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Raising Children's Cultural Voices

A third-grade teacher describes how she uses children's writing to expand cultural awareness and teach Spanish and English in a two-way bilingual program.

By Berta Rosa Berriz

How can teachers create a learning environment that honors the diverse family cultures of students within a racist society? Further, how can teachers develop literacy in two languages within a standards-driven curriculum that dictates what each student needs to learn, regardless of cultural and linguistic differences? I work with my colleague Ramona in a large urban school system in Massachusetts. Our journey as teachers is grounded in our search for answers to these questions within our two-way bilingual program classrooms, in which native speakers of Spanish and English are taught in integrated classes in both languages.

As third-grade teachers, we are committed to quality education for inner-city youth and hold the highest expectations for our students. Our students are African Americans and Latinos whose family cultures differ significantly from mainstream U.S. culture. Thus, they move between two cultural worlds - their home culture and the mainstream culture. Becoming familiar with these two worlds is a developmental process with a double edge: Our students must strengthen their sense of pride in their family culture while at the same time building skills to succeed in mainstream culture. Part of the work of our bicultural classrooms is to live and re-create our own cultures within an integrated learning environment.

We use a team approach to create a consistent learning environment in which we model cross-cultural respect and cooperation for our students as we learn and teach together from different points of view. Our teaching combines use of the arts and a strong emphasis on writing within a web of relationships essential to our bilingual and bicultural classroom, which includes the teacher, the teacher team, the students, their families, and our community. The arts become tools that celebrate the cultural identity of our students, develop their cultural voices, and strengthen their connection with their family and community. Writing links children's personal experiences to academic learning. This weave of symbols from family cultures and the community becomes the foundation for the development of dual literacy within a standards-driven curriculum.

TWO-WAY STRUCTURE

In our program, the language of instruction is separated by classroom. There are two classrooms with one teacher for each language. I always use English in my classroom and Ramona always uses Spanish in hers. Two groups of students spend an equal amount of time in each language, rotating between

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Spanish and English classrooms biweekly. Each class group has a mix of students who speak Spanish or English as their native language. Students are becoming bilingual to varying degrees, depending on how long they have been in the two-way program. Teachers speak only one language, while students may use either language as they are acquiring the new language.

The language immersion in our classrooms is supported by team teaching. The team spends time coordinating the development of the curriculum so that it develops sequentially. We do not repeat teaching content. Students follow the development of ideas in one language at a time. For example, a child may start the math investigations unit on patterns in Spanish and finish it in English. In other cases, an entire unit will be presented in one language, and then we move to studying the next unit in the other language. In each classroom, students who are at ease in both languages are resources to their peers in the learning process. Both languages are used as a tool for students to explore and interact with their world.

The integration of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is achieved through cooperative learning groups. We do not believe in tracking or ability grouping. Children learn and play together with their peers, many of whom are neighbors in their community. Learning together, they are protected from the harm that segregated student groupings may cause to their spirit and ability to learn. In our child-centered classrooms, the children are language resources for one another. We take care to group students with mixed abilities in each cooperative group. For example, social studies curriculum includes building skills for cooperative learning, cross-cultural understanding, and conflict resolution. Each group will have members who are strong in English, Spanish, reading, writing, drawing, and so on. In our collaborative learning environment, differences are good and necessary for the success of the challenging work of learning two languages.

There are many principles contributing to the effectiveness of our program, in particular, our use of the arts to develop students' cultural voices, our integrated approach to learning, and our belief that learning happens in a web of relationships, not only among peers but within the wider scope of the community. [For a more complete explanation, see my chapter in the book *Lifting Every Voice: Pedagogy and Politics of Bilingualism*, edited by Zeynep F. Bekont (Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2000), 71-94.]

In this article, I would like to concentrate on how we use writing as the gateway to literacy.

WRITING IS A GATEWAY

Writing, the creation of symbol on a page, is an important step toward literacy. In our classrooms, writing accompanies the arts in the development of biliteracy. Artistic expression and writing are connected in that they are both symbol systems. In the process of making art, a child spends time with images before they take on shape, color, and texture in an art piece. In the same way, writing requires that a child spend time with ideas and bring them out in conversation before they take shape in a manuscript. Both forms of self-expression, arts and writing, have common requisites: a safe place to explore, a personal place to move from, and a community place to share both the process and the message. Many of the writing activities in our third-grade classrooms are based on art projects.

Autobiographical writing, journals, and publishing are three major components of our writing program. Autobiographical writing builds on a personal story and develops academic knowledge of Standard English. Journals provide a safe place to express personal concerns, try out new ideas, and have exchanges in writing with the teacher. Publishing promotes effective communication through writing for general audiences.

Autobiographical writing is key to the positive cultural identity formation of children who have been inhibited by negative immigration experiences or by racism. Student autobiographies are deepened over the course of the year

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and represent self-discovery, family history, and future dreams. Autobiographies encourage children to reconnect with family stories and name the values in those stories that sustain them. It is significant that the experts on this writing assignment are also the protagonists. Yismilka's words from the introduction to her autobiography exemplify both depth in self-expression and quality writing in her second language:

I see the world as a dark place. If people depended on helping and saving, we could make a vast difference. The world is a good place to grow in. If we stick together the large difference can take us to an incredible blossom.

We use "sheltering" strategies to enhance the quality of autobiographical writing. One sheltering language development strategy highlights students' prior knowledge in conversations held before writing. For example, sheltering for autobiographical writing may include building descriptive language through talk about family pictures or drawings. In the process of writing their autobiographies, students talk to their classmates about the family pictures. Using oral language, children elaborate with detail as they develop descriptive language for their written life stories. These ideas can be graphically organized for further development around a central theme. Word banks organized on large chart paper categories - such as nouns (names), verbs (actions), adjectives (descriptions), or by topic - such as colors, feelings, textures, or geographical locations - are always on display and are added to by students as their vocabulary expands. Sheltering strategies also include the use of repetitive phrases such as "I know that it is a piñata because" Students are asked to repeat the phrase and fill in as many descriptions of a piñata as they can. Invented spelling, oral dictation, and illustrated response to questions are also part of sheltering strategies for students who are beginning to develop literacy.

Another strong support for good autobiographical writing is simply discussing with students the criteria for evaluating a writing piece. For example, students were preparing artist statements for a schoolwide exhibit that would form part of their autobiographies. In writing, they had to describe the scene that was represented on their family quilt square. The best artist statements would meet the task (stay focused), use a variety of sentence structures, use details, use descriptive language (including smells, colors, adjectives, adverbs), and use good basic mechanics (spacing, margins, indentations, capital letters, spelling, and punctuation). We used a sample quilt square and generated lists of words that would visually describe the art piece by categories such as colors, textures, background, and foreground. The second part of the assignment required students to describe the art-making process. In preparation, they dictated a list of actions involved in making their quilt square. The list generated a repetitive pattern of sentences: "I chose the color ... because it" Clarifying the assignment, using visual cues, generating lists of words, and using repetitive language patterns are sheltering strategies that enable second-language learners to write effectively. These student-generated lists are resources for the whole class as they compose. The words and ideas have been experienced orally, visually, dramatically, and in writing. This allows for reciprocity between students and teachers. Both players are participants in the learning process and vocabulary development.

A variety of genuine writing experiences is woven throughout our day by the frequent use of journals, which accompany many of our classroom activities: morning journals, math journals, science journals, end-of-the-day journals - though different in content, all of these journals provide a safe place for students to try out ideas. I respond to the journals regularly. The personal nature of these exchanges allows me to build friendships with my students and a sense of trust. The interactive morning journal opens the day with a personal dialogue and is written freestyle. Poems or illustrations may be the communicative symbol system on any given morning. There is something peaceful and gentle about morning journal time. While music plays softly, children sit quietly at their desks and make their transition from home to the work of school as they read and respond to my comments. Both reading and writing form part of our written conversations. The following is a poem from a

student's morning journal:

Shhhhh.
Listen! to the sound
Higher than the ground
We are black,
We are white
they are not so tight.
We are Puerto Rican,
We are Dominican,
We are Chinese,
We are Cuban,
We will hold hands and stand.
We are Japanese,
We are Indian,
We are together forever.
Together forever.
(from "I Am Black," by Myeshia)

End-of-the-day journals are strictly academic in nature. A special book with a beautiful cover and quality paper is purchased for this purpose. At the end of the day, one student leads the class in a discussion that generates three main ideas that were learned during the day. Three other students write these in complete sentences on the board. The day closes as students enter their summary of the learning for the day in their end-of-the-day journals. Content-area journals, such as literature-response and math journals, also provide a review and confirmation of the main ideas covered in a lesson or unit.

REAL-WORLD AUDIENCES

Our many forms of journaling are important tools for written communication, review, and documentation of academic gains. In telling, writing, and presenting themselves to the world, students realize reciprocity in learning - that is, that students are also teachers.

Bringing student writing to real-world audiences through publishing or the internet also promotes effective communication skills. One such publication project over the internet resulted when third- and fifth-graders in our school worked together on math stories in their math journals, writing stories about their everyday lives with numbers. News about a bilingual internet exchange project called De Orilla a Orilla inspired our students. A group of teachers in New York, California, and Puerto Rico were facilitating exchanges between Spanish and English bilingual students through the internet. Students wanted to participate even though we did not have internet access in the classroom.

Our students' math journals contain stories and describe ways of thinking about math. They write, for example, about how they solved a problem, and include real-life math stories. They enjoyed their math journals and wanted to share them with other students. We decided to participate in De Orilla a Orilla by using the internet connection on my computer at home. Students prepared the following announcement for the project on the internet:

Math Journals Take Us Across Grades and Across Cyberspace
Warm Greetings from Chilly Boston:

We are students in third- and fifth-grade classes in a two-way bilingual program in Greater Boston. You might be wondering what it means to be a two-way bilingual program (two x bi = multi?). We are African-American and Latino kids who are learning about one another's cultures and languages. We study math, science, and social studies in Spanish and English. In math class we have been keeping a math journal and writing math stories with the ideas we are discovering in math class.

Here are some ideas we have been writing about:

The Community We Have Multiplied

In math class we were multiplying, multiplying, multiplying. We read Anno's Mysterious Multiplying Jar. We wrote our own versions of the Multiplying Jar set in our own communities. Would you like to write with us? Please send us your stories and let us know if you would like to read ours.

I sent the message from my computer at home. A few weeks later, I printed the responses and brought them into class. Although the exchange was difficult to maintain without classroom access to the internet, this collaboration across grade levels strengthened the writing for both groups as they presented their work to an international audience. The literacy circle is complete when children take what they have learned in the classroom and use it in their experiences with the outside world.

Another example of student publishing was preparing student stories in book form for the classroom library. Including quality student writing in the multicultural library inspired children to write their own versions of stories that were popular with the class. One reading group was reading science fiction with animal characters. Their favorite was *Catwings*, by Ursula LeGuin. This story takes place in an urban setting; the wings saved the cats from a terrible fate. Stories sprouted from our students about urban animal families with liberating anatomy. Final edited versions were included in the library for classmates to read.

To summarize, as classroom teachers we emphasize varied ways of developing literacy through writing. Autobiographies, journals, and publishing projects encourage children to express themselves through writing. Second-language learners benefit from sheltering strategies to support the development of their academic language. Children write to be read when their work is validated through publishing.

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