

# CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMERGING BILITERACY

Each day the kindergarten children in María Berzins's class rush to the book baskets to pick out books. Students lie down on the carpeted floor, lean against the wall covered with posters and print in Spanish and English, sit in the teacher's large, cushioned chair with a partner, or hug a stuffed animal and beg to have someone listen to them read. The teacher hears overlapping requests: "Can I read a book now?" "¿Puedo llevar este libro a la casa para leerle a mi mami?" ["Can I take this book home to read to my mom?"] "Can I read to you?" Enthusiasm for reading is high. When it comes to sharing a book with a friend, whether in Spanish or English, all language barriers disappear.

Alice Laliberty (Eloise is known by friends and colleagues as Alice), then a bilingual classroom teacher, noted similar enthusiasm among her fourth graders after she started the first writing project that included all of her students (a mix of Spanish, English, and bilingual speakers) using Dunrea's (1990) writing method. Over and over throughout the year, she heard comments such as, "Mrs. Laliberty, can I write my own book?" "Maestra, ¿puedo quedarme en el cuarto durante el recreo para terminar mi cuento?" ["Teacher, may I stay in the room during recess so I can finish my story?"] "I want to use the computer to write my final copy. Can I stay in during lunch?" "¿Puedo llevar papel para la casa para escribir otro cuento este fin de semana?" ["May I take home some paper to write another story this weekend?"] Dunrea's process asks students to contribute sentences to the development of a group story, but the class votes on "the best

ones" and only those sentences become part of the group story. Using this method in combination with encouraging students to use Spanish and/or English for their writing heightened students' interest and eagerness to write their own stories. Curious Anglo and Latino parents visited her classroom to observe what their children were doing (Reyes & Laliberty, 1992).

## Background

When it comes to teaching bilingual students, there is sometimes a perception that all that is needed for success is for teachers to be bilingual also. This is far from the truth. For example, although we are both Spanish/English bilinguals, we admit that our success in literacy instruction did not begin the first year of our teaching. For Alice, it wasn't until she took some workshops on process writing that she began to learn how to involve students in the kinds of interesting and creative writing that they enjoyed. These workshops and institutes, however, did not teach her how to implement this process with non-English speakers. As a result, she began by using process writing with only her fluent English speakers, leaving language arts instruction for the Students Learning English (SLE) to the bilingual resource teacher who did primarily drills and fill-in-the-blank writing. Regrettably, not all students were offered the same opportunities and choices.

It was early fall when a Spanish-speaking girl asked Alice if she and the other students learning English could also write a book like the English speakers were doing. That innocent request turned Alice's

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classroom inside out as she scrambled to find ways of including *all* of her students in the creative and exciting writing that only the English-speaking students had been doing. It was after this incident that she implemented Dunrea's (1990) writing process for both English and Spanish speakers in her classroom. The results were a windfall for all.

María also admits that although she liked the idea of creative writing and letting children explore their own reading potential, she was hesitant to do so. You would think that since her master's program included courses in process instruction, she would have been doing this on her own, but she wasn't. Instead, she relied on

the process by which she herself had become literate. This coincided with her own training in bilingual education where Spanish reading instruction is taught by using phonics and syllabication, (e.g., "ma, me, mi, mo, mu") (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). As a result, she was reluctant to unleash her kindergarten students' potential for emergent literacy and early experimentation with writing. To ensure their success, she wanted to guide them through literacy methodically and carefully. In May of 1997 (almost the end of the school year), she finally encouraged her kindergarten students to try a bit of their own writing. She was impressed with their efforts. Figure 1 is what Humberto, a Spanish monolingual child, wrote in Spanish.

In this figure, Humberto writes "Oso y Osa" (Papa Bear and Mama Bear), probably influenced by his knowledge of the Spanish version of *Los Tres Osos* (*The Three Bears*). Very quickly, however, he personalizes and appropriates the writing to something more familiar and relevant to him: his grandfather. He writes: *Fueron todos a pasearse a Mejico a ver [mi abuelito "que estaba muy triste porque nadie lo visita"]*. This translates to: "Everyone went to Mexico to see my grandfather" (the word grandfather is depicted in his drawing of a sad old man with a cane) "who was sad because no one visited him." Humberto did not write the explanation for his grandfather's sadness, but told it as part of re-reading of his writing.

María was extremely encouraged by the fact that at age five, these students understood that written symbols could convey meaning (Clay, 1975; Goodman, 1990). During the academic year 1997-1998, she tried to remember this lesson by providing her students with writing opportunities earlier in the year. Her attempts, however, were still quite structured. The University of Colorado professors, who were collecting data in her classroom, would often inquire about the children's emergent literacy



Figure 1. Humberto's writing. Translation: Papa Bear and Mama Bear. Everyone went to Mexico to see my grandfather (drawing of grandfather) [who was sad because no one visited him.] Humberto.

progress. This kept her thinking about it, but it wasn't until 1998–1999 that she felt confident enough to free her students to try emergent writing. What María discovered is amazing. Her kindergartners were consumed with a kind of literacy fever—they wanted to read and write all the time! Expecting students to write from the first day of kindergarten allowed their potential for literacy to unfold much earlier and helped motivate and encourage them as emergent writers.

As bilingual teachers, we know that the degree of success in biliteracy varies with the student's own perception of the value of English and Spanish, his/her level of fluency in two languages, grade level, and especially the opportunities, encouragement, and level of support from teachers. In examining our classroom practices, we have discovered instructional principles that have contributed to our students' success, their love of literacy, and their emerging biliteracy. We have condensed these principles into the following list:

1. create a socioculturally supportive learning environment that affirms the cultural and linguistic resources for all students,
2. provide opportunities for inclusion and choice,
3. involve parents in their children's learning.

These form the foundation of our literacy instruction and contribute to the development of biliteracy.

## **Creating a Socioculturally Supportive Learning Environment**

### **Getting to Know Our Students**

We believe that creating a safe and socioculturally supportive learning environment for students begins with getting to know them: What do the students like/dislike? What is their dominant language?

Who speaks what language at home? What is their family like? What experiences have they had that will help support learning? Do the students have other siblings at home?

María searches for background information through the registration forms and informal interviews that she conducts with the kindergartners and their parents on orientation day. These 15-minute interviews help familiarize the child and his or her parents with the various learning areas in the classroom. During this time, she provides an overview of what children will be doing and sets the stage for high expectations and responsibilities on the part of the students and their parents. Hence, collaborative partnerships for a successful year are initiated. While the parents are browsing in the room, María takes time to talk individually with each child. She speaks to the child in both languages to determine for herself which language to use for instruction. This also gives her a brief chance to make students feel comfortable before the first day of class.

By the time students reach Alice's fourth-grade class, the school has already conducted several language assessments and reading tests, so she assesses only the new students. Although useful information about students is on cumulative records, Alice selects only the most critical information and suspends opinions about students' behavior until she has the opportunity to know them. Before the first day of class, Alice makes a personal phone call to the parents and asks if she can do a home visit to meet their child. Throughout the year, she makes home visits as needed. Although most teachers find this idea intimidating and time-consuming, Alice has come to appreciate how crucial and revealing this contact can be.

Home visits help Alice better understand the students' home environment and how that affects learning. For example, it wasn't until Alice made a visit to Elena's home that she truly understood the reasons

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this student had been struggling at school. At age ten, Elena, a fourth grader, not only took care of her new baby brother, but she also helped cook meals and tended to the needs of her bedridden mother. Knowing this information led Alice to allow extra time during lunch and recess to help Elena. Alice also communicated more often with Elena's mother to ensure that she was aware of her child's needs and expectations.

### **Providing Opportunities for Social Interactions**

In addition to getting to know our students, we believe that providing opportunities for social interactions is essential for creating a supportive learning environment. This interaction among active learners can occur anywhere: during snack time, free reading time, partner reading, buddy reading with students from higher grades, watching/discussing an educational video, or participating in classroom rituals and celebrations. Our students learn from each other as they express their views, offer their opinions and responses, or hold discussions with their peers. Both of us group our students in heterogeneously mixed cooperative groups to enhance their opportunities to interact and learn from each other. In this regard, we concur with Peterson (1992) that "the primary goal at the beginning of the new year is to lead students to come together, form a group, and be there for one another. At first students are concerned foremost with their own welfare. It is by establishing values of caring and trust in the classroom that social ties and interests in one another's welfare come into existence" (p. 13). This support for one another helps students feel respected, at ease, and free to take risks. We also believe it helps to promote a positive self-image. Children learn that others will not laugh if they make mistakes; on the contrary, we celebrate mistakes when students make an effort to learn. In this way, a closer community of learners is formed and main-

tained throughout the year.

The following classroom practices enhance a socioculturally supportive learning environment:

- Validate students' language and background experiences (consistently using both languages for instruction, conversation, and home communication).
- Before the school year begins, send postcards, make phone calls, or visit homes to welcome the students back to school.
- At the beginning of the year, establish important routines and classroom management procedures with student input; have students apply for classroom chores (passing out lunch tickets, passing out papers, class reporter, line leader, etc.), then let the "experts" train the next group of helpers.
- Get to know the students and have students learn about each other: partner introductions, "All About Me" posters, and specific locations to showcase students (student of the week, birthday child, etc.).
- Provide opportunities for social interactions: snack time, extra recess, lunch with the teacher, cooperative learning groups, group projects, etc.
- Establish a positive learning environment: practice respect for self and others, foster acceptance of other cultures by providing multicultural literature, encourage students to take risks and pride in what they do.
- Set the stage for high expectations, teaching the students "I can do it!"

### **Providing Opportunities for Inclusion and Choice**

In a bilingual class, there can be no better way of including all students than by us-

ing their native language for instruction. The students in our classes also know that they have a choice in which language they want to use. Of course, we encourage the development of both English and Spanish, but we believe that allowing students to use their linguistic and cultural resources to access new concepts is the best way to honor their needs.

Students have other choices, too. They may choose their own literature books, their own topics for writing, and various ways of reading (alone or with others). This means that we go out of our way to find a good selection of books in each language so the choice will be a real choice and not one based on default. Our classrooms are also filled with as many Spanish and English literature books as we can provide. Without access to good books in both languages, it is impossible to achieve equitable treatment of the children's languages. (A list of resources in Spanish and English can be found on p. 18.)

As bilingual teachers, we have learned through experience that an environment that encourages the use of two languages can be challenging because some students come to school with negative attitudes about speaking two languages. When this is the case, we try to create varied opportunities to show the importance of being bilingual. Alice has instilled the advantage of bilingualism by telling her fourth graders that speaking two languages is like having "two brains." She realized that this must have been absorbed by at least some of the students when one afternoon she overheard a bilingual student telling a new boy in class, "If you speak Spanish and English, you are one of the lucky ones with two brains!"

María follows an alternate day model. This means that she instructs in English one day and in Spanish the next, providing extra scaffolding for those students whose primary language is not being used. Greetings, openings, directions, story time, and

any type of conversation with students take place in the target language of the day. Her students, however, have a choice in the language they use. For example, if it is an English instruction day, they may use Spanish to converse with each other or ask questions; however, María's responses are in English to maintain the target language for the day. She also makes a point to celebrate a student's effort to use the target language of the day, however limited the attempt might be. Reading instruction is always in the student's primary language. During reading time, students rotate to various learning centers (guided by adults) where students have opportunities for additional listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the two languages. Students also have many opportunities for independent reading during the day, and for participating in discussions and conversations with peers. María expects students to read a book each week and to do related comprehension activities. These books represent a combination of student choices and teacher selections.

In Alice's fourth-grade transitional bilingual class where the majority of students are English speakers, her instruction and directions are conducted primarily in English. For reading instruction, however, students are taught in their primary language. Throughout the year, Alice uses a variety of ways to manage the reading groups. There are times when the entire class reads the same book. She chooses titles that are available in both English and Spanish, giving students time to read on their own, with a buddy, or with the teacher. For sharing time, she often mixes English and Spanish readers, but also identifies a bilingual student as the translator for the group. This arrangement provides her students with the opportunity to listen to what others have to say regarding the literature book they are reading. In particular, these sessions help Spanish-speaking students feel confident about what they read and pro-

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vide opportunities for them to share their own thoughts.

The following classroom practices enhance opportunities for inclusion and choice:

- Offer students a choice in book selections, but provide some guidance.
- Provide opportunities for learning Spanish and English during instruction and social interactions.
- Prepare book bags containing Spanish and English books that the students can take home to read themselves or to have parents read to them.
- Give students opportunities to share and comment about the books they read.
- Provide opportunities for writing in Spanish and English (emergent to proficient writers).
- Establish a book swap program (students bring one book to put in the Swap Book Bin and exchange it for another).

### **Involving Parents in Their Children's Learning**

Offering guidance and help to encourage parents' participation in their children's education is a primary focus for both of us. Parent participation can take place at home and/or at school. As mentioned earlier, we both introduce ourselves to the students and the parents as soon as school begins by a phone call, a home visit, or a postcard. We feel this communication establishes connections and builds a rapport that reaps high rewards throughout the year, so it is especially important to send home materials in the language that parents can comprehend.

We believe that communication with parents is a key factor in building a positive link between the school and the home. We often inform parents about their children's progress. We know that parents

have great influence on their children's learning, especially in the development of biliteracy, and that we must emphasize this partnership with parents as needed and valued, even if their own academic background is limited.

To facilitate a child's literacy growth in kindergarten, María sends homework folders home once every two weeks. Since this is a half-time kindergarten class, the students are only in school two or three times a week. In these folders, she includes a book to be colored by the child, a book to be read to the student by an adult, and a letter letting parents know how to help with the activities and expectations. Parents are able to help their child reinforce concepts at home that are being learned at school. Special needs are also accommodated, such as including books on tape in the lending library for students whose parents are non-readers.

When parents show up to volunteer in Alice's classroom, she makes every effort to make them feel welcome. She makes sure that the work given to them is something they are both ready and willing to do. Many of her students' parents choose to work at home, helping their child with writing. Alice remembers a student named Lonnie whose mother illustrated his story. When Lonnie shared his published book during Author's Chair, he identified and pointed to his mother's name as the illustrator. This was a very significant event because it legitimized the idea that other students could ask their parents for more help, too, especially in selecting names of the characters or names of particular places in their stories. Some parents actually took a more active role in discussing plots with their children.

One year, Alice hosted an author's celebration for her students (see Reyes & Laliberty, 1992) that showed the parents the kind of writing their students had done all year. The parents and students came together to read and listen to children's pub-

lished stories. Parents wrote comments about the children's reading and writing or anything else they felt might be helpful. One parent reflected on the value of bilingualism by writing the following:

"Yo quisiera decirte que si de veras te gusta estudiar y la escuela, 'Algún día' lo lograras. Estudia. Felicidades." ("I want to tell you that if you really like to study and like school, 'Some-day' [the name of the story] you will accomplish it. Study. Congratulations.")

The following classroom practices are ways of involving parents in their children's education:

- Communicate with parents as soon as school begins, or before if possible.
- Encourage parents to get involved with their children's schoolwork at school and/or at home.
- Provide specific ways in which parents can help their children (read books in literacy bags, help with developing ideas for writing, send homework sheets).
- Share with parents the high expectations set for their child and encourage the parents to become partners in this endeavor.
- Validate the expertise parents provide and encourage their participation at school.

Although our teaching experiences have been in different grades, we share many common views on teaching literacy. These instructional principles create a socioculturally supportive learning environment in which our students can take risks, not only in their learning but also in their social surroundings. Opportunities for inclusion and choice also allow our students to feel confident about who they are and their ability to succeed in academic areas, just like everyone else. When parents are involved in their children's learning, they become teachers, and as such they can share in the successes and accomplish-

ments of their students.

Overall, we believe that the bottom line in our success with students learning English is that we not only say that we respect our students' languages and cultures, but we use these as a starting point for their learning. We don't merely have high expectations for our students (that alone is not enough), we purposely organize instruction so that our students can meet those expectations. In everything we do, we try to show students that it is by using their cultural and linguistic resources—not by denying them—that they can be academically successful. Since most of our students come from a bilingual background, we believe our success starts with a solid foundation in reading and writing in the native language with support for literacy in English. This is how we create opportunities for emerging biliteracy. We also believe that affirming diversity (Nieto, 1996) is a powerful message that influences the students' efforts to achieve. In the end, this is our ultimate goal—to see students achieve.

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