

# *Learning To “Do” School: Procedural Display and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Students in Canadian Early Childhood Education (ECE)*

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Students in North American elementary schools are more culturally and linguistically diverse than they have ever been as a result of international restructuring and the subsequent increase of labour market mobility (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Cummins, 2005; Obiakor, 2001). Increased diversity has meant that a significant number of children in Canadian elementary schools located in urban centers speak a first language (L1) other than English or French (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2003; Kilbridge, 1997). Researchers have noted that despite these changing demographics, there is a dearth of research about culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in early childhood education (ECE) and disparity in providing for these students (Bernhard et al., 1995; Toohey, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Falconer & Byrnes, 2003). The limited scholarship about young children learning English as second language (ESL) that does exist has traditionally been methods-focused with very little produced from sociocultural and critical perspectives (Toohey, 2000). The study this paper reports on however, contrasts this trend as it is grounded in sociocultural perspectives on early literacy development

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(Bourne, 2001; Boyd & Brock, 2004; Gee, 2001) and draws on critical multiculturalism (McLaren, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1997; May, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2004) as an analytic lens.

The first tenet of sociocultural theory that informs this research “is that the mind is social in nature” (Wertsch, 1991, 1998 in Boyd & Brock, 2004, p. 4). The second tenet is that “language in use plays a central role in mediating our actions as humans. Consequently, the uses of language in the context of interactions, and the various analytical ways of looking at that language become central when considering human learning” (p. 4). Literacy is conceptualized as a social practice and socially mediated. Coming to literacy is therefore not exclusively about the acquisition of a code but also, and more importantly, a culture. To this end, classroom literacy practices can be understood as a particular set of cultural events. As such, it is imperative to critically examine what students appropriate as they encounter school literacy as well as the impact this appropriation has on their identities. Critical multiculturalism further informs an analysis of the literacy practices and events encountered by CLD students in their early years classrooms and allows for an examination of what they appropriated as well as the impact this appropriation had on their identities.

Critical multiculturalism, as it relates to education, is influenced by critical pedagogy which “is the term used to describe what emerges when critical theory encounters education” (Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1997, p. 24). Critical theory is “especially concerned with how domination takes place, the way human relations are shaped in the workplace, the schools and everyday life” (p. 23). Critical pedagogy further explores “how pedagogy functions as a cultural practice to produce rather than merely transmit knowledge within asymmetrical relations of power that structure teacher-student relations” (Giroux, 1992 in Sleeter and Bernal, 2004, p. 241). The influence of critical pedagogy has helped link multicultural education with wider socio-economic and political inequality. This link has traditionally been absent from discussions about and conceptualizations of multiculturalism and multicultural education (May, 1999).

The aforementioned framing informs the year long ethnography (Iannacci, 2005) this paper reports on. The study addresses “gaps” in provision of appropriate education for CLD children in two kindergarten

and two grade one classrooms by examining the following guiding questions:

*What are the literacy practices and events CLD students encounter within early years classrooms? In what ways does this "lived" curriculum facilitate and constrain cultural and linguistic assimilation and acculturation as CLD students acquire ESL? What part does it play in the negotiation of their identities?*

The study uses Critical Narrative Research (CNR) as an expression of ethnography to address these key questions. CNR is an emerging genre that frequently border crosses a variety of theoretical orientations and borrows from ethnographic traditions while aware of their colonial underpinnings (Clair, 2003). CNR research is concerned with culture, language and participation as issues of power in need of critique with the intent of change in the direction of social justice (Moss, 2004).

Data collection consisted of two phases of observation in four early years classrooms in two schools. During both phases of the research, the researcher engaged in "overt participant observation" (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001, p. 436) and ensured that research subjects knew that they were being observed. School documents, field notes, photographs and children's work were collected during both phases of field work. Interviews with teachers, parents, school board personnel and students were additionally conducted throughout the year. These multiple forms of data were used to construct narratives that were then deconstructed through reflection about and a distancing from the relations of power that informed what was observed. Literacy events, practices, themes and salient issues that emerged from the narratives were discussed after they had been juxtaposed, contextualized and interrogated for inconsistencies and contradictions. Reconceptualized understandings about the data were subsequently developed as a result of this "threefold mimesis" (Ricoeur, 1992).

One of the issues that emerged as guiding questions were explored has been conceptualized as "procedural display"; a learner's need to "pass" by echoing, mirroring and complying with peer and teacher accepted responses and behaviors. This need to pass can limit CLD students' academic achievement and cause them to suppress their

backgrounds in order to facilitate their classroom social identity as “the good student” (Rymes & Pash, 2001). Procedural display is often unquestioned and has even been constructed as a universal and desirable trait early years CLD students exhibit as they begin learning English as a second language. Weber & Longhi-Chirlin (2001) for example believe that two first grade ESL students derived meaning from “doing” tasks assigned to them even though they did not comprehend the text the tasks were about. Based on this observation, they argued that delaying ESL students’ teacher-supported exposure to mainstream curriculum was unnecessary. The nature of the mainstream curriculum and the ramifications of students passively performing without understanding were not examined.

Pransky & Bailey (2003) observed that early years CLD students derived success from procedural display strategies that included “choral answering, reading facial expressions, chiming in milliseconds after an answer was begun by another student, copying what another student did, or reading the flow and form (inflection and rhythm) of a teacher’s language” (p. 377). Although the researchers argue that these strategies were “understandable” since they helped the students “survive in a social and cultural context where they were unsure of the rules and did not see themselves as empowered” (p. 377-388), they also had reservations. They noted that the strategies “reinforced an internal passivity around monitoring...[student’s] own understanding and learning” (p. 378) and as such, believed that teachers needed to become more aware of them before they became CLD student’s “predominant vehicle for...learning and classroom functioning early in their school careers” (p. 378).

Anthropological classroom research has described and examined the nature of procedural display (Bloome, Puro & Theodorou, 1989), and questioned (but not pursued) whether “procedural display is a necessary condition of classroom education or whether there are ways of organizing classroom interaction that avoid or minimize procedural display”(p. 284). To this end, this paper critically examines why CLD students engaged in procedural display as they negotiated schooling, literacy instruction and the “identity options”(Cummins, 2005) made available to them in their early years classrooms and subsequently presents alternative understandings about the ways in which CLD

students are provided for in English instruction ECE.

The following narratives were constructed from data collected during fieldwork. They are offered, then discussed, and finally used to present reconceptualized understandings of literacy instruction that address and minimize the extent to which CLD students encounter the need to participate in procedural display within their early years classrooms.

### "R" Day

The literacy teacher begins the lesson by writing "R" on a large sheet of paper and then shares a small book containing pictures, some of which are things that start with /r/. The students are asked to identify items that begin with /r/ and echo what sound /r/ makes. A couple of students do so successfully. Amet who is sitting silently and grinning, does not respond when the teacher asks him for an answer.

Amet, the youngest child in an Albanian speaking family, lives with his parents and older sister. Born in Canada, Amet began Junior Kindergarten shortly after turning four. Although his utterances were often restricted to echoing things his classmates and I said, his oral proficiency in English improved a great deal as the year progressed. Highly communicative, demonstrative, rambunctious and excitable during play, "No" was one of the first words he used independently in January of that school year. I often observed Amet code switching (switching between languages) into Albanian to himself during individual and parallel play situations. A common strategy Amet used to quickly finish the mandatory *Jolly Phonics* work sheet was quickly writing a few of the letters the sheet required then, using one crayon, furiously "coloring" the featured picture with a hand full of broad strokes. He would then rush to his preferred sand, water or construction activity. The time spent at these activities was highly productive. On many occasions we discussed and explored concepts such as volume and capacity, colors, directionality, and materiality as Amet built and experimented. Although other children liked Amet, his proficiency in spoken English meant that he often played by himself. While I was there, however, other boys would often join Amet after he initiated his own play. They followed what he was doing and mirrored the cues I was

using with him. The class was genuinely interested in Amet and other students learning ESL and was always eager to help them. I usually sat right beside Amet during literacy group sessions since he needed one-on-one assistance to benefit from them. Whenever I moved to sit next to other students, Amet would tune out and fidget. The teacher incessantly refocused his and others attention to keep them on task. At times she would leave her seat to direct Amet through a task in hand-over-hand fashion.

On this day the literacy teacher asks Amet a second time for an "R" word. When I remove my ring and give it to him, he rolls it around in his hand. I ask him what it is. "Ring" he replies. After a slight pause, he looks up at the literacy teacher and repeats "Ring, /rrr/!" The literacy teacher affirms his answer with praise. She then asks another student to write "R" on chart paper with a picture of an "R" item under it. On individual sheets of paper each student is asked to copy "R" and draw pictures of "R" items. The entire activity lasts for 40 minutes. Between this lesson and classroom rituals that preceded it, the students have been seated for well over an hour. Toward the end of the session, Amet looked directly at the literacy teacher and said, "Too long". She giggled nervously and replied, "Ok" but continued despite having to plea for the children's stillness and attention.

### **Inattentive Alita**

Alita, a junior kindergarten student, had arrived from Argentina in February of 2002 and turned four just before her first year of school. She lived with her parents and older sister Ines. Fluent in Spanish, Alita also tended to code switch into her first language during play. Her spoken English was extremely limited and at times created difficulties for her at school (e.g. toileting). Like Amet, Alita also tended to rush through phonics work sheets in order to get to an activity as well as squirm and lose focus during literacy groups without intensive one-on-one support. Consequently, Alita's literacy teacher described her as "inattentive" and felt that her lack of attention during literacy group sessions had hindered her progress. Yet, the ability to remain attentive was not something she lacked.

On December 10th, Cindy (the kindergarten teacher) read her class *The Gingerbread Man* and had followed up the story with a hunt to find

him. Cindy placed gingerbread man "footsteps" around the school and had the students follow them. The footsteps led to the staff room and a baking tray where he and several of his friends lay ready for snack. Alita was enthralled by the morning's events and after two and a half months of near verbal silence, began animatedly retelling me the events of the story and the follow up activity as she painted using a combination of English, Spanish and onomatopoeia for well over 40 minutes.

Alita's first painting fulfilled Cindy's requirement that the students paint the gingerbread man's face and his three buttons on gingerbread man shaped paper she had prepared. Cindy was trying to reinforce ministry expectations related to student's ability to properly illustrate facial features and the concept of three. When Alita finished the required painting, she wanted to continue to tell me about the gingerbread man story and activity. Unfortunately there was a line up of children who were ready to do the required gingerbread man painting, and although there were two painting aisles, only one had paint in it. Cindy walked by and said, "There isn't any paint Alita, you need to go to another activity". Alita remained committed to painting and talking about the gingerbread man. Her classmates were getting impatient. Remembering an activity a kindergarten teacher once showed me called "magic paint" (using water instead of paint), I quickly grabbed a piece of paper and put it on the second aisle. I filled a baby food jar with water and handed Alita a clean paintbrush. She quizzically looked at me for a split second and then proceeded to paint and retell the morning's events. She remained focused and committed throughout the entire episode. Although no one could actually see the breakthrough painting Alita's concentrated efforts produced, she meticulously and tenderly picked it up and placed in on the drying rack when she was done.

### "F" Day

As per routine, the grade one students are called to the carpet to review the October verse of Maurice Sendak's *Chicken Soup With Rice*. They have read and re-read the poem numerous times throughout the month so Connie (the grade one teacher) covers all but the first letter in certain words in the poem and then asks students if they know what the word is. I pay special attention to Ines during this oral cloze lesson.

Ines, Alita's older sister, attended senior kindergarten after arriving in Canada in February of 2002 from Argentina. Ines began receiving ESL support at the beginning of her grade one year. Most of her verbal utterances were in English but she would code switch into Spanish when she didn't have the English vocabulary to name an item (e.g. gello for icicles) or to demonstrate her ability to speak her first language. The ESL teacher's encouragement of first language use fostered a comfort level that allowed for the switches. Ines participated a great deal more often in the ESL sessions than during whole class instruction in the regular grade one class. Ines was very aware of and concerned about fulfilling Connie's expectations. To this end, she often mirrored and mimicked what other students were doing and was constantly aware of and attentive to what was happening in the classroom and tried to appear as if she understood. It was clear from observing and working with her that this was not always the case.

Throughout the review of *Chicken Soup With Rice*, Ines echoes sounds similar to those her classmates utter when they are asked to repeat a correct word in unison (e.g. Chhhhhhhhhicken). She does not volunteer an answer throughout the lesson. At one point Connie assumes she has an answer to offer because she sees her echo the beginning sounds of a correct response. She asks her to think about the new word she's covered. Ines looks at her intently. Her tiny hands dig deep in her lap and start to fold into one another. The class becomes very quiet. Ines's tongue shifts from her left cheek to her right several times. Connie repeats the question and prompts her toward an answer. She provides more and more of the word until she finally uncovers all of it and provides her with the correct answer. The entire class repeats it and Ines' hands and tongue stop their nervous dancing. Connie then delivers a phonics lesson. She is following the prescribed *Jolly Phonics* lesson schedule so today is "F" day with a lesson sequence similar to that described in "R" Day. After the lesson, Connie explains that students are to find and circle pictures on a sheet that begin with "F" and ignore pictures of other things. Items included a football, an American flag and someone playing golf. Before distributing the sheet, she asks questions about the pictures to prepare students for the task. Although she gives clues about the football, no one answers and Ines sits quietly diverting her eyes away from Connie.



Despite Connie's descriptions of the items on the seatwork sheet, both Ines and another student who is learning English as a second language have difficulty determining items that begin with "F". At one point, Ines points to the American flag and quizzically asks, "Flag?" I assure her that it is a flag, an American one with the same shape but a different look than the Canadian flag hanging in the classroom. I have a difficult time explaining the golf picture, since I've never golfed either. From time to time, Ines names an item in Spanish "Flores – flower, dedo-finger". I listen to her then elicit Spanish responses from her about pictures on the sheet. We compare and contrast them with English words for the same items. Sometimes they both begin with /f/, sometimes they don't. Eventually we complete the worksheet, correctly identifying "F" items and leaving the others. The class stops at this point for recess.

After recess Connie asks the students to return to the carpet where she has prepared a sheet with Halloween-themed pictures (goblin, jack-o-lantern, ghost, bat, witch, black cat). She invites the students to first color the pictures then find the sentence to match the picture using a prepared chart. She demonstrates, "This is a black cat. Where does it say black cat on the chart?" After she sends the students to task, I continue working with Ines. Since Connie encourages "good grade one coloring" and "not coloring out of the lines", it's a while before Ines can begin the matching exercise. Since she is familiar with and can only name two of the items on the sheet, I once again try to explain what each of the items is.

### Letters to Santa

Since Sarah (the grade one teacher) is away, I introduce myself to the supply teacher. Right after the morning announcements, the ESL students line up and wait for Paula (the ESL teacher) to pick them up. I attend the ESL session with them, then escort them back to their classroom. Just before I enter the room, Sarah's grade partner stops me to ask about the bilingual and multicultural books I have been using in Sarah's classroom. We have a discussion about them and she requests a bibliography of the books since she hopes the school parent association will purchase them. After our conversation, I walk into the grade one classroom and find students already assigned to a writing task. Akil

immediately signals me over to his desk.

Akil, the youngest of two children in his Arabic speaking family, was extremely proud of and generous about sharing his cultural and linguistic background with me. Akil's family had visited Lebanon before he began junior kindergarten. He remembered this time with great fondness and talked about friends and relatives. Akil even insisted that he was born in Lebanon, although his father and documents in his Ontario Student Record (OSR) attested to the fact that he was born in Canada. In November, Akil completed a frame sentence Sarah had assigned that began, "When I wish upon a star I wish..." by writing "I wish I was in Lebanon". On one of my first visits to the grade one class Sarah asked Akil to let me see me what he was wearing. Underneath his white turtleneck with a Canadian maple leaf, was an olive t-shirt that read "I Love Lebanon". He smiled from ear to ear as he proudly showed it to me.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2003, I read the class "The Sandwich" by Ian Wallace, a story about Vincenzo, an Italian-Canadian grade two student who is ridiculed by his peers for bringing a "stinky" mortadella and provolone sandwich to school. CLD students, including Akil, were very quiet during the follow up class discussion about the book. Afterwards however, Akil decided to write about his own experiences in his journal. His entry reads, "This is when I first brought Arabic bread to school and my friend laughed at me".

Akil and Farah sit beside each other and are in the same group. Both of them are busy copying the "Dear Santa" writing frame as is everyone else in the group who began the activity while Akil and Farah attended ESL class. The supply teacher, busy with another group, has not visited yet. Akil seems tentative about what he's doing. He looks at the piece of paper in which he has written "Dear Santa, My name is Akil I ha...", then looks at me, then to the charts where Sarah has prepared two different writing frames (a "Dear Santa" frame and a letter to parents, family or friends frame). He does this very quickly several times before he stops and asks, "Do I copy that?" as he points to the "Dear Santa" frame. I reply, "Well, you don't have to. There are different letters you can write" Akil asks, "Well, which one do I copy? What do they say?" I read both frames and explain that there are different types of letters so that anyone who celebrates Ramadan can write a letter to anyone they

choose, as can everybody else. He tells me about Ramadan and how he is looking forward to Eid as he puts the letter he has started aside and begins a new one. "I think I wanna write a letter to my mom and dad." Just before beginning his new letter, Akil turns to Farah who thus far has written "Dear Santa" and says, "Farah, we don't celebrate this. We celebrate Ramadan. We're Muslim". Farah looks at him and quietly asks, "Which letter is ours then?" He informs her, "That other one only says 'Dear,' and then you can write it all down and put whatever you want."

Before Farah begins her new letter, she turns around and leans forward toward the next group where Halim is seated. Halim has also begun to write a Dear Santa letter. Farah says, "Halim, you have to write the other letter. We're Muslim." Halim briefly stops what he's doing and then continues. Farah leaves her chair and attempts to tell her other Muslim classmates the same thing and then rushes back to her group to begin her new letter.

Unfortunately, the alternative frame is much longer than the "Dear Santa" frame and although Akil and Farah are eager to begin personalizing their letters, the rather laborious task of copying the frame takes the remainder of the time left to work on the task. I exclusively work with Farah and Akil and their group since the supply teacher seems to have unofficially assigned me governance over them. I'm not sure if she has made Sarah's plans clear to everyone.

As they prepare to go outside for first recess, my doubts are confirmed. I notice that all of the Muslim students except Akil and Farah have written "Dear Santa" letters. I couldn't help but wish the supply teacher had made Sarah's plans explicit to students who had come back from ESL rather than having them mirror what everyone else was doing. I was however, glad that Akil had questions and asked for help.

## Discussion

Narratives such as "*F*" Day, *Inattentive Alita* and "*R*" Day, demonstrate how CLD students engaged in procedural display to appear competent, fit in, please the teacher and/or to act as if they understood concepts and the requirements of assigned tasks in spite of the constraints placed on them. The fragmented and isolated presentation of language expected to be understood and used by CLD students during

instruction meant that opportunities for exposure to context-embedded communication were diminished. Context-embedded communication occurs when “participants can actively negotiate meaning (e.g., by indicating when a message has not been understood) and the language use is supported by a wide range of meaningful interpersonal and situational cues” (Cummins, 2001, p. 67). Opportunities to negotiate learning, relationships and identities were greatly diminished during literacy events that employed context-reduced communication, which

relies primarily on linguistic cues to meaning. In these situations, successful interpretation of the message depends heavily both on students’ background knowledge and on their knowledge of the specific vocabulary, grammar, and discourse conventions that express the meaning of the message” (Cummins, 2001 p. 67).

These literacy events did not permit CLD students to negotiate interaction and their reliance on linguistic cues and discourse conventions in English prohibited them from being able to successfully participate and/or independently complete assigned work. Additionally, some of the items featured in the tasks students were asked to complete were culturally specific and took for granted student’s background knowledge. Without understanding the item, students could not name it, let alone isolate sounds within its name or complete assigned tasks independently. In these work-sheet tasks there was minimal external contextual support provided to students and little regard for their internal context [life experiences and prior knowledge] (Cummins, 2001). Without contextual support, the otherwise undemanding tasks became difficult for the students since the cognitive, culture, language and learning load of the events created barriers to meaningful instruction for CLD students (Meyer, 2000).

Narratives such as *Letters to Santa* and “*F*” *Day* additionally demonstrate the ways in which students engaged in procedural display to mirror their classmates, feign competency and comprehension and gain teacher approval at the expense and suppression of their cultural/religious backgrounds. Prior to Akil’s questioning for example, he and all of the CLD students in Sarah’s class simply reverted to doing what the rest of their classmates were doing. However, since Sarah had

somewhat established a space for difference to be recognized and accessed by providing differentiated writing frames, Akil was able to draw on his background without compromising his need to be in compliance with the expectations of the "good student". Farah, by way of Akil, followed suit. When this provision did not appear to be in place however, (e.g., a journal writing activity after a school organized Santa Claus visit), all of the CLD students in Sarah's classroom mirrored what their classmates were doing. As such, opportunities for students to negotiate with the literacy curriculum in ways that capitalized on their cultural resources were missed. Constructions of childhood experiences and interests reflective of the dominant culture were reinforced and limited the potential for a culturally relevant and responsive literacy curriculum. Additionally, alternative conceptualizations of 'children' and 'childhood' were not questioned or developed during these specific events since mainstream cultural celebrations associated with dominant notions of childhood were taken for granted and reproduced. A potentially rich incorporation of culture that accessed the multifaceted identities of CLD students was excluded from a literacy curriculum that sustained and reinforced the cultural values of the dominant group. In this regard, the configuration of practice and events featured in the narratives can be understood as reinforcing an assimilationist orientation (Cummins, 2001) since classroom conditions compelled students toward hegemony.

It must be noted that students did not consistently respond to the literacy practices and events they encountered by engaging in procedural display. The narratives also demonstrate that CLD students were proficient in developing strategies that allowed them to assert their autonomy and minimize the extent to which they "played" at being the good student. It may however be argued that when CLD students did not engage in procedural display they may not have acquired the necessary cultural and/or linguistic capital to do so. Newman (2002) points out that lockstep curricular commercial programs often render ESL students deficient since the "artificial complexity of the tasks that are presented to them...in a language that might not be spoken at home" do not consider "the negotiations that must take place on a continuous basis in the dual lives of second language learners" (p. 4). Other researchers have noted how scripted reading instruction creates rituals of silence that

simultaneously prevent students from critically accessing the dominant culture while Othering and altogether shutting out cultural and linguistic diversity. Instead, the language of obedience and dominance is used and a literacy of working class compliance is perpetuated (Jordan, 2005).

Moments when students resisted or tried to negotiate context-reduced communication tasks may have however have demonstrated *both* their compromised ability and perhaps unwillingness to try to make sense of what was essentially nonsense (Smith, 1988). Amet and Alita's reticence during literacy group sessions and phonics sheet tasks for example, may be read as moments that demonstrated their awareness of what essentially "worked for them" as learners, namely participating in play-based, context-embedded communicative literacy events. These moments can also be interpreted as students negotiating their school identities by refusing to act like the "good" student who mirrors expected behaviors that hold little value for them. Instead, they were drawn to creating events that capitalized on and further developed their growing English literacy and constructed them as interested, engaged and autonomous learners rather than "received knowers" (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997, p. 39). This significant shift moves students away from having to mask their "deficiencies", toward demonstrating and building their communicative competence.

Communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting-that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors (Savignon, 1972 in Omaggio Hadley, 2001, p. 4).

Silver (1999) speaks to the benefits students learning ESL experience once they have developed communicative competence. Silver found that ESL students were extremely dependent on their classmates and in almost every aspect of school life, were recipients of assistance. This dependency resulted in a sense of inferiority, a lack of confidence and for some ESL students, resentment. During classroom play however, "ESL students exhibited an independence and confidence that were not otherwise evident. In fact ESL children who were seen to be proficient at

a particular play activity were often asked by others to help them with their activity" (p. 68). Amet's self-initiated activity followed by his peers joining him highlight the benefits students learning ESL incur during play as described in Silver's study as well as the importance of context-embedded communication in developing second language learners' communicative competence.

It cannot be denied that at times, procedural display helped the CLD students in my study adjust to classroom culture and to a certain extent, some of the data corroborate previous findings with respect to the inevitability and utility of procedural display. However, what is significant about the strategies CLD students used were the ways they were predominant during context-reduced literacy events. This suggests that teachers need to be aware of the discursive conditions that instruction within their classroom propagates and its relationship to the strategies students use to survive within the learning environments they help create. For instance, Solsken, Willett & Wilson-Kennan (2000) contend that

School and state norms demand particular performances of literacy at particular ages and...norms for achievement, even within developmental perspectives where norms may be less age-graded, are based on patterns observed in the learning of White, middle-class children and reflect cultural and linguistic practices of dominant groups. In regard to early literacy, the norms often focus on superficial aspects of language like spelling and word recognition (or pronunciation and fluency in second language learners) more than on matters of meaning and social function. As a result, children whose learning reflects the cultural and linguistic practices of nondominant groups or whose knowledge and strategies focus on meaning and function more than on form, are at risk of our misunderstanding their capabilities and achievements. (p. 206)

It could be argued that students such as Alita and Amet were performing the "good" kindergarten student by participating in play activities. However, a vital difference in their "performance" is the power and autonomy they exerted during the activity as they negotiated meaning and reconfigured their school identities as active learners rather than

passive recipients of knowledge. This point is especially significant when the links Cummins (2001) has made between the ways in which students learning ESL have been excluded from actively participating in their education and their academic underachievement are fully considered.

## Implications

Within a context that values and systematically recognizes and responds to CLD children's needs, assets, abilities and background, language use and literacy opportunities have the potential to become re-conceptualized. Central to this re-visioning is the use of and focus on context-embedded communication to develop students' communicative competence. In an asset-oriented classroom "access to communicative interaction is crucial, although the learner may not necessarily have to participate directly in the interaction" (Cummins, 1994, p. 51). This would require students be provided "access to language that is appropriately modified for them, and is issued in ways that allow learners to discover its formal and pragmatic properties" (Wong-Fillmore, 1991, p. 64 in Cummins, 1994, p. 51). What is key here is "discover its properties", a notion that does not entail passivity or neglect on the teachers behalf but rather the use of modified language within a context that values purposeful and meaningful activity (e.g. focusing on and repeating a language structure such as "under" and "over" at the construction centre). During these events, a response or a mimicking of the structure would not be viewed as expected "normal" language acquisition behavior as CLD students would be given *time* to assimilate the language structure as they experience it being used. This would require teachers to become less focused on production and more attuned to the various ways CLD students communicate their needs and abilities through gesture, action and verbal formula (Ernst-Slavit, Moore & Maloney, 2002), and therefore cognizant of and responsive to features of second language acquisition (e.g. silent period, English language anxiety etc.).

Fostering context-embedded communication would inform pedagogical approaches to literacy learning and subsequently resist the fragmented and impoverished presentation and use of language. Instructional opportunities and approaches afforded CLD learners would be reflective of a whole-part-whole approach which necessitates



beginning with the use of whole texts, deconstructing textual features and applying and transferring learning into authentic reading and writing experiences (Ruiz, Vargas & Beltran, 2002; Strickland, 1998 in Hibbert & Iannacci, 2005). Phonics and phonemic awareness are therefore understood as essential skills taught through the use of environmental print, songs, rhythms, rhymes, poems, books and so forth. Further, these skills are viewed as partial and incomplete in relation to the vast array of skills and strategies children require to further their literacy development. Skills are unpacked and made explicit for the purpose of enabling students to *use* them to communicate with others rather than demonstrate their knowledge about them. What fuels and is at the forefront of this approach is recognition that the "central function of language use is meaningful communication" (Cummins, 1991, p. 170). This means rejecting the artificial "letter of the week" approach deemed problematic and ineffective by researchers (Bell & Jarvis, 2002) yet employed by several commercially available and often mandated phonics and phonemic awareness instructional programs used in many classrooms. In contrast, what informs the pedagogical trajectory of literacy instruction is what occurs in children's homes, communities and classrooms. What children are experiencing becomes the impetus for deciding what literacy opportunities are presented and organized for them. Skill-related instruction emerges as a result of these experiences as opposed to being set by a pre-determined instructional scope and sequence, which exists outside of the context of the classroom and distanced from children's literacies and lives.

Such an approach does not necessitate throwing out materials that isolate skills. Once the need for a skill has emerged from the context of the classroom and children's literacy lives, these materials may be used to support and/or reinforce skill acquisition. The fundamental difference is that these materials do not drive the literacy curriculum, but become an aid to children's literacy learning. Transfer of skills is imperative and therefore, what comes before and after the materials are used is far more important than what they actually do in of themselves. Further, the use of these materials is tempered by a teacher's awareness of "culture load" (Meyer, 2000) and the difficulties students may have understanding and using them.

Many of the literacy events that involved play also demonstrated the

importance of early years literacy instruction that facilitates opportunities for students to experience context-embedded communication. During these events students were increasingly more successful at both sending and receiving messages and were viewed then as competent communicators who could be integrated into play situations because they understood and could (eventually) send cues during play. Play experiences did not prevent CLD students who were developing oral English proficiency from eventually negotiating classroom activity or forming relationships. These observations corroborate Silver's (1999) findings:

[P]lay helped establish bonds of friendship among children who could not communicate well in English. It was noted that ESL children played in a solitary manner at building, painting, or doing cut and paste with junk materials. After varying lengths of time...they also became involved in games with children during the time designated for play. (pp. 66-67)

This shift from solitary to group play is especially significant when we consider the isolation some of the students in my study experienced, and the loneliness researchers have documented among CLD children in schools (Kirova, 2001; Kirova-Petrova, 2000).

## Conclusion

What I have outlined is a crucial shift reflective of and responsive to and asset-oriented, meaning-focused approach to understanding CLD students' literacy development. However, I harbor no illusions that any curricular changes will rectify some of the dominant understandings that shape the ways unresponsive literacy practices and events are constructed. Literacy practices and events that recognize and allow for cultural, linguistic and learning diversity are insufficient in contesting hegemony. Mere recognition is not transformative; in and of itself it does not help to reconceptualize schools and schooling in ways that are more equitable and relevant for *all* students, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Critical examinations of the dominant ideologies that undergird the hegemony of how experience is constructed and instructionally addressed in early years literacy

curricula is also required. Further, structural dynamics also need to be fully considered if these changes are to materialize. Although dominant discourses and structural dynamics that operationalize and support curricular change are explored in the larger study this paper reports on, they are beyond the scope of this paper to address properly. What this study cannot also address is the impact procedural display can have on CLD students' future lives. As a former ESL student, one of the reasons this issue is of concern and interest to me is because of my past reliance on procedural display within learning institutions and the subsequent and long lasting feelings of inferiority and imposter syndrome I experienced throughout my life as a student, elementary school teacher and newly appointed professor. With this in mind, I feel it is essential that we question and address how to create learning institutions that foster confident and critical learners and citizens rather than skilled performers of institutional desires.

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