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Engaging Children and Families in Culturally Relevant Literacies

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"If what we want…is to develop the full intellectual potential of all our citizens and future citizens, the challenge before us is enormous. We must plan carefully, and we must work quickly" (Valdés, 2001, p. 159).

Responding to Valdés' (2001) call to action, this article offers theoretical and practical strategies for engaging families, communities, and children in culturally relevant early literacy education. The authors highlight findings from data collected in their own classrooms and with families and communities for the Professional Dyads in Culturally Relevant (PDCRT) teaching project, a research partnership (2013-2015) between teacher educator-teacher *dyads*. The PDCRT project creates a much-needed space for supporting early childhood educators of Color who teach children of Color, English Language Learners (ELLs), and children from low-income communities. The central purpose of the PDCRT is to move from *diversity rhetoric* to *classroom action* in thinking about literacies. The first four authors, Piña, Nash, Boardman, and Polson, were part of the initial cohort of PDCRT Dyads. Panther, a doctoral student, has been assisting with transcription of data, data analysis, and a related research project. This article takes readers into the classrooms of Piña and Boardman, sharing actionable culturally relevant literacy practices that have resulted in academic achievement.

Connections to the Literature: Moving Beyond Traditional Literacies

Early literacy interventions have traditionally been implemented as top-down and teacher-centered (e.g. Flippo, 2001; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009; Deford, Pinnell, Lyons, & Young, 1988). Interventions that are implemented *on* children are still prevalent in early literacy education, particularly with minortized students (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010). These practices are rooted in developmental and behaviorist theories, emphasizing the biological age of the child in relation to acquisition of finite literacy skills (Dolch & Bloomster, 1937; Morphett & Washburne, 1931). Yet, traditional approaches ignore children and families' cultural capital and linguistic resources.

In contrast, Heath (1982), Taylor (1983), and Long, Volk, Baines, and Tisdale (2013) forefront the power of a student's sociocultural knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and multiple literacies as a way to support emerging literacy. Rather than viewing non-dominant language as a deficit, language is viewed as a rich resource (Ruiz, 1984). While the rest of the world is successfully teaching its children multiple languages both in and out of school (Kenner & Gregory, 2013), current American education often promotes the opposite (Nieto, 2013, p. 12). Ideologies that assume that "different" cultural and linguistic identities equate to deficit identities have also resulted in the standardization of teaching (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Using a standardized one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum, teaching practices, and assessments hurts students; most markedly those who are labeled as outside the dominant culture (Gay, 2010; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Morrell, 2008). In both the dual language preschool and ELL classroom settings where our studies took place, language was viewed as a resource. In both of our studies, children made improvements both academically and socially, reaffirming the research on the benefits of culturally relevant, community-focused, dual-

language bi/multilingual educational approaches. These practices involve mutual and reciprocal collaboration with families to foreground students' and families' funds of knowledge (Durán, Roseth, Hoffman & Robertshaw, 2013; Heng, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992).

Culturally Relevant Bi/Multilingual and Dual Language Classrooms
Building on a child's prior knowledge and cultural capital is the crux of culturally relevant teaching in bi/multilingual and dual language early literacy classrooms (Kenner & Gregory, 2013). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was first explored by scholars in the mid-1970's because of concerns about racial and ethnic disparities apparent in learning outcomes for children of Color (Gay, 2010). CRP is essential for linguistically diverse children of Color because, starting as early as pre-school, children of Color are consistently overrepresented in special education (Sullivan, 2011), underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford, 2013), and disproportionately represented in discipline referrals (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 1999; Race Matters Institute, 2013). The definitive goal of CRP in these classrooms is to increase achievement, facilitate construction of knowledge of self and culture, and develop critical consciousness (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013). Culturally relevant teachers consider the "life-world" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004, p. 45) experiences children bring to school in order to "move to a broader repertoire of authentic experiences in which children are able to utilize their life-world experiences in order to increase their knowledge and skills and broaden their experiences" (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008, p. x).

Although reading and writing are privileged modes of literacy and often overshadow oral literacies (Madison, 2011), bi/multilingual and dual-language teachers center these multiple modes of literacies (Tabors, 2008). This is important because Latino/a culture values oral stories as a way to pass to on values, attitudes, histories, and perceptions to younger generations (Espinoza-Herold, 2007) and has long been used as a pedagogical tool to encourage Latino/a parents to involve and engage in their children's schooling (De Gaetano, 2007). This storytelling is rooted in three major elements of Latino/a culture: the focus on family, the story itself, and dichos-or popular sayings (Sanchéz, 2009). The focus on oral literacy within a bilingual classroom is a way of validating and bridging the primary and school discourses of Latino/a students while also engaging the students in culturally relevant content (Zentella, 2005).

Deficit perspectives of children and families have not been effectively challenged in schools, which leads to teaching that privileges some students over others (Delpit, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2010; Valdés, 2004). However, in culturally relevant early literacy classrooms, the focus on what is culturally meaningful for the students and the local community is a starting point for curriculum-building. The common denominator for curriculum, instruction, and assessment becomes the same: families and communities.

Pedagogical practices. Specific pedagogical practices in culturally relevant bi/multilingual and dual language early literacy classrooms include using names to honor family and cultural identities (Tabors, 2008), warm demanding teaching, or

teaching with a strong but caring manner (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010), translanguaging (Gort & Sembiante, 2015), and foregrounding student voice and heritage language (Souto-Manning, 2013). Moreover, culturally relevant teachers set up classroom environments that build on students' voices and interests and provide opportunities for students and families to use multiple languages and literacies as they interact with others (Tabors, 2008, p. 103). Gort and Sembiante (2015) noted intentional translanguaging practices such as code-switching, translation, bilingual recasting, and language brokering as means for students to experiment with new language. Within these safe spaces and social activities, students and their families are engaged in language use that validates their identities (Kenner & Gregory, 2013; Tabors, 2008). For example, since name writing is a part of identity-formation (Bloodgood, 1999; Campbell, 2004), culturally relevant teachers find ways to use names as relevant literacy texts. Likewise, in culturally relevant literacy classrooms, assessment moves beyond an official script in order to describe children's learning in authentic and rich ways (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008). Authentic and culturally relevant assessment is essential in these classrooms, yet standardization has crept into even the lowest of school grades, typically as a screening mechanism for entry into primary schools. Standardization requires a single context; the content is the same for each test taker (Murphy, 2013).

Additionally, culturally relevant teachers get to know families and communities beyond the classroom walls, visiting the homes and communities of families to learn and engage with families' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzáles, 2006), and using parent and student generated knowledge to drive instruction. Within bi/multilingual dual-language classrooms, these practices can drive literacy instruction in fluency, comprehension, phonemic awareness, alphabetic awareness, and print concepts while including the voice, language, and images of children's and families' cultures (Caesar & Wolf Nelson, 2013). Using home and school connections also benefits families (Query, Ceglowski, Clark, and Li, 2011). As communication, collaboration, and community are built between home and school, so are the connections between students' shared identities and experiences (Nieto, 2013). The work we present in this article challenges teachers, children, and families to reformulate language and literacy as a resource (Ruiz, 1984), rather than as an obstacle (Nieto, 2002).

Methods

Critical theory rejects "methodological individualism and universal claims to truth" and instead recognizes that the world is filled with feeling, thinking human beings whose interpretations of the world must be studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). It follows that critical ethnography, the primary method used in the studies described here, is critical theory in action: moving from noticing unequal power structures to confronting them (Madison, 2011; Willis, Hall, Hunter, Burke & Herrera, 2008). In that confrontation, research challenges dominant practices, including the concept of universally valid knowledge that denies local, context specific cultural knowledge (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011). Critical

ethnography aims to understand the cultural knowledge of the people by entering and becoming a part of the context; as Madison describes the process, "belonging preceded being" (Madison, 2011, p. 16). Within ethnographic traditions, this takes immersion within the context over a long period of time so the researcher can best understand how the discourse community has evolved (Carspecken, 1996). Since cultural descriptions can often be used to perpetuate imbalances of power between the researcher and the researched, researchers speak *with* the researched rather than *for* them (Seidman, 2012; Spradley, 1970).

Data Collection and Analysis
In studying teaching practices, critical ethnography demands an intimate understanding of the context in which these teaching practices occur. Piña and Boardman held close knowledge of their communities, schools, classrooms, students, and families. Therefore, understanding Piña's and Boardman's experiences from their point of view drove the choice of data collection tools (Seidman, 2012).

Data collection tools used in our studies included structured classroom observations and semi-structured and topical interviews (Creswell, 2013; Madison, 2011). The observations were conducted by Nash and Polson using a participant observer status; meaning they engaged in activities within the classrooms when appropriate and also observed the activities, students, and physical structure of the classroom (Spradley, 1970). To record their observations, researchers made use of field notes to record both verbal and non-verbal actions and events, audio recordings of classroom discussions and lessons, and photographs of students and physical environments/classroom artifacts, including photos/recordings of Skype conversations. The topical interviews focused on the teachers' points of view on specific incidents as they arose in the classroom and conversations with Nash and Polson (Madison, 2011). The interviews incorporated personal narratives from Piña and Boardman (included in italics after this section). Written first person versions of these interviews are provided in excerpted from throughout this article.

Data analysis consisted of identifying the themes across all data by coding the data at two levels (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) with NVivo software. We use the term *themes* to describe a pattern that is generalized across the teachers' classrooms and pedagogical practices (Spradley, 1970). Data from observations and interviews were triangulated with the documents and audio to increase the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Since themes are rooted in Piña and Boardman's voices, their voices are foregrounded throughout the remainder of this article, through first-person excerpts of dialogue, and visuals of their classrooms. Before moving into the findings specific to Piña and Boardman's classrooms, we contextualize the school and classroom settings and the dynamic personal investment and mission that drove the teacher-teacher educator dyads.

Contexts and Participants
In Piña, Nash, and Panther's study context, an urban Midwestern community near Kansas City, Missouri, there has been significant growth in the number of

immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, yet English-only public school policies are widespread. Within this context, Piña's school, El Centro Academy for Children ("El Centro Inc," n.d.) feels like a haven where children's language and identities are safe and valued (Nash & Sosinski, in press). El Centro, a dual-language preschool housed in a brick, renovated Catholic School is part of a larger community-based, non-profit organization whose overall mission is "to strengthen communities and improve lives of Latinos and others through educational, social, and economic opportunities" ("El Centro Inc," n.d.). El Centro's mission and vision is to foster a research-based, dual-language preschool, building on the idea that being bilingual is an advantage (Valdés, 2001). Since seventy percent of El Centro's 80 students are Latino/a emergent bilinguals, that mission is enacted day in and day out by promoting dual-language curriculum, teaching, and evaluation, and by hiring Spanish-speaking bilingual staff. Each of El Centro's five classrooms has a bilingual Spanish-speaking and an English-speaking teacher. At the time of the study, Piña had been teaching there as the Spanish-speaking lead teacher in the three/four year room for several years. Nash, a teacher educator at a local university, is a newcomer to the Midwest. She first heard about Piña from a student in an early childhood literacy methods course who had previously worked with Piña in a different preschool. During the PDCRT project, Piña and Nash worked together to generate, collaborate, and research culturally relevant literacy teaching through weekly school visits, meetings, and by co-constructing memos based on their work.

In Boardman and Polson's study context, an urban Northeastern city that is close to metropolitan New York City, Northern Parkway Elementary School (NPS) is one of five elementary schools on Long Island. Boardman has been teaching at NPS for eight years as the 2nd/3rd grade bilingual teacher. The NPS administrative team is comprised of one principal and two assistant principals (Polson). Polson has been an Assistant Principal at NPS since December 2007. Polson was drawn to NPS because it has a high representation of students of Color and is the oldest school on Long Island, with a rich history and connections within the community. NPS services students in grades kindergarten through fifth-grade. There are 782 students attending NPS. The school's student population is approximately 56% Latino, 42% African-American, 1% white, and 1% Asian. Thirty percent of the students are English Language Learners who are native speakers of Spanish or Haitian Creole. Eighty percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. According to a state-wide report, 5% of the families of students who attend NPS are homeless. During the PDCRT project, Boardman and Polson worked to collaboratively generate and research culturally relevant literacy practices through daily and weekly electronic and face-to-face communication.

PDCRT Teacher Voices

Patricia Piña. *I am personally drawn to the PDCRT project and program because as I reflected about my own experiences as a Dominican and French girl growing up in the Dominican Republic, and later in the public schools of Kansas City, Kansas, I never felt like my culture was recognized* (Figure 1). *Like with my accent, they think that it makes me seem not very smart. Even though I am the lead*

teacher at El Centro, sometimes people come to my class and address only the Assistant Teacher and not me, the Lead Teacher. Once there was a lady from the school district who came into my class as part of a grant. She was always pointing out my low points—criticizing me, you know, like the way I talk. But when she saw my scores on the evaluation tool, she was surprised at my success—that my students had all met their goals before Pre-K graduation. You can't judge a book just by looking at the cover—you have to read a few chapters. I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school in the U.S. Since then, I have not looked back. I have received my Associate's degree and I am about to begin my Bachelor's degree. Eventually, I want to earn a Master's. My family is very proud of me! They had a special dinner for me when they found out I had been selected to be part of this program and learn about culturally relevant pedagogies. "Look at Patricia," my family always says!

Culturally relevant pedagogies are so important because children come from many different backgrounds. Like me. My father is French, brown skinned, and my mother's family is White, very pale. My hair came out very kinky. Not like the Latina people with the long black hair. My grandma, who raised me, always told me that my hair was special because I could do it in all kinds of styles, I could have my hair braided, I could wear it down, I could wear it curly. So I know how it feels to have brown skin or kinky hair, and I know that kids need me-their teacher-to let them know that I love their essence!

For me, this project is a great opportunity for progress! And now that I've learned how learning two languages actually makes your brain even smarter from reading Souto-Manning (2013) and others, I am determined to figure out how I can be a better bilingual teacher! My dream is that one day . . . there are not going to be any [more] labels on the little ones. For me, we have no choice, we must keep working.

Figure 1. Patricia Piña in her classroom.

Alicia Boardman. *The PDCRT project is important to me as an educator to English Language Learners (ELL), mother to children of Color, and Latina woman (Figure 2). Growing up as an English language learner, I often felt ashamed of that. Many teachers in school were not receptive to students who were bilingual. We live in a country that is constantly receiving children from different parts of the world and I want them to feel valued and realize that they bring wonderful and beautiful aspects to the classroom. It is important for me that our students do not feel ashamed, that they feel pride and a high level of self-worth because they can teach all of us. The culture and language of my students and their families informs my instruction to best fit their needs, something that my teachers as I was growing up did not offer me.*

My daughter was born when I was 19, and I remember people telling me "Now you are a statistic. You are a Latina and a single mother. What will you do now?" I am grateful for the constant love and support of my parents who helped me raise my daughter and also helped to silence the voices that were constantly putting me down. She is 16 now, intelligent, beautiful and the reason I have gained

the success that I have today. When she was in the 4th grade, we moved to a predominantly white neighborhood. I never saw my daughter as anything different than just a beautiful olive skinned girl with thick curly hair. However, her experiences at school shocked us as a family, from comments being made to her by teachers, to the incessant teasing that occurred at the hands of girls who didn't look like her. When I became an educator, I wanted to make sure that no other child felt the way I had as a student or the way my precious daughter had either. These experiences helped change the way I looked at race, especially the role of race in the classroom.

The work of Mariana Souto-Manning (2012) and Lisa Delpit (2012), social media, and conversations my colleagues influenced my work with emphasizing the importance of identifying and students interest and expertise be used in school. The use of real conversations with my students' and my own family and friends, and social and traditional media have created opportunities and learning material for my classroom. Literature from the scholars in the field, listening to my students, taking recommendations from families, and observing their lives contribute to my culturally responsive pedagogy.

Figure 2. Alicia Boardman in her classroom.

PDCRT Teacher Educator Voices

Kindel Nash. *I am personally drawn to this opportunity and program because of my experience as a mother of children who have brown skin, a teacher who has always worked in communities of Color, and a teacher educator who works at an institution with a mission and vision to be an "urban serving" teacher preparation program. As a former early childhood teacher of literacy and a current literacy teacher educator, I am particularly interested in culturally relevant pedagogies in early childhood literacy education. Although there have been some efforts to develop instructional and curricular practices in these areas, there continues to be a need for teachers and teacher educators to transform our practice and work towards an education that meets the needs of all students.*

I began to learn about engaging families in culturally relevant pedagogies and multiple literacies—and most importantly those literacies from children's home and communities--way too late in my early childhood teaching career. I could have benefited from reading Delpit (2012), Irvine (1990), Ladson-Billings (2014), Au (2013), Gay (2010), Souto-Manning (2010), Gonzalez, Moll, Neff & Amanti (1992), Milner (1983) and so many others during my teacher preparation program and during my seven years of teaching early childhood and elementary education. I did not know, for example, that it was appropriate to adapt and use the communication repertoires of the students that I taught. I did not learn that in my teacher preparation program, so I had to learn that I could do that and many other culturally relevant teaching strategies by experience. That is why I feel this PDCRT work is so important.

Figure 3. Kindel Nash.

Bilal Polson. *I am drawn to the PDCRT project because as an African American and Latino man, husband of a Latino woman, father of two boys and an assistant principal of African-American and Latino students, I am always looking for ways to enhance my skills to serve my children. Growing up in a school system that did not always know how to serve my needs and identify my strengths, I think it was important for me to learn about cultural relevant pedagogy to be able to support my students, teachers and families.*

Attending a primary school that was not prepared to meet my needs as an energetic and kinesthetic learner who needed tactile and highly visual experiences is the reason why culturally relevant pedagogy is included in my research agenda. The combining influences of my physical education teacher, elementary school principal and dance teacher established a system and program that enabled me to flourish in an education system that was failing me. My parents endorsed the participation of multiple activities along with people serving as mentors in my life allowing opportunities for me to succeed inside and outside of school. The school leadership team recognized that it was a collective approach of out of school activities influencing academic achievement in school. School teachers and leaders eventually shared their awareness and publically acknowledged my gifts and talents and how it was my out of school "expertise" that supported my school growth and academic achievement.

Reading the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1982), Luis Moll, Lisa Delpit (2012), Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) and Pedro Noguera (2003) has helped me make connections from my past and led me to find ways to help all children in my role as school leader. The network and project of PDCRT was a perfect avenue and venture to nurture and develop my natural inclination of wanting to serve children and their families in culturally relevant way. What has been important in my learning is discovering that teachers and colleagues are not my only resource within this process; the students and their families themselves are central to my learning and are comrades and partners in this work.

Figure 4. Bilal Polson.

Piña and Boardman's classrooms showcase pedagogical practices forefronting multiple literacies that practitioners everywhere can learn from. Piña, Nash, and Panther (Kansas City, Missouri) showcase findings about honoring family and cultural identities through getting to know families, activities around student's names, culturally relevant assessments, translanguaging, and warm demanding teaching. Boardman and Polson (Uniondale, New York) share findings about the importance of building curriculum around student interests, highlighting families' home and community literacies, and going beyond traditional notions of 'family involvement' through the use of video gaming and social media.

Results and Implications

The results of the authors' research into culturally relevant teaching were rich and multifaceted. Inviting readers into Piña's and Boardman's classrooms shows the

complexity and skill of culturally relevant early childhood literacy teaching. We offer, through their example, concrete strategies to engage teachers, children, families and communities in multiple literacies both in and out of classrooms. First, highlighting Piña's classroom, we discuss and illustrate four ways she forefronted children's multiple literacies: honoring family and cultural identities through using student's names and getting to know families, culturally relevant and authentic assessments, translanguaging, and warm demanding teaching. Then, discussing Boardman's classroom and school, we showcase three primary strategies to foreground children's multiple literacies: honoring student voice through building curriculum around student interests, highlighting families' home and community literacies, and going beyond traditional notions of 'family involvement' through the use of multi-modal texts (Gee, 2007) like video-gaming and social media.

Valuing Multiple Literacies: Piña's Classroom

Piña's strengths as an educator stem from her desire to foreground students' and families' voices, experiences, and cultures within the curricula. She accomplishes these goals by valuing the names and identities of her students, speaking across Spanish and English and through the way she established and maintained high expectations with her students. Furthermore, she advocates for a more robust view of her students' abilities within assessment. This is especially relevant for the unique context of her classroom within a dual language preschool.

Valuing Names. Every day, Piña foregrounded the language and literacies of students and families. One strategy she applied included using students' names as texts to study language and identity. For example, Piña had an ongoing Spanish/English conversation with a little girl in her classroom. It typically went like this:

> Piña: ¿Te llamas JULIA? / Is your name JULIA?
> Julia: Nooooo, mi nombre es Julia, NO JULIA!
> Piña: ¿Estás segura que no te llamas JULIA? / Are you sure your name isn't JULIA?
> IJulia: Nooooooo, mi nombre es Julia, NO JULIA!

Piña taught Isabella that her name —pronounced in Spanish-- was part of her identity, emphasizing that she shouldn't alter its pronunciation. This commitment arose from her own personal understanding and upbringing, as she discussed:

> I know how it feels to be different... I remember when I was growing up... this teacher had a little boy in her class, Guillermo. When she called him or tried to say his name, he wouldn't answer. She thought he was ignoring her, and it made her angry, but he wasn't, he [wasn't responding] because she just couldn't say his name correctly. Children feel disconnected when people say their names wrong—like saying "GEEE-ERR-MO" instead of Guillermo!

Piña enacted this belief in the importance of names in her own class by carefully attending to correct pronunciation of students' names:

> If a child is named Laura (Luow-rah) you have to say Luow-rah, and not Lo-ra. It just diminishes who the child is if you don't do that.

She also put this belief into action through multiple engagements around children's names that other early childhood educators can use (Table 1). Since names are often among one of the first sight words a child masters, name writing promotes the overall development of writing skills (Both-de Vries & Bus, 2008; Levin, Both-de Vries, Aram, & Bus, 2005), specific literacy skills such as letter recognition (Drouin & Harmon, 2009), print-related knowledge (Puranik, Lonigan, Young-Suk, 2011; Welsch, Sullivan, & Justice, 2003), and letter-sound relationships (Luongo-Orlando, 2010). Thus, name writing is a developmental indicator of future literacy skill development (Haney, 2002; Tolchinsky-Landsmann & Levin, 1985). Learning to write his or her own name is not just a task, but a part of identity formation (Bloodgood, 1999; Campbell, 2004; Davies, 1987).

Table 1. Strategies to Foreground Children's Names

Alphabet book	Make a book with one letter on each page. Include students' artwork, and have students write their names on each appropriate page. Then, fill in gaps with well-known environmental print (Campbell, 2004).
Alphabet chart of names	Make a classroom alphabet chart that includes students and families photos and names, as well as photos of environmental print from the community and school.
Authentic writing	Encourage children to write their names multiple times throughout the day for authentic purposes to indicate ownership of any art or written work, to identify snack choices, and on a variety of paper in daily centers.
Birthday chart	Create a whole class chart with the children that includes birthdays and names corresponding with months of the year.
Computers	Encourage children to practice typing their own names to log in to the classroom computers.
Kinesthetic letters	Encourage children to use movement such as clapping, air writing, tapping letters, and musical instruments to "write" names.
Labels	Label the classroom in English and

	Spanish.
Craft stick names	Children use labeled craft sticks with their names to gain admission to a center during center time.
Manipulatives	Use a variety of tools to write for real purposes during play, including magnetic or felt letters, whiteboards, crayons, markers, paintbrushes, pencils, and clay.
Name puzzles	Create individually bagged name puzzles: keep name puzzles in the games area where children are able to create their name and classmates' names.
Self-portrait books	Photograph children in various activities throughout the day: have them complete a short sentence about their page in English/Spanish (e.g. Yo puede_____/I can_____) to make a bilingual book.
Read the room	Encourage children to read the room daily for their names and letters from their names in environmental print.
Self-portrait display with names	Explore self and names by creating signed self-portraits that are displayed in the classroom.
Sign-in list	Children sign-in on a list every day when entering the classroom (can use a variety of media including i-pads, paint/chart paper, etc. . .)

Getting to know families. In Piña's classroom, visits to children's homes and encounters with children in the community were the norm. Piña was part of the community in the relatively small Midwestern city where they lived. She spoke often of how she would see children and their families in the grocery store or at McDonald's. She was part of the network of support that many of the families in this community tapped into in order to navigate the newness of this country. She garnered this first-hand knowledge of communities and families to better support children and families in the classroom on a regular basis. In addition to the home and community visits and other out-of-school contacts that Piña made in order to connect with families, El Centro's school-wide family night was always well-attended by parents and families. Families came and seemed eager to connect with the school and the teachers (Figure 5). Piña felt that the family events were

successful because she would hold them during parent pick-up time and invite families to bring in family photos, stories, and dichos to share during the event (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). At one such get-together, jointly hosted by Nash, Josué's mother elaborated on photos of a baby Josué by telling the story of his premature birth at 24 weeks. She told her story in Spanish, while Piña simultaneously interpreted the story for the rest of the get-together participants. Given the opportunity to tell her story in Spanish, she was able to bring emotion to it in ways that communicated to other parents across languages. Other early childhood educators (both regular and bi/multilingual) can easily take these strategies into account as they seek ways to make their teaching culturally relevant.

Figure 5. Families sharing stories at a get-together.

Culturally relevant and authentic assessment. Piña understood the importance of authentic assessment as a way to get a complete picture of a child's literacy understandings. She set particular goals for students that were grounded in standards (Head Start Early Learning Outcomes, 2011), and she assessed those goals in multiple ways: anecdotal notes, observation checklists, informal conversations with children, and work samples all maintained in a portfolio for each student.

One of Head Start Early Learning Outcomes reads "Manipulates writing, drawing, and art tools" (2011). An interaction between Nash, Piña, and a child demonstrates how Piña expertly guided a child to meet this standard by using scissors to cut paper (this activity was guided by the child himself).

Santiago: I can cut this piece of paper [questioning].

Piña: How are you going to cut it? (Holding scissors) With this? This pair of scissors (showing him scissors with easy –to--squeeze handles) is really easy because you can hold it like this and cut it in half (modeling). Right? But I'm going to need you to cut that piece right there. Now let me see you try it. You hold it in your hand (putting it in his hand) your right hand, and you squish (modeling) and you hold it with this one (putting paper in his hand). Like that. Let me see, I hold it. See? You did it! Yay! You did it all by yourself!

Nash: Yea! You're cutting! Can you cut more?

Piña: Remember? This way. Hold it that way. And squeeze. Wait, wait, hold it that way. Remember, you have to hold it down here and squeeze, squeeze hard (modeling it again). Uh oh (it gets stuck). Are you holding it right? Let me see, I'm going to show you one more time (models).

This is an example of how Piña assessed the child's skill (manipulating tools) in an authentic way. By taking anecdotal notes at the end of each day, she was able to add specific encounters such as these to children's developmental portfolios. In this way she made her assessment culturally authentic because she placed the child, rather than the assessment tool, at the center of the assessment event (Geneshi & Goodwin, 2008).

Students in Piña's class were also expected to learn letters and sounds. One way that she authentically assessed students' alphabetic knowledge

throughout the day was through having them write in their journals at writing time each day. Figure 6 is a photo of Santiago's journal and his letter "S" (also the first letter of his name). While these authentic assessments captured by observational notes and work samples and placed in Santiago's portfolio showed that he was making progress in literacy and fine motor development, one day Piña expressed a concern that despite these assessments, Santiago was being referred to special education because of his results on an isolated assessment (the DIAL-IV, English version).

Figure 6. Santiago's Journal and Letter "S"

The fact that Santiago was being referred to special education was of great concern to Piña because she had a complete and accurate picture of his literacy development which included becoming bilingual in English and Spanish in about one year, moving from having explosive daily tantrums each day to having none, learning to recognize all of the alphabet letters, and learning to write his name. Because of this progress, Piña did not agree with the single-shot assessment being used to determine whether or not he qualified for special education. Early childhood assessment experts have long pointed out the need to consider multiple qualitative and quantitative assessments and particularly assessments like work samples, anecdotal notes, and observation checklists (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008; Tabors, 2008).

  Translanguaging. The term translanguaging refers to the practice of switching between two or more languages or registers within a given context, especially when those languages are typically referred to as formal or informal dialects or languages (García, 2007). The way Piña translanguaged, playing with language and talking across Spanish and English every day fostered students' success with both Spanish and English. For example, every day, Javier, a young boy in her class, would say (speaking across English and Spanish), "Ms., Ms., will you wrap me up '¿como un burrito?" Piña would reply, "¿Como un burrito?' you want me to wrap you like that?" "Yes, yes!" he would exclaim, giggling. By talking across Spanish and English, Piña encouraged language to be fluid rather than separating the two languages on parallel lines that do not cross. This is consistent with research indicating that translanguaging is not detrimental to bilingual development (Durán, Roseth, Hoffman & Robertshaw, 2013) but instead supports students' abilities to see the links between the two languages and cultures (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Piña explained her decision to use English and Spanish outside of arbitrary boundaries:

> That is why I talk to the kids and teach the kids in both English and Spanish. I repeat sentences to them to make sure they understand. If I say something in English and they seem confused, I say it again in Spanish.

In other words, Piña decided in-the-moment on the language or languages appropriate to the task, the context, and the student. Yet, parents often objected to this practice. Reflecting on a family event where parents objected to translanguaging, Piña communicated those concerns:

Some parents said, 'Oh no! Don't speak to my students in Spanish. I want them to learn English!' And that's not a very good idea, either, but when children can speak English, and Spanish and they are learning both languages, we know that they are smarter than other kids. So now [I tell parents about] the value and the importance of their first language. They are Spanish, and they should know Spanish, and then they can learn anything.

The response included increasing the parents' familiarity with the research base surrounding the benefits of emergent bilingualism and its value. Figure 7 shows a visual diagram Nash and Piña shared with families at a get-together.

Figure 7. Visual Showing Benefits of Translanguaging/Bilingualism Shared with Families.

Warm demanding teaching. Piña was a warm demander. Warm demanders are described by Delpit (2012) as teachers who do not lower expectations but increase their support of students with a tough but caring demeanor. This was clear when Piña discussed how she viewed herself as an advocate for children and families. She said,

The parents are trusting us. Something rises up [in me], and I've got to fight for them… I can't sit here… politics and tests are always going to be there. Our job is to help families and children maneuver the system. I keep going back. I speak for the children.

Delpit notes that many students with warm demanders call their teachers "mean" or "tough" citing examples such as a raised voice, disapproving look, or refusal to do tasks for students (Delpit, 2007). However, she was not the kind of warm demanding teacher that raised her voice to "express genuine emotion and a belief in a child's ability to do better" (Delpit, 2012, p. 81). What was striking about Piña was the way she *didn't* raise her voice, *ever*. Instead, she consistently used a quiet, soft voice when she talked to children. With this soft-toned voice, however, she guided children to engage in the classroom and with their peers in positive, acceptable ways, and she never lowered her expectations that they do so. Below is an example of an interaction with Uzziel, showcasing author one's warm demanding teaching skills:

Uzziel: (shouting) I'm the line leader!
Nash: Uzziel come here.
Uzziel: I wanna be the line leader.
Piña: But he was first.
Uzziel: [begins crying]
Piña: Uzziel can you use your words?
Uzziel: Javier, it's my turn to be the line leader.
Javier then walks to find another place in line.

This was culturally relevant, warm-demanding at its best, because of the way she

carefully explained, facilitated understanding and clarity, and used common language norms. In doing so, Piña laid out clear expectations using the verbal practices of the students and parents (De Gaentano, 2007). She gave voice and power to children, encouraging them to use language to communicate for themselves.

Piña honored family knowledge, literacies and language through name-play and writing, translanguaging, culturally authentic assessment, and through her stance as a warm demander. Boardman also valued students' knowledge in equally powerful ways: through reflecting, discussing, dialoging and teaching about topics that matter most to the students and the communities in which they live (Fielding, 2004).

Valuing Multiple Literacies: Boardman's Classroom
Like Piña, Boardman was focused on building culturally relevant curriculum around student interests. During her PDCRT work, she found many ways to honor student voice through student driven curricula, foregrounding family literacies, and going beyond the traditional view of family involvement. Boardman's pedagogical practices, rooted in culturally relevant literacy teaching, fostered student success in her 2nd grade English language learners (ELL) classroom at Northern Parkway School.

Building curriculum around student interests. Boardman created deep dialogue in her bi/multilingual classroom through bringing unofficial curriculum to life as she and students talked about first-hand experiences (Souto-Manning, 2013). One day, as Boardman engaged in a classroom conversation with a colleague about the death of Maya Angelou, a student in wondered aloud, "Who is Maya Angelou?" That initial conversation prompted a student-led discussion about what students knew about Angelou. One student guessed, "She's a teacher!" Another suggested, "A TV person!" Yet another wondered if Maya Angelou was Boardman's friend. This kind of student-led dialogue, which fostered a month-long interdisciplinary investigation of the poetry of Maya Angelou, represents one of the ways Boardman build on student interests.

Life doesn't frighten me. Based on their initial curiosity about Maya Angelou, Boardman's students were so eager to know about her, so students listened to various poems by Maya Angelou during morning meeting for almost a week, while Boardman translated parts of the readings into Spanish as necessary. Boardman and her class talked about where Angelou lived and her many accomplishments as a writer, speaker, and actress. Boardman also encouraged her students to visualize as they listened to Angelou's poetry, telling tell them to close their eyes and just let the words sink in, letting their minds wander. Maya Angelou's captivating, beautiful and powerful voice intrigued students to learn more about her poems and her life. Their curiosity enticed Boardman to want to share more about Maya Angelou's life and writings so their investigations continued. After reading several poems, students decided that they particularly enjoyed "Life doesn't Frighten Me," which they asked to hear more than once. This led Boardman to craft a lesson with the goal of introducing Maya Angelou, her background, her

impact on the world and engaging students in writing poetry. Students first listened to and read her poems, speeches and other writings and eventually wrote a poem modeled after, "Life doesn't Frighten Me." Using the poem's refrain, while omitting certain portions, students crafted their own "Life doesn't frighten me" poetry (Figure 8). Boardman's students showed her how powerful words can be. In foregrounding their voices, she learned how powerful their words were as well. Through this engagement, Boardman showed students that she viewed them as citizens -- people with ideas, voices, and interests that matter (Cook-Sather, 2006; Morgan & Streb, 2001).

While there are many studies of culturally relevant teaching that forefront the importance of viewing students as citizens (Banks & Banks, 2009; Gay, 2010; Genishi & Dyson, 2008) and building curriculum around student interests and cultural knowledge (Delpit, 2012; Hollins, 2011), Boardman's adaptation of the practice in her bi/multilingual classroom represents a departure from the norm. In many early childhood bi/multilingual classrooms students often follow a prescribed sequence of language instruction, using a scripted curriculum (Durán et al, 2013). Boardman's "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" engagement suggests an important implication for culturally relevant bi/multilingual teachers: they should feel free to open up "adult" conversations to everyone in the classroom, converse with children throughout the day, and shape curricula around things that children are naturally curious about.

Life doesn't' Frighten me at All
By JD
Tring to get in
Knocking on the door
But nowhere else to go.
Life doesn't frighten me at all.
That doesn't frighten me at all.

Figure 8. Writing Poetry like Maya Angelou.

Writing about local sports teams. Another way Boardman showcased culturally relevant teaching for her English language learners was by encouraging students to write about local sports teams. Spring in the New York (NYC) context of Boardman's school is always an exciting time since there are two major sports teams representing NYC, the Mets and the Yankees. Boardman's classroom was no exception. Students, who were competitive fans of one or the other team, frequently engaged in healthy debates about which was the best team during class time. But, rather than shut these discussions down so the students could get back to "regular" work, Boardman challenged her students to write persuasive, argumentative essays with the goal of changing their classmates' minds about their favorite team. This was a good way for students to think about the difference between fact and opinion because they had to actually provide evidence for why their team was the better team.

To write their essays, students first conducted research about each team, collecting information through Google, newspaper articles, books, and other

reading materials. They created Venn Diagrams comparing the two teams as a way to record the information they were learning (Figure 9). Then they wrote persuasive essays and shared them over the course of two weeks during the share portion of Writing Workshop. By encouraging students to write about sports, an aspect of the regional culture they were passionate about, students became more engaged with the kind of academic writing needed for success on state-mandated achievement tests. In this way, Boardman fulfilled a central tenet of culturally relevant teaching: increase student achievement (Gay, 2010). Yet, while persuasive or argumentative writing engagements are commonplace in regular classrooms and are indeed part of the official curriculum of many writing programs (e.g. Calkins & Tolan, 2010), it was challenging for Boardman's ELL students, who often wanted to support their argument by a simple "My team is better because I think so." At the same time, we know that teaching argumentative writing and critical thinking strategies helps motivate and engage students who are learning a second language (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). Thus other ELL teachers should not shy away from a challenging genre of writing but instead should encourage bi/multilingual students to write persuasively about their passions.

Figure 9. Writing about local sports teams.

Connecting with second graders in Manhattan through Skype. Through the PDCRT project, Boardman was able to connect with other NYC educators on a professional and personal level, and she thought she would involve students in these relationships as well. Since Northern Parkway is located on Long Island, somewhat removed from NYC and not one of the five Burroughs where the class they would connect with was located, Boardman engaged her students by trying to find out what their experiences were with greater NYC. Many of them had visited before, going by train for a day-long visit; however, they had a hard time believing that students just like them went to school and lived there.

Leading up to the Skype session, Boardman and the other PDCRT teacher, Martell, prepared their students by dialoging and building background about what they knew and wanted to know about NYC. Boardman recorded her students' wonderings on a KWL chart. The class then used the KWL chart to come up with questions that they wanted to ask Martell's class. These questions ranged from "Where do you live?" "How do you get to school?" and "What do you like to do on the weekend?" to "What are your favorite colors?" This was important because it helped students develop questions and learn questioning skills. The day they Skyped was exciting for students, as they voiced their questions out loud (Figure 10). This experience both increased students' engagement (Cook-Sather, 2006) and expanded their knowledge about asking and answering questions (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). In regular classrooms, asking and answering questions is a key component of comprehension instruction (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009), usually taking place in the context of independent reading. Yet extending this strategy into the digital realm builds on a cultural fund of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) that ELL students often have but that is not often used as a forum for learning in bi/multilingual classrooms. Children are digital natives (Palfrey & og Gasser, 2008);

they communicate frequently across languages through the use of Skype and Facetime with family members in their native countries.

Building on the students' prior experiences with digital technologies is culturally relevant because it appeals to skills students have already begun to develop from home and family contexts and brings them into the classroom in authentic ways (Souto-Manning, 2013). This strategy is important for other teachers because it builds a bridge between home and community experiences and literacy skills like questioning, speaking, and listening.

Figure 10. Asking and Answering Questions with other second graders at a school in Manhattan via Skype.

Foregrounding families' home and community literacies. Like Piña, Boardman was an expert at foregrounding families' home and community literacies in the classroom. Knowing the importance of this for her Latino/a students, Boardman created The Hispanic Heritage Museum. During June of 2014, Piña, Boardman, Nash, and Polson visited El Museo del Barrio in Harlem, viewing exhibits of artifacts and culturally significant items from families in Spanish Harlem including: posters, figurines, records, and clocks. Inspired by this exhibit, Boardman thought this would be an amazing experience for her students to celebrate their culture with the entire school community. When September came, Boardman sent home a survey to parents about celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. They had a choice between Latin musicians/artists or the home-based museum. Almost 100% of the parents wanted to participate in the museum. Soon, families began sending in their artifacts: a mug that their abuela drank café con leche from, the plate that their Mamí made tortillas with, a flag, money from their home country, etc.

Boardman's students displayed these artifacts as a museum exhibit (Figure 11). On the actual day of the museum tour, it took on a life of its own. Throughout the day, teachers, parents, and staff members walked through the museum. Their Hispanic Heritage Museum inspired them to add additional artifacts from their homes and classrooms. It became a living exhibit, organically changing and growing on the generative knowledge of students, families, and teachers' cultures. Students loved learning about their classmates and teaching their peers about themselves; they suddenly took on the role of experts (Gonzáles, 2006; Morgan & Streb, 2001). Typically, such practices are deemed enrichment for monolingual or gifted students, yet implementing such strategies is actually aligned with what we know as best practices for ELLs (Renzulli, 2003). Teachers can easily bring the idea of creating a Heritage Museum to life in their school contexts.

Figure 11. Hispanic Heritage Museum.

Going beyond traditional notions of 'family involvement.' Piña went out of her way to connect with families and the community surrounding El Centro. Similarly, Boardman and Polson, garnered by Northern Parkway's school-wide focus of bringing families into the school, went even farther in involving families in

the life of the school and classroom. Since a central element of culturally relevant teaching involves being attentive to the actual lived experiences of students and their families (Hollins, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009), schools must utilize approaches that are commonly used in our students' lives and integrate them into effective practices. Video game day and social media are key examples of this work.

Video game day. Knowing that many of the students at Northern Parkway were active video gamers, Boardman, Polson, and others at the school wanted to find ways to bridge that knowledge with school curriculum. Additionally, they predicted video games would go beyond the traditional practices surrounding "family involvement." Northern Parkway School hosted a Video Game Day where students and their families spent a Saturday at the school playing video games with peers, teachers, and staff. Throughout the play, the students were encouraged to make connections between video-game play and academic learning. Video game experts, enthusiasts, and scholars participated in the event by hosting workshops for students, staff, and families about developing computer science programs. This demonstrated a step-by-step approach to creating video games. University undergraduates, young researchers, and computer scientists from the region discussed the importance of elementary students learning to how to code and the relationship between video game design and development.

Video game day proved to be a way to establish vital connections between students, their families, and school personnel while also challenging traditional notions of literacy as print or text-bound (Gee, 2007). Video-game based learning is validated by educational research (Klimmt, 2009; Squire, 2008). In fact, research suggests that moderate levels of video game play have been associated with relaxation, stress reduction, and mood and self-esteem enhancement (Johnson, Jones & Burns, 2013). Educational researchers have also illustrated the relationship between academic performance and video game play (Gee, 2007). Boardman and Polson saw a large turnout and enjoyed the informal connections.

The value and power of video game literacy is often acknowledged as a culturally relevant teaching strategy for secondary contexts; it is rarely focused on young children. Yet young children and their families use this practice and knowledge in their everyday lives. Approaches to learning that build on student expertise are powerful tools for fostering ELL's sense of independence and accountability. However, since these are not often generated from traditional practices and methods (Bomer, 2010; Taboada, Gunthie & McRae, 2008), practices such as video game day would be an excellent tool for teachers and schools to begin to expand notions of "family involvement."

Using social media to connect with families. Video-game day demonstrated how Boardman and Polson went beyond traditional notions of family involvement in their PDCRT work together. They did so because they recognized these strategies as foundational to culturally relevant teaching for ELLs (Souto-Manning, 2013). In a similar way, social media served as an effective tool for connecting with families, communicating effectively with students, branding the school (Cutler, 2013). Boardman expanded the way she communicated with her families beyond backpacks, folders, and formal conference meetings. She created a private

Facebook page for her families. Through this medium, she was able to send information about events, share pictures of activities in the classroom, and communicate both formally and informally with families throughout the day (Figure 12).

Twitter was a strategic way to share ideas, pictures, and information about the school and class in real time. In Boardman and Polson's school, tweets have also served as press releases, research tools, and archiving centers for all of the activities, events, and student work that are generated (Figure 12). These strategies are important because they demystify classrooms for parents by breaking down barriers between school and home. As families also post and interact throughout the school day, these technologies become a tool for restructuring schools as empowering and inclusive spaces (Banks, 2007; Souto-Manning, 2013). Teachers and schools can better serve their students and families by embracing social media rather than viewing it as something that needs to be restricted.

Figure 12. Class Facebook page and tweet.

Conclusion

Piña and Boardman identified and valued multiple culturally relevant literacies that increase children's academic success without neglecting their cultural identities. As illustrated by curriculum choices, assessment methods, and pedagogical practices highlighted throughout this piece, these methods can be a powerful way to engage students and motivate literacy learning. Employing these approaches works: several students in Boardman's class moved from being non-English readers to reading proficiently and on grade level within the course of one school year. Surpassing the academic performance of many kindergarteners, students in Piña's class consistently demonstrated alphabetic knowledge and concepts of print. The academic success of Piña and Boardman's students is encouraging, but we know that in many cases the way they teach is not the norm. Valdés (2001) called educators and those who care about education—those who care about children, to plan carefully, and work quickly (p. 159). Rooted in their personal stories and guided by their relationships with students, families, and communities, Piña's and Boardman's work within the PDCRT offers practical examples of this work in action.

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