered more than traditions and holidays by teachers and should be viewed as “a total way of life” for students (p. 30).

According to Freire (1970) cited by Osterling (2001), a child’s development could not be separated from its social context since the social context influences how and what learners think (p. 10). As Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, & Arzubiaga (2001) state, through a sociocultural lens, there is a shift from looking at the child as an individual to looking at the child in interaction with a larger context. This larger context can be defined in terms of the classroom, interactions with peers, family, and school staff, and the community at large. According to Arzubiaga et al. (2002), it is important to look at a child within their environment especially the daily practices of family and the role that it plays in literacy development.

“If school is relevant, if its curriculum and goals are consistent with the functional needs of the pupils, if it accepts their language and culture and builds



on it, then children will respond to school and grow” (Goodman et al., 1979, p. 41). This sets the stage for one factor that is valuable to consider for the academic success of Latino students, the involvement of families.

The importance of family

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) feels social relations with families is a key component to building trust with the families and thus beneficial to the school experience of the child. “We build on the knowledge that every household is, in a very real sense, an educational setting” and the need for considering the importance of social relationships within the family and community and the value of this being reflected in the classroom (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 320). Building such a bridge of trust between home and school, thus considering the funds of knowledge of families, benefits teachers because parents hold the greatest knowledge about their child and can be valuable allies in the academic success of their child as “educators need to be conscious of the fact that parents know about their child” (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, p. 16). “Latino parents are willing partners in their children’s schooling” but often feel isolated because they are not informed about how the school systems work if they are only familiar with those of Mexico and Latin America (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, p. vii).

Educators need to consider understanding literacy of the home and view language as a strength of Latino families. Families communicate through songs, stories, and social gatherings as they express their pride and identity. Durgunoglu & Öney (2000) observed that home experiences are important in the development of language skills. Durgunoglu & Öney (2000) discuss that children become aware of how language functions through interactions with family and this is instrumental in their literacy development. Jiménez (2001) contends that it is important to consider how literacy is meaningful for students and their families. For example, Jiménez (2001) through interviews with Latino youth discovered that reading bills, being a language broker, or translator, and teaching younger siblings are literacy practices that children engage in beyond school. It is important to recognize the strengths of families rather than looking from a deficit perspective that can continue a cycle of failure for kids and minimize their chance for success.

It is important for teachers to remember that families may feel self-conscious if they don’t know the language of school, so teachers need to work



to engage them in an ongoing conversation. Moll & Greenberg (1990) observed a teacher with the willingness to adapt and change a packaged curriculum by inviting parents as experts into the classroom. Based on observations, Moll & Greenberg (1990) found that this type of planning contributed to the lesson development and valued the students' and their parent's backgrounds. The use of social networks stretching beyond the classroom into the community as a feature of instruction increased the motivation and engagement of students who were now eager to learn because the learning was meaningful and within familiar contexts (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). The learning modules designed by the teacher were student-centered and allowed for the construction of meaningful connections between academic life and home life (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). One teachers' willingness to be reflective, set high expectations, and use the following beliefs as a foundation for curriculum development were effective in the success of a challenging student, Frankie:

Both reading and writing are meaning-constructed activities, that the motivation and engagement that are essential to learning must be centered around relevant and authentic activities, that the sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds of our students are the bridge to academic learning, that the curriculum can and often does shift as the needs of the learner become evident, and that assessment across multiple contexts gives a more accurate picture of what a child is capable of than any standardized testing situation could (Gutierrez, 2002, p. 62).

This is a perspective to consider when building the bridge to connect home and school, and clearly views the child through a sociocultural lens. Teachers can help parents connect with their children by recognizing and celebrating the literacy activities that families engage in at home and how those can contribute to school success. This can be very beneficial to students as they work to build something new from what they already know, and develop their language skills based in relevancy to their world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Latino parents have the knowledge, skills and ideas but they sometimes need to be shown how they can use them to help their child at home in order for them to be successful at school Ada and Zubizarreta, (2001). Oftentimes, pressures to become "American" puts children at risk for losing language because they become aware of English as the dominant language and the language that helps them negotiate their environment Ada and Zubizarreta, (2001). What is important is "how teachers organize instruction, and their



decisions to include culturally relevant curriculum, can support a commonality of understanding between students and parents” Ada, (2001, p. 235). Pransky & Bailey (2002/2003) citing various researchers (i.e. Delpit, 1996) assert that “for many children...home life and culture are not closely aligned with school culture at all” and therefore it is important to consider creating the appropriate connections for the best interest of students (p. 373). Supporting their approaches with research helps teachers move away from the pressures to conform to a curriculum and they can work on building a community of learners Gutierrez, (2002).

Reaching their potential

Soltero (2004) when referring to Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective discusses that the acquisition of knowledge and development of cognition are socially constructed. Therefore, through cooperative groupings, in the form of literature circles, children are engaged in a learning process with peers that allow them to work at a higher level of thinking with the guidance of a teacher, what Vygotsky refers to as the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) Baker, (2001, p. 327). Vygotsky’s sociocultural framework offers teachers a means for valuing the cultural and community experiences of their students and provides them with the ZPD “by which they can help everyone reach their fullest potential” Diaz & Flores, (2001, p. 46).

The ZPD is an important idea to consider when teaching to potential as it emphasizes the idea that sociocultural activities contribute to higher psychological functions and those who are “more capable” assist those who are “less capable” (Moll, 2001, p. 15 citing Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, students are encouraged to go beyond a certain level by the teacher who is able to recognize their abilities and what they have to offer Diaz & Flores, (2001).

It is the responsibility of the teacher to continue at school what the family started at home. In consideration of the sociocultural perspective, it is important to capitalize “on students’ previous experiences and incorporates the highest expectations” in the learning process Diaz & Flores, (2001, p. 45). Goodman & Goodman (1990) assert that “collaborative learning between peers, regardless of ability, activates the zone of proximal development” (p. 228). A classroom practice that values this particular perspective and encourages reaching potential are literature circles. The small group interactions between students allows for higher level thinking and language development.



Chapetón (2004), working with her adult students in Bogotá, observed the participants engaging in dialogues connecting texts to prior experiences, creating inferences, and constructing meaning in the same way that Carger (2004) observed a group of children engaging in the same process as they reflected on children's book illustrations. An important element for both Chapetón and Carger was the use of high quality literature selections as their students engaged in thoughtful dialogues that enhanced their literacy skills development.

Quality latino children's literature

It is through the use of good Latino children's literature that "teachers and children truly connect by increasing teachers' understanding of the specific cultures of their students" (Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla, 2003a, p. 103). In addition, Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003a), emphasize the value of teachers selecting appropriate stories for presenting in the classroom and being conscious of issues affecting their students' lives as they bring culture into the classroom through literature. The research study conducted by Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003a/b) emphasized the importance of making pre-service teachers aware of the availability of Latino children's literature and its use as a resource for students in the classroom to be able to see reflections of themselves because "ignoring the reality of students' lives promotes an educational system that is culturally responsive to its community" (p. 245). Soltero (2004) agrees with the need for careful selection of materials and asserts that it is important for students and teachers to explore stereotypes, prejudices, and injustices relevant to cultures through literature that reflects a whole cultural perspective and not just one aspect of culture.

Crowell (1998) presents approaches taken to determine quality literature for various cultures, with a special emphasis on the Latino community and its diversity. Crowell (1998) mentions that it is difficult to evaluate Latino literature because of the fact that "Spanish speakers do not share a monolithic culture," and so she makes the following recommendations when selecting literature: look for authentic images; make sure the books move beyond stereotypes; the books should honor the meaning and significance of an original story; consult someone with more knowledge of a culture to ensure its authenticity; and the books should give a voice to a culture (p. 229).



Crowell (1998) continues her discussion by giving examples of quality books. One of the first examples is Gary Soto's "story of an old man trying to do what his wife tells him to do" in *The Old Man & His Door* (1996), in which he uses codeswitching as authentic language throughout the story (p. 229). According to Crowell (1998), this is valuable because codeswitching "is a distinctive characteristic of bilingual communities" and therefore this story reflects something that happens in the community (p. 229).

Crowell (1998) presents an example of a good dual language text by selecting *Gathering the Sun* (1997) by Alma Flor Ada. This is a dual language Spanish-English alphabet book presented in poems "that celebrate the pride and honor of farmworker families and their way of life in the American Southwest" (p. 230). Crowell (1998) expresses that the "vibrant illustrations invite readers of all ages into the homes, hearts, and culture of the people who work in the fields," and this is therefore a book that presents authentic images to present the culture (p. 231).

While Crowell (1998) present many more examples of quality literature, the book *Say Hola to Spanish* (1996) by Susan Middleton Elya is used to highlight the importance of being aware of potential stereotypes. The story uses "lively rhythm and rhyme" and "colorful Disney-like illustrations" to introduce children to Spanish, and Crowell (1998) asserts that young children enjoy the story and point out it is helpful for teaching English (p. 230). However, Crowell (1998) expresses that the reviewers of the book were "mildly irritated by the stereotypical sombrero and maracas on the cover" even though the interior pictures reflect more diversity" (p. 230).

According to Soltero (2004), a child's literacy experience will be enhanced and their self-esteem will increase when they are able to see that their teacher recognizes and values culture. For this reason, "one of the most effective ways to bring authentic multicultural and diverse perspectives into the classroom is to have an extensive collection of children's literature" (Soltero, 2004, p. 88 citing Rueda, 1998). Literature allows the students to engage in meaningful discussions relevant to their lives and experiences. Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003b) emphasize this importance of connecting the books with the children's lives in order to teach literacy and content in meaningful ways. Soltero (2004) believes that a culturally responsive approach to learning using multicultural children's literature contributes to the development of positive relationship amongst the students in the classroom.



Classroom conversations: literature circles

“Whatever the text may be, once the reading is finished, a discussion about it is indispensable” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 71).

Literature circles, or small groups of students concentrating their reading and discussion on one text, are an approach to teaching Latino children that incorporates the ZPD as students are encouraged to stretch their thinking and oral language skills through questioning and exploration of a single text. Crowell (1998) emphasizes that “language is the vehicle by which we tell our own and our communities stories” and that presenting Latino children with good literature they will see their culture valued in the classroom. Soltero (2004) citing Giroux (1989) states “critical pedagogy of literacy must be rooted in a framework that allows students to speak so that their voices become integral components of the curriculum” (p. 56). It is valuable for students to tell their stories and share their experiences with other students, and through that process they can discover what they share with each other.

Kaser & Short (1998) feel that children should be “encouraged to bring their lives and cultural identities into school” and through literature discussions children are able to consider different perspectives about themselves, others, and the world (p. 185). Kaser & Short (1998) present Kaser’s approach to bringing her students’ culture into the classroom by having the students become the curriculum, “with the study of family as a framework and literature discussion as a vehicle for response” (p. 186). For example:

Rosanna connected with the Family Studies Inquiry immediately and talked with her family all year long about their history and traditions. As she shared her stories, the whole class gained a rich sense of her values as a Mexican American. The children saw her stories as authentic knowledge, based on the experiences of a member of the classroom community, rather than mandated learning. (Kaser & Short, 1998, p. 187)

Based on research by Crawford (2004), peer models are one of the most prominent ways in which children are able to learn from one another in their process of language development as he states, “peers tend to be more influential role models than teachers when it comes to language learning” (p. 295).

During literature circles, students are encouraged to provide authentic responses to the text, and this occurs when students are able to see themselves



reflected in the text, which according to Finazzo (1997) activates their schema – personal experience brought to the learning – that they bring to the classroom and to book and enhance discussions. Carger (2004) clearly demonstrates this importance in her work with bilingual children and the art of the picture book. Carger (2004) maintains that literature circles provide a non-threatening environment for students to develop their literacy skills especially through oral expression, and through connections with culturally relevant texts students are able to make meaning from what they are reading. Not only do children make connections with texts through their own stories, but also by looking at illustrations students recognized the tiniest cultural details of illustrations, such as recognizing the game “La Loteria” in *Friend from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* by Gloria Anzaldúa. When they saw their culture represented, they shared personal stories and it was through the art of the picture book that the children created meaning for themselves and “embraced visual cultural details with delight” (p. 290). Carger (2004) asserts that art helped the bilingual children to “name their worlds and to grasp their unique personal backgrounds” which contributes to engagement in the process of developing literacy skills (p. 291).

Authentic learning

Working in groups, or cooperative learning, provides a structure that promotes more effective interaction and communication among students and that also draws on a learning pattern that is familiar to Latino families (Huerta-Murcias, 1998). When Latino children are given opportunities to read culturally relevant material that reflects their everyday life experiences, they begin to develop their academic language skills as the process of reading is connected with their knowledge of the communities and world in which they live (Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003a; Soltero, 2004; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Therefore, it is important to consider authentic learning experiences that are meaningful for students rather than handing them a packaged product that does not reflect their reality.

It is important for students to develop their own voice as it is “socially constructed within their own reality as they converse with others” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 129). Literature circles allow for dialogue to play a significant role in constructing meaning: “The capacity for language is innate, but it can only be realized in a social setting” (Berthoff, 1987, p. xiv).



Martinez-Roldán & Lopez-Robertson (1999/2000) use the example of reading the book *Tomas and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora, and how authentically the children responded to the text and their feelings of sensitivity to the main characters' situation of moving from one place to another. In addition, the children enjoyed when Tomas taught the librarian some words in Spanish. The book "gave the students the opportunity to see not only themselves represented in it, but also positive attitudes toward the Spanish language" (Martinez-Roldán & Lopez-Robertson, 1999/2000, p. 274).

Another example was the use of the text, *Friends from the other side/ Amigos del otro lado*, which created an extensive discussion by the children in relationship to their own experiences being affected as recent immigrants by the border patrol and their ability to relate to feelings expressed by characters in the story. Through the exploration of that text, the children were able to share stories with others and it was a valuable learning experience for the researchers as well: "we came to value how important storytelling can be for students and how the literature circles provided them with the opportunity to express themselves through this genre" Martinez-Roldán & Lopez-Robertson, (1999/2000, p. 278).

Based on the various research studies presented, when children are able to see themselves represented in the text it carries more meaning for them and they are more likely to be engaged in the process Carger, 2004; Martinez-Roldán & Lopez-Robertson, (1999/2000).

In their own research study, Stuart & Volk (2002) worked to develop a culturally responsive reading club for Latino children to encourage them to read and work on their literacy skills. The teachers involved in the process used the children's language and culture as a resource in the discussion of children's literature, and in the process of motivating children to read. It was unclear as to the native language proficiency of the students, but not all of the students were proficient in their second language as there were students translating for others. Stuart & Volk (2002) found that drawing from the experience and knowledge of parents was very important and discovered that "most parents talked of literacy interactions with multiple participants including parents, siblings, children's friends, and neighbors" (p. 129). This supports the use of literature circles with Latino children because they are reflective of the cultural experience at home.



Language skills

When teachers create meaningful and authentic literacy experiences using literature circles, the development of oral and written language skills in a second language is enhanced by the student's interactions with peers that is contextually relevant to their everyday lives. "Language, written language included, is learned more easily in the context of use" and so therefore with the development of literacy skills, there is a need for learning to be social Goodman et al., (1979, p. 42). There is also an extensive amount of research that supports the development of native language skills as they will transfer to the acquisition of a second language, and this can be achieved through social interactions in a meaningful context as illustrated by the current discussion of literature circles Soltero, (2004); Baker, (2001). Based on research by Soltero (2004), "readers and writers who are proficient in their first language can become proficient in a second language because they transfer universal literacy skills from one language to the other," and these do not need to be relearned in the second language (p. 54).

Soltero (2004) further discusses the interactive pedagogy that subscribes to Krashen's theoretical idea of comprehensible input – "messages in the second language that make sense when modified and facilitated by visual aids and context" (p. 52). This is particularly relevant when considering the use of Latino children's literature in literature circles with Latino children in an effort to create a culturally responsive classroom environment, and develop higher cognitive thinking skills Moll & Greenberg, (1990); Carger, (2004).

Goodman & Goodman (1990) assert that "kids learn when they are in control of their learning and know that they are in control" (p. 226). When learning is authentic, natural, purposeful, and useful, students will actively participate (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). It is important for student to be in classrooms that are social communities "where teacher value each learner, help the learner to value themselves and each other, and win the respect of their students" Goodman & Goodman, (1990, p. 235).

When participating in literature circles, "students can learn how to relate experiences from their communities to issues or problems found in the literature, or to use the knowledge from the literature to rethink issues in the community" Moll, 2001, p. 20 citing Moll & Whitmore, (1993). This places



critical literacy into the curriculum, which contributes to the construction of academic language, and students begin to make connections with the literature in meaningful ways and examining the experiences in their own communities and if there is a need for change Moll & Greenberg, (1990).

Children develop critical thinking skills through the process of expressing their ideas in response to texts. Carger (2004) asserts that children's critical responses to literature by commenting on, for example, the author's illustrations "can engender genuine conversations for English language learners (ELLs) and develop critical literacy skills" such as developing hypotheses and using language creatively (p. 291). It is also important to consider the value of maintaining a child's reading skills in their native language, as those skills transfer to the second language, as presented by Ernst & Mulhern (2003) who place value on children reading in their first language to maintain their confidence that they are indeed good readers and critical thinkers. In some instances there may be children who do not have well-developed first language skills. The research reviewed did not specifically address how teachers should approach teaching students with limited first language skills; however Grant & Wong (2003) mention encouraging parents to read with their children in their native language.

Implications for Teacher Practice

According to Freire & Macedo (1987), creativity requires risk taking. Teacher can develop their pedagogies with their own voice, but they need to encourage students "to affirm, tell, and retell their personal narrative by exercising their own voices" Giroux, (1987, p. 23).

Reflective teaching is important when working with diverse populations. McKeon (1994) cited by Pransky & Bailey (2002/2003) comments that "teachers must be willing to learn not only who their students are, but also who they themselves are as cultural beings and how that strongly colors their teaching" (p. 371). It is recommended that teachers engage in critical dialogue amongst themselves and others in order to create curriculums that best suit the needs of their students Giroux, (1987). Taking time for creative and reflective discourse enables teachers to learn from one another and share in the development of a culturally responsive curriculum for students. Teachers play a significant role in the development of students' self concept: "We know



of no one who is more significant in changing a child's view of literacy and organizing the classroom so that the curriculum is in tune with the children than the classroom teacher" Goodman et al., (1979, p. 41).

It is very important that Latino students see the value of their native language and culture in the process of learning. As Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003 a/b) assert it is very important for teachers to be aware of the literature that is available to them and to carefully select appropriate stories for presenting in the classroom. Rosen (1992) as cited by Martinez-Roldán & Lopez-Robertson (1999/2000), feels it is important to reflect upon the stories children tell and to value the oral stories that are so much a part of our everyday lives because it is through stories that the children are able to make meaning from their lives and make sense of "chaotic experiences" because their stories reflect their culture (p. 278).

As the demographics of classrooms continue to shift and change, teachers need to examine their attitudes about language and language learning. There is no guarantee that practice will change but raising awareness of teachers may be influential. Learning should occur in a context in which both teacher and student explore language and children find that it is meaningful and useful. When teachers take into consideration the strengths of a child's language, they begin to take a step towards fostering a love of learning in the child and the child will grow and connect with school. It is when teachers do not take into consideration the language and culture of a child that a great amount of incongruency develops between home and school.

Latino children often experience language in one context at home for specific purposes and are then exposed to the language of school, and if they are unable to make a connection between the two it then becomes a struggle towards which aspect of language, academic or social, is most useful for their survival in an English dominant context. One of the issues facing schools is the problem of "narrow definitions of literacy that privilege middle-class speakers of Standard English and render useless the rich cultural and linguistic resources of non-mainstream children" Reyes & Halcón, (2001) citing Delpit, (1995); Dyson, (1993). For instance, we should be viewing the translation skills of children, as they serve as cultural liaisons for their families, as a sign of their giftedness Reyes & Halcón, (2001). Teachers emphasize that exposure to literature lead to academic success and they assume that working class children



are less likely to become competent readers because of the deficiency of such resources in the home, but there is evidence that literacy rich experiences are happening at home and teachers need to adapt their thinking and curriculum to bring these into the classroom Moll & Greenberg, (1990).

Diaz & Flores (2001) recognize that teachers have a huge responsibility and can greatly influence their students as “teachers can decide to follow mainstream thought or they can reorganize to counter negative influences... teachers have the power to make decisions about what is best for students based on the research...when methods are backed up by sound research then there is validity to the approach” Diaz & Flores, (2001, p. 45).

Teachers who are reflective about their practice and work hard making decisions in the best interest of their students “are aware that they need to know a great deal about their students and the communities in which their students live in order to provide for and support authentic opportunities for learning “(Goodman & Goodman, 1990, p. 247). This idea supports very clearly the idea of funds of knowledge and it also points to the need for teachers to become ethnographers of their students and understand them in order to create classroom environments with teaching practices that reflect the culture of students. Children are more likely to be engaged in the learning process when they see reflections of themselves in the curriculum Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Diaz & Flores, 2001; Jiménez, (2001).

Teachers need to remember to enter with questions about their students, curiosity about why they are rather than trying to fit them into a specific framework, or stereotyped box Moll & Greenberg, (1990). What is unfortunate for many students is that a high percentage of teachers are white, middle class females who do not share the same experience, nor feel the need to address their students needs. They work from a deficit model, and enter already feeling that the students are “at-risk” because of being Latino and speaking Spanish. “This perspective...leads teachers to organize instruction for poor and minority student at the ‘lower’ end of their abilities” rather than maximize potential Diaz & Flores, (2001, p. 31). Through the use of literature circles that allow for small group interactions, each child’s potential can be recognized and pushed to reach their zone of proximal development.

The awareness of using Latino children’s literature in the literacy development of Latino students is very important, particularly for practicing



and preservice teachers as Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003a) emphasize that they “feel strongly that contemporary literature based on people’s lives (whether fiction or nonfiction) brings the teacher candidates closer to the real lives of the children they teach” (p. 107). Therefore, Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003b) find that there is a great need for preservice teachers to have more training in the culture of their students, and the use of Latino children’s literature is one such approach. Grant & Wong (2003) also find that teacher education, about culturally responsive pedagogy, is important because lack of knowledge is one of the potential barriers to literacy development for Latino students when teachers are unsure about how to meet their needs.

According to Dana & Lynch-Brown (1993) cited by Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003b), children’s literature is a powerful tool for teacher education programs because teachers are able to: “experience an array of cultural settings, develop understanding and appreciation for diversity of cultures, gain insight into children’s minds and hearts, prepare children for the global society” (p. 239).

While Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003a/b) found some success in the process of their study, it was a limited group of graduate students in Colorado and it is unclear as to whether it has been modeled by other university programs. As was already mentioned, Grant & Wong (2003) express their concern about teacher education programs, and they go on to discuss the limited number of researchers engaging in substantive research in the field of literacy development for ELLs, which seems to indicate that research relate to Latinos is limited. Grant & Wong (2003) assert that ELLs are often excluded from attempts to improve reading because they are not represented in the testing material and for this reason teacher education programs need to educate more responsive literacy professional who are aware of how to best meet these children’s needs. Grant & Wong (2003) also find that the problem lies in the fact that white, native English speakers establish the norm and set guidelines for literacy achievement without recognition of the many paths to literacy Goodman et al., (1979).

With the cultural gap that exists between a predominantly white and female teaching force and the growing number of Latino students in schools, it is important to be culturally sensitive to all students because “when children feel their cultural identities have no place in the classroom, they often reject the curriculum, resist learning, and may eventually drop out of school” Kaser & Short, (1998, p. 191). Finally, using meaningful contexts, through Latino



children's literature, brings the students into the learning experience and develops their literacy skills, helping them discover the joys of exploring literature. According to Kaser & Short (1998), learning takes place when students are able to make connections to their experience and quality children's literature can help make those connections and enhance their learning experience.

Concluding thoughts

Despite the research that is beginning to appear by Latino and Latina scholars and others, the mainstream practices prevail and this needs to change in order to provide the best opportunities for children to be successful in today's schools (Reyes & Halcón, 2001). Teacher education is certainly a good place to start, especially when you consider that "equal educational access is socially constructed in the classroom...organized by teachers who choose to provide it for all students and by the administrators who support them" Diaz & Flores, (2001, p. 46).

While the research clearly illuminates a viable solution to the current state of affairs in education, change cannot happen until all those participating in education of children raise their awareness and begin to change their practice. Unfortunately, this takes time and with the pressures placed on teachers with standardized testing, it is even more difficult. Goodman & Goodman (1990) citing the work of Vygotsky in their discussion of using a whole language when looking at literacy development emphasize "his (Vygotsky's) awareness of the need for learners to be immersed in language for literacy learning to be easy" (p. 223). This has clearly been discussed in the implementation of literature circles using quality literature. It is important to prevent the placement of Latino children on the "fringes where cultural and linguistic differences" are not respected and they are measured against the English norm and thus culture, language, and lives of the children are undervalued Reyes & Halcón, (2001, p. 4).

A dominant thread through much of the research being conducted for improving teacher practice with Latino children is the need for being aware of each child as an individual. Valuing the funds of knowledge being brought to school by each child rather than starting with stereotypes. When designing curriculum, "teachers who are willing to experiment with instruction and who consider the making of meaning as the central purpose in their teaching of



literacy” will undoubtedly reach their students and create the connections of mutual trust that will help the children in their literacy development (Moll, 2001, p. 19). Most importantly, students will invest in their learning when “the context is meaningful and students feel that they are truly valued by the teacher” (Jiménez, 2001, p. 165). From the research presented, it is evident that presenting Latino children with culturally appropriate texts and creating discussions in meaningful contexts provides a strong framework for the development of literacy skills.

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THE AUTHOR

Stephanie A. Bryant, received her M.A. in Language, Reading and Culture from the University of Arizona. Ms. Bryant is a bilingual 3rd grade teacher in the Mapleton Public School District, Denver, CO, U.S.A. Ms. Bryant can be reached at sabryant9705@msn.com

