

# “It’s a difference that changes us”: An alternative view of the language and literacy learning needs of Latina/o students

*Teachers need to know who their students are and what they want and need to accomplish through literacy.*

Saúl grabbed my attention when he told me that he was tutoring an older sister who was studying to be a nurse. (All students’ names are pseudonyms.) I was intrigued because Saúl was receiving services in a bilingual special education classroom serving Grades 4–6. Saúl attended school in a large district that served almost 30,000 pupils, of which about 7,000 were Latina/o. His particular school served 517 students, and 290 of these were Latina/o. A school district appointed psychologist had determined that Saúl, a 12-year-old, was reading in Spanish at a beginning third-grade level and described his reading as “weak and deficient.” Ironically, Saúl explained that he was helping his 20-year-old sister to relearn Spanish, a language she no longer felt comfortable using.

*Como mi hermana, le explico, así como palabras en español. Es porque estaba tomando una clase de español. Ya se le olvidó casi todo el español pero, ya, ya se lo sabe más. Cuando tenía tarea de español, le decía las palabras, que significaban. Yo, y mi papá, le decíamos. (Like my sister, I explain to her, like words in Spanish. It’s because she was taking a Spanish class. She has already forgotten almost all of her Spanish but now, now she knows a little more. When she has Spanish homework I tell her the words, what they mean. I and my father, we tell [this] to her.)*

Although unique, Saúl’s story parallels that of other students I got to know while conducting a study of the biliterate development of intermediate-grade Latina/o students in the midwestern U.S. These students, like Saúl, reported using Spanish and English both orally and in writing to accomplish what I considered to be sophisticated and worthwhile objectives.

Over the course of one school year, I observed, taught, and interviewed students in four bilingual education classrooms, one of which was a special education classroom. As in the case of Saúl, I discovered that the students I was interviewing often responded to my questions in ways that I had not anticipated. In fact, they often described participating in literate activities that I would not have predicted. Researchers, educators, and policy makers, on the other hand, often depict students like Saúl as passive recipients of instruction (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Factors such as students’ language proficiency, their class backgrounds, or their ethnic and racial heritage are frequently cited as reasons for their low academic achievement (August & Hakuta, 1997).

As a result, educators often ask what can be done to better promote the school literacy development of Latina/o students, rather than how literacy is already meaningful to these same

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students. While the former question is not irrelevant, it assumes that neither the students nor their families will be the major determinants of whether and how this literacy development occurs. Saúl's revelation encouraged me to consider the possibility of multiple literacies: the idea that literacy can take on forms other than those typically expected in schools. Guerra (1998), for example, documented the ways that adult Mexican immigrants creatively use oral language and engage in writing letters and personal autobiographies. I concluded that the literacy promoted by U.S. schooling may not always be the literacy desired or needed by students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Saúl's interview inspired me to imagine a literacy program that would place Saúl, a student diagnosed as having learning disabilities, in the position of tutor to a college student.

In this article, I would like to suggest that one of the reasons that schools are not as successful supporting the literacy development of Latina/o students is that school literacy, whether it be in Spanish or English, envisions forms of literacy that these students do not recognize. In other words, many Latina/o students want and need to develop both their Spanish and English literacies, but they need to accomplish tasks for which typical school curricula and instructional activities fail to prepare them. Students from recent immigrant backgrounds or working-class families may be among those who find school literacy least relevant to their needs. The problem faced by educators—low academic achievement for many Latina/o students—is not due to these students' lack of motivation or to their ethnolinguistic backgrounds but should instead be attributed to a lack of information concerning who students are and what they want and need to accomplish through literacy.

On the other hand, many of the assumptions made concerning the literacy learning needs of Latina/o students as well as the instructional methods employed to supply those needs are often inadvertently alienating. This alienation results, at least in part, from the disconnection between school-based literacy and the realities of students' lives. These realities include tasks not envisioned in curriculum materials grounded in mainstream assumptions and practices. In this article, I will explore what some of these alter-

native literacies might look like by asking Latina/o students to describe their lives, their involvement with literacy, and the various roles that they themselves play in both learning and teaching these forms of literacy. A goal of this article, then, was to identify and describe literacy practices familiar to many working-class Latina/o students, practices that to them are every bit as important and meaningful as is the storybook reading and personal writing so familiar to mainstream educators. I determined that a good place to start was with what the students had to say about who they were.

### **Petra's insight on her identity**

A frequent source of confusion for mainstream educators of Latina/o students is the failure to recognize the high level of diversity within the group. For example, a recurring question concerns how best to refer to them. Typically, scholars encourage as much specificity as possible (Darder, Torres, & Gutiérrez, 1997). In other words, if the student is from Guatemala or from Nicaragua, he or she should be recognized as of Guatemalan or Nicaraguan origin. Students, however, are frequently found in more complex settings, settings where various communities are represented. For example, one might have in the same classroom students from Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chicano, and Central American backgrounds (see Nieto, 1992, and Giménez, 1997, for more in-depth discussions of this issue). However, umbrella terms such as *Latina/o* can obscure the evolving and ever-changing reality of students' identities. Anzaldúa (1999) insightfully critiqued the shortcomings of umbrella designations, as well as those based on national origin, primarily because all of them fail to account for the complex and multifaceted identities that many students bring with them into school.

All of the students who participated in this research project were first- or second-generation immigrants who lived in the U.S. midwest. Of the approximately 85 students, 30 had been born in the continental U.S., 1 on the island of Puerto Rico, and the remaining 50 or so in Mexico. None of their parents had been born in the U.S. Even among the immigrants, experiences ranged from having spent most of their lives in the U.S. to being very recent arrivals. For example, the

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students I met during this project averaged 6.6 years in the U.S., but some reported having spent 12 years in the country and some 1 year or less. Their ages ranged from 9 to 12 years.

The combination of the aforementioned facts makes these students somewhat different from their parents and quite distinct from mainstream students of European American origin. Their specific identities, then, show influences from their experiences in the U.S. and what they consider to be their country of origin, be it their own or that of their parents.

Ferdman (1990) has claimed that identity is rooted in one's membership in specific ethnocultural groups and that this membership has consequences for "becoming and being literate" (p. 182). This fundamental aspect of one's identity, ignored so often in classrooms as too incendiary and volatile a subject for discussion, has a huge influence on the types of schooling available to students, their later educational opportunities, and even their career possibilities. These contradictions are understood well by many students, and for this reason Ferdman encouraged educators to recognize students' ethnicity. Ethnicity, however, is in itself a highly complex domain that involves, among other factors, students' biculturalism, various degrees of biracialism, and at times biethnicity. In other words, ethnicity encompasses a vast domain of potential influences and is much greater than the sum of any collection of parts. Ferdman's insight can also be extended to recognition of students' evolving sense of identity.

The importance of identity, and its influence on students' understanding of and stance toward literacy, was brought home to me in a very concrete manner when I asked Petra, a Grade 4 student in a general bilingual classroom, how reading in English was different from reading in Spanish. I did not anticipate that she would discuss her identity with me. Her comments, however, are revealing in terms of the importance she placed on the relationship of identity to literacy development:

*Pues, como yo soy, yo nací aquí, y soy de padres mexicanos, era difícil para mí aprender el inglés. Es una diferencia que nos cambia porque en inglés hay palabras que uno no entiende, y en español, como yo soy [de habla] española, son más así las en español que en inglés. (Well, since I am, I was born here, and I am from Mexican parents, it was difficult for*

*me to learn English. It's a difference that changes us, because in English there are words that one does not understand, and in Spanish, well, since I am [a] Spanish [speaker] there are more like that in Spanish than in English.)*

Of interest to me was her comment that she was born in the U.S. but her parents were Mexicans. This combination of events, she explained, is a "difference that changes us." Petra used this understanding of her unique identity as cause for explaining why there were so many words in both English and Spanish that she did not know. This is a common struggle faced by many bilingual students (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996). I found it fascinating that she was able to verbalize in such a specific manner how her identity influenced her literacy development. Perhaps most interesting is the connection she established between identity and language. I was especially intrigued that she seemed to have an incipient sense of identity different from both her parents and her mainstream counterparts.

How we use language, our dialect, the range of our vocabulary, and the content of our speech are but a few of the ways we define ourselves and others. Failure on the part of educators to recognize students' ethnicity has been theorized to have negative consequences for student achievement because, in essence, this failure is a refusal to accept the students for who they are (Delpit, 1995; Diller, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It seems reasonable to assume that active recognition of students' more complex identities might facilitate their interaction with literacy.

In the next section, I touch upon a few of the distinctive ways that the participating students used language.

## **Recognizing and affirming Lito's creative use of language**

The fact that many Latina/o students are bilingual to varying degrees is a source of constant confusion for many educators who are socialized to view English monolingualism as the norm. All of the students involved in this project, with only one exception, indicated that Spanish had been their first language. Because their school district had been a pioneer in the field of bilingual education and actively advocated native-language instruction, students averaged 4.2 years in a bilingual classroom. Almost 200

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students were receiving bilingual education services at the time of the study.

Even so, according to Hakuta (1986) and Crawford (1995), the frequent use of two languages strikes many mainstream U.S. residents as odd, perhaps even a bit un-American. This attitude persists despite the fact that at least 50% of the world's population may be bilingual (Baker, 1996). But few things in life are as personal as the content and the manner of our speech. One need only reflect on the last time someone pointed out a grammatical error or nonstandard linguistic feature in one's own speech to be reminded of this truth. Consider the following excerpt from a story retelling narrated by Lito, a student in a Grade 4 general bilingual classroom, after he read the story *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (*Our Lady of Guadalupe*) (1980) by Tomie De Paola:

*Um, que está... la virgencita le, um, la virgencita told the... la virgencita le dijo al hombre que... um, um, he could go to the side to get some flowers for he could be on the... and um... she says go to the other side... she says, váyate para el otro lado, y um, llevaron las flores y véte and, y, he said okay and he left, dice he went to the village and showed the... the roses, flowers. [Then] she disappeared.... (Um, that there is... the little Virgin [told] him, um, the little Virgin told the... The little Virgin told the man that... um, um, he could go to the side to get some flowers for he could on the... and um... she says go to the other side... she says you go to the other side and um, they carried the flowers and go and, and, he said okay and he left, it says he went to the village and showed the roses, flowers. [Then] she disappeared....)*

Lito's retelling includes many of the key features of the story. Through the use of his background knowledge and information found in the text, he was able to demonstrate comprehension of the story. However, because of his frequent code-switching between languages (Zentella, 1981), his account might be interpreted by some as an indication of a failure to become proficient in either Spanish or English. While such an interpretation is plausible, it overlooks the fact that Lito includes almost the same information in both languages. In other words, he doesn't simply switch between languages because of a lack of vocabulary, nor does he simply translate. Instead, he reiterates some of what he considered to be important information in both Spanish and English. In fact, he appears to have switched into Spanish for the purpose of quoting textual information. The book was written in Spanish, and

Lito's retelling reflects this fact. The use of code-switching to quote another was described by McClure (1981). Lito's ability to create a coherent account using two languages rather than just one, often within the same utterance, is an indication that he not only determined that his interviewer was bilingual but also that he appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate this dual language proficiency. This was something I never observed him doing when interacting with monolingual English speakers.

Baker (1996) likened the bilingual student to an athlete trained to both run and swim. He contended that it would be unfair and misleading to compare such an athlete with another who focused all of his or her training solely on swimming. Likewise, bilingual students should be recognized as having dual language abilities and viewed in that light rather than compared only to Spanish or English monolingual students. From a study of Laura, I explore some of the specific ways the participating students reported using literacy.

### **Laura and Gil explain their language and literacy needs**

I began this article with a brief glimpse at what was a somewhat unusual and unexpected use of language and literacy on the part of one of the students. More commonly, students who are recent immigrants or the children of immigrants engage in a number of language and literacy transactions that are complex, demanding, and even stressful. Perhaps the most common of these transactions places the student in the role of language broker (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Valdés, 1996). The language broker translates but often also interprets and serves as a bridge between individuals who are limited to a monolingual world in either Spanish or English. Laura briefly explained her job with respect to language brokering:

*Como por ejemplo cuando voy a la tienda y voy con mi tía y ella no sabe como decirle y yo debo...yo debo de decirle, y lo que me dice mi tía, le digo...le digo a la señora...mi tía me dice una cosa que le diga...yo se la digo y...y...diciendo lo que me diga la señora, se lo digo a mi tía. (Like, for example, I go to the store and I go with my aunt, and she doesn't know how to speak to him or her, and I have to, I have to say it to him or her and what my aunt says to me, I say it, I say it to the lady...my aunt says something to me that I say...I say it to her and...and saying whatever the lady says, I say it to my aunt.)*

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One can easily imagine the rapid pace of such a transaction, the need to satisfy the English speaker unaccustomed to accommodating speakers of other languages, and the importance of accurately relaying the message to both parties. Some of my Latina/o university students have conveyed to me their occasional discomfort in similar situations and how language brokering reversed some of the traditional roles of parent and child. Furthermore, they described how they were often asked to perform this function as intermediaries between English monolingual educators and Spanish monolingual classmates at school because no bilingual personnel were employed.

For Laura oral language was the focus, but at other times the role of language broker extended to the translation of documents such as bills and other complex texts. For example, Gil described assisting his parents when I asked him the question “what is reading?” I had expected to hear him describe the sorts of literacy that students are asked to engage in at school. Instead, he explained,

*Es muy importante...tienen algo que está en el libro y si, este, no sé leer, pues, ¿cómo le voy a entender? Y cuando te dan como así...algo que tienes que pagar...y no tienen números y solamente así como en letras...y no vas a saber que vas a pagar. (It's very important...they have something that is in the book and if, uh, I don't know how to read, well, how am I going to understand it? And when they give you something like that...something that you have to pay...and it doesn't have numbers and it only has it like that in letters...and you are not going to know what you are going to pay.)*

Tremendous responsibility had been placed on the shoulders of this 9-year-old boy, whose parents, and perhaps other adult family members as well, depended on him to assist them with crucial transactions. Failure at such a task has far greater consequences than failure to accurately decode a fictional account of the type that constitutes much of what students are presented in schools. Yet instruction designed to facilitate Latina/o students' skills as language brokers is rare. Finding ways to give students credit for these skills could provide them with new insight and motivation to acquire higher levels of literacy. Literacy curricula and instructional methods that are created, modified, or otherwise structured so as to affirm the unique identities of these students would be an exciting educational innovation.

In this last example, I briefly discuss one student's account of the instruction he imparted to a younger brother. The majority of the students I interviewed related similar information concerning their younger siblings.

### **Christopher as reading teacher**

Perhaps the least surprising uses of literacy on the part of the participating students were their reports of teaching younger siblings. Although such a use of literacy is not unexpected and might be found in the homes of students from just about any ethnic background, these students reported using an instructional method very much like that described by Gregory (1996) who wrote of the literacy learning of Asian immigrant students to Great Britain. In her book, Gregory provided multiple examples of how immigrant students in London insist on first hearing words, then ask for these words to be repeated, and finally repeat the words themselves. Such an approach appears to be associated with traditional instructional methods in many nonwestern cultures. Christopher described his interaction with his 6-year-old brother in ways that Gregory would probably regard as familiar:

Interviewer: How is José Luis doing in school?

Christopher: Not too good. He doesn't know how to do his homework. I'm teaching him how and I read it. I tell him to read a book, and then he reads it, and then I read it again.

Several other students who participated in this research project reported similar types of interactions with their younger siblings. Gregory (1996) encouraged teachers to recognize these somewhat different approaches to text. Further, she explained that a failure to understand these distinct approaches can leave parents and others who care for the children without a firm understanding of how to help their children succeed with school literacy. In her words, the school curriculum and instructional approach “leave them [the parents] floundering” (Gregory, 1996, p. 44).

In the examples given here, participating students shared their understandings of identity, language, and uses of literacy. It seems as though there is much more to learn concerning how these three domains interact, combine, and influence one another. In the following section, three recommendations concerning instructional applications will be presented.

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## Instructional recommendations

Freire and Macedo (1987) asserted that educators have the duty to provide students with “the right to express their thoughts, the[ir] right to speak, which corresponds to the educators’ duty to listen to them” (p. 40). The student voices presented in this article illustrate a different way of thinking about literacy instruction and development. This information was shared by Latina/o students for the benefit of those interested in their literacy development. The instructional recommendations presented here were designed to facilitate and promote these students’ multiple literacies.

The first recommendation is that students should be recognized for who they are on their own terms. At one level, this means acknowledging their specific background and national origin, but at another level it means recognizing that they are “both, and” rather than “neither, nor.” Their identity and combination of experiences means that some of the students will find themselves feeling as though the attainment of a full command of both Spanish and English literacy is an insurmountable task. Petra’s concern with encountering lots of unknown vocabulary is a case in point. Making students aware of the challenges as well as the special advantages of bilingualism is one potentially productive approach (Jiménez, 1997). At a deeper level, this recognition includes an understanding that terms such as bilingualism, biculturalism, and ethnicity—all important facets of these students’ identities—are abstractions and umbrella terms, useful at times but potentially misleading if used uncritically to label and categorize rather than as starting points for gaining insight into students’ complex identities.

Second, it is clear from the interviews that these students should be viewed as individuals who want and need to read and write. Reading and writing are a part of their lives in indispensable ways. They need to read and write to help their parents and extended family members, to help their younger siblings, and to fully develop their own identities. In fact, some of the literacy engagements they report may be much more sophisticated than those expected in school (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). Recognition of these realities is a starting point for beginning productive conversations with students concerning their own literacy learning. Because no two students are identical, it

may be necessary to find out how literacy is used in each community, in each student’s life. Becoming aware of some of the different ways that reading and writing are important to students in specific classrooms requires dialogue, a genuine two-way flow of information. Finding time to listen to students, providing them with time to interact with one another, and opening dialogue with members of students’ communities can provide educators with insights that counteract negative portrayals of Latina/o students that are so pervasive in our larger culture. Cummins (1986), in his discussion of interactive empowerment theory for students from language minority communities, argued that students will succeed to the extent that community participation is encouraged as an integral component of their education.

The third recommendation is that students should be encouraged to fully develop those literacies that traditionally have not been a part of the school curriculum. For the students involved in this research project, that meant serving as language brokers of both oral and written text, and as teachers of their siblings. These activities depend on the students’ bicultural and bilingual development. Depriving students of these abilities by insisting on monolingual or monocultural programs of forced assimilation does fundamental damage to their sense of self and to their identity as members of the Latina/o community.

Finding ways to adequately convey to mainstream individuals how important knowledge of both Spanish and English is to many Latina/os is difficult. Mark Anthony, the Puerto Rican salsa musician, recently compared the attachment to both languages to what a parent of two children feels. To abandon one for the other is at best undesirable and at worst unthinkable. I hope that schools and other societal institutions will begin to understand, value, and actively promote this crucial facet of Latina/o identity.

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