Fourth Grade
Papers passed back
to desks in rows.
Red circles and lines
on stories.
The teacher walks
to her big desk.
I’ve seen her book.
The one with our names.
Mine’s fourth from the top.
The one where she writes
neat little A B C
with pencil.
She hits her bell.
We all look up.
Time to go home.
Red Pen.
Big Desk.
Book.
Bell
Playing school
must be fun
for her.

Not surprisingly, I spent the following 12 years of schooling a safe, good student. I watched my teachers, respected their power and got A’s and B’s, even through college, without ever having to speak up, defend a position, argue an issue. It’s true I took no risks, but I worked hard at what I was told to do. According to the school establishment, I was a success.

Only in my social realm did I learn the negative consequences of silence. With friends I realized that my habit of keeping quiet rather than defending myself and my beliefs could be problematic and sometimes dangerous. Among my peers, not saying “no” often meant I was saying “yes.” By not taking a stand, I was by default taking a stand. I’ve often wondered why I had to learn such hard lessons on the playground and in the streets. What if my teachers had been open to my voice in the classroom, had even expected me to use it? How would I be a different person today?

Five years ago I became a teacher and entered my first classroom understanding that teaching is more than sitting at a “Big Desk” and wielding power. I realized that encouraging student voices would be one of my greater responsibilities. But I wasn’t prepared for the challenge I faced: second graders already wanting the “right” answer, passively accepting what they were told, afraid to ask why. It was as though, at age seven, they already knew that their voices had no place at school.
Voice
What is voice, and why should it necessarily have a place in schools? Educator Henry Giroux describes the concept of voice as:

...the principles of dialogue as they are enunciated and enacted within particular social settings. The concept of voice represents the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, culture, racial and gender identities. The category of voice then refers to the means at our disposal — the discourses available to us — to make ourselves understood and listened to, and to define ourselves as active participants in the world. (Giroux, from Darder, 1991, p. 66)

In other words, voice represents not only the way we express ourselves so that others understand, but also the way we define our very identities. Voice seems to be formed within the context of our life experience. Giroux points out, however, that these experiences are also influenced by historical and social interests; they often “harbor the sedimentation of domination” (Giroux, 1988, p. 117).

This last element profoundly affects the role of teachers in the development of voice in the classroom. For it would seem now not enough simply to sit back and let students “express themselves.” Certainly, this exercise is important, but now that we understand voice within the context of history and oppression, a critical look, or as Paulo Freire notes, a “working on” of these experiences, becomes very important. It isn’t enough, for example, to discuss, celebrate and display the rich culture of my Mexican-American students by bringing in artifacts and having them share experiences from their community. Instead, Freire and Giroux challenge us to explore critically how conquest, slavery and racism have helped form these experiences and student voices.

And what a challenge it is! The implications for us as teachers are great. Antonia Darder points out that for bicultural students, voice develops not only through dialogue with other students, but also with the presence of a bicultural educator “who facilitates the critical (and often fearful) journey into the previously prohibited terrain of the bicultural discourse” (Darder, 1991, p. 69). White educators in the bicultural classroom assisting in the development of voice “must first come to acknowledge their own limitations, prejudices, and biases, and must be willing to enter into dialogue with their students in a spirit of humility and with respect for the knowledge that students bring to the classroom” (Darder, 1991, p.70). As a white teacher myself, I suspected that this personal, transformative process wasn’t as easy as it sounded, and began to wonder in what ways I would be able to work on voice with my students.

Writing is particularly difficult for children because their language must be directed on paper to an abstract audience that doesn’t even seem to exist. I observed this struggle as I watched my seven-year-old students; I heard their rich language during play time that never seemed to transfer to writing. Even following explicit encouragement and whole-class brainstorming for prior knowledge, my students typically wrote pieces like:

*Me gustan mucho las flores porque están bonitas. Me gustan los conejitos porque están bonitos. (I like flowers a lot because they are pretty. I like bunnies because they are pretty.)*

Certainly a piece like this shows few organizational and mechanical errors, and the child is describing the things she likes. Yet the written work lacks the unique voice of the student I hear at play time. I was bothered by such “safe” writing and wondered how to facilitate the expression of student voice, not only orally, but in written form as well.

Success
Fortunately, my reading of Paolo Freire (1970) suggested a method of helping my students develop their voices. In the early 1960s, Freire and his colleagues experienced widespread success, not only in teaching the marginalized how to read and write, but also in facilitating the expression of their voices and awakening social consciousness.

Freire began in students’ homes and communities, listening to the themes pertinent to their lives. Later, he brought these “generative themes” to “culture circles,” comprised of students and a facilitator-learner, where the themes were presented in picture form and discussed by the group. Learners were challenged to look at their lives both personally and critically, and they came to understand that they could influence their own reality.
The presentation of a generative theme in culture circles was done through a code, or "a concrete physical representation of a particularly critical issue that has come up during the listening phase" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 38). Codes included pictures, photos, skits or collages that reflected the learner's reality. After the code was presented, learners participated in a problem-posing discussion, with the facilitator-learner posing questions organized into five phases:

1. Descriptive Phase (i.e.; "What is happening here?")
2. Definition Phase (i.e.; "Is there a problem? What is the problem?")
3. Sharing Phase (i.e.; "When has this ever happened to you before?")
4. Questioning Phase (i.e.; "Why is there a problem?")
5. Strategy Phase (i.e.; "What can we do about this problem?") (Adapted from Wallerstein, 1987, pp. 38-39.)

Presentation of these codes followed by discussion of questions led not only to peer interaction, but also to heightened consciousness. Through Freire's culture circles, learners came to understand that their reality could be altered, that their destinies were in their own hands.

Others have replicated Freire's methodology in diverse adult settings, including college English classes (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977), discovering that social language became more explicit as written speech was brought out into the open. While the practice sounded promising, I could find no evidence of problem-posing methods used with young children, and wondered if Freire's success could be replicated in my own classroom.

I began my study, then, in this context, with these two questions:

1. Will the use of generative themes help my students develop voice in the primary grades?
2. What will happen when both teacher and students are faced with their own reality codified?

**Design**

I conducted my study over an 11-month period in a combination first-second grade bilingual classroom composed entirely of bicultural students. As I mentioned before, I myself am a White teacher, a point to keep in mind for the following discussion.

I replicated Freire's own process, beginning with a "listening phase" during the first semester of school. By conducting home visits for each student, making anecdotal observations of children during free time, and interviewing students with critical questions, I was able to collect a comprehensive list of themes and words reflecting my students' reality.

In the second semester, I began to present codes (usually drawings I made or copies from picture books) to the class: over a four-month period, I encouraged class discussion of eight generative themes, always following the same steps:

1. Presentation of a picture on the overhead projector;
2. Individual student quick-writing in "voice journals" (usually about 5 minutes): to record expressions of first thoughts;
3. Problem-posing discussion facilitated with questions in phases as a whole class (usually about 10 minutes);
4. Individual student writing in "voice journals" (again, about 10 minutes) to record thoughts after discussion.

A note about language use: my class included both English and Spanish language-dominant students. All students, however, were bilingual, understanding and producing considerably in their second languages. As the teacher I facilitated a typical discussion of a code using one language only. Hence, throughout the four months, four codes were presented with questions in Spanish, four with questions in English. The three codes I focus on in this article were facilitated with questions in Spanish, just as the student voices emphasized here were of students whose "first language" (language of choice and language of the home) was Spanish. So although many of my journal entries are in English, all of my actual questions were posed in Spanish.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In addition to the original list of generative themes, I collected student voice journals. I also made entries in my own journal to record both the process and my own perceptions of our progress.
Three of the codes presented to the class follow, as well as my record of the class discussion surrounding the codes. In a box accompanying this article, I present one student’s written responses to the three codes, as well as my analysis. I believe this collection of material illustrates that Paolo Freire’s generative themes can be used in elementary schools to bridge cultural gaps among students and between student and teacher.

**Tres Retratos (Three Portraits)**

_A Slap in the Face, Indeed_

Rain pounds the pavement outside Room 11 as grumbling first and second graders slosh and shuffle in prematurely from recess. This will be their fourteenth consecutive recess indoors. By now even the final scenes from _The Lion King_ on the T.V. screen fail to excite them. “These kids want out, no they NEED out,” I think, biting my lip. At the same time I worry about the research project I was to have begun with my class, but have managed to put off all week. What theme could I present now that would motivate such unhappy creatures?

Observing this group of children, I am inspired by the obvious. I sketch “The Rainy Day” (Figure 1) and run to the office to make the transparency, all the while planning in my head my presentation and dialogue questions. “They will for sure relate to this kid wanting to play outside when it’s raining. Given the collective mood brewing in my room, this is a shoe-in theme,” I tell myself.

Within 10 minutes, students are at their desks writing and drawing about the picture introduced only by title, “El Dia Lluvioso” (The Rainy Day). I am writing also, mostly planning out my questions by phases to lead the class dialogue.

> “Question #1,” I begin, after getting student attention, “What is happening in this picture?”

The students answer in Spanish. “Pues que el niño está viendo que se están mojando sus cosas afuera.” (Well, the boy is seeing that his things are getting wet outside.)

> “Sí, y está preocupado porque su mamá se enoja con él y a lo mejor le pega.” (Yea, and he’s worried because his mom will get mad at him and maybe she’ll hit him.)

> “Maestra, no debes dejar tus cosas afuera.” (Teacher, you shouldn’t leave your things outside.)

> “Sí, una vez hasta a mí me robaron la bicicleta.” (Yes, once they even stole my bicycle.)

> “¡Ooooo maestra, a mi primo una vez le quitaron la bicicleta y la encontró la policía!” (Oh teacher, once they stole my cousin’s bike and the police found it)

Uh-oh. Not only is this collective stream-of-consciousness dialogue straying from my sequence of phases, but as I look down at my journal, I realize my own set of predetermined questions no longer apply. These kids don’t see a boy yearning to go out; they see a potentially hairy situation with mom, and worse, a person unable to care for his few possessions. And just as I begin to experience panic in my lack of preparation for this unexpected direction, I feel the group grow silent as all eyes look to me for the next question.

I realize I must abandon my plan and follow the lead of the group. I write in my journal again. This time I simply marvel at how complex and telling this, our first exposure to our own codified experience has been, especially for me. How was it possible for me to
be so off-base in predicting my students’ responses to this picture? It’s midyear, don’t I know them yet? More importantly, though, it scares me to wonder: How many other times during the day do I presume to “name” the world for my students based on my own race and class experiences?

“Son de Otro Color”
Two months later. Now, needless to say, discussion questions are no longer planned. I’m proud of myself for being able more naturally to follow the lead of the group, and yet pose questions that are more and more critical. While on recess yard duty in the morning, I note the tremendous problem we’re having with kids throwing rocks at each other. At lunch I make a transparency of a page from *La Niña Invisible* (The Invisible Girl), showing green and blue children chasing each other, throwing rocks and sticks. “Who knows what they’ll make of this? They could either relate to the rock-throwing, or maybe the different colors, or maybe to nothing at all.” I shrug and head to class.

This time I provide no title, no introduction. “Write about what you see,” I say, and I sit down to write, too. Five minutes later, we’re in the circle, ready to discuss.

“What’s happening in this picture?”

“Se están peleando.” (They are fighting.)

“Están tirando piedras y tienen bates y se están pegando.” (They’re throwing rocks and they have bats and they are hitting each other.)

(Great! They’ve already defined the problem.)

“Have you ever fought before?”

“Sí, una vez a mí me tiraron piedras.” (Yes, once they threw rocks at me.)

After hearing a series of combat stories, I hone in on the essential question: “But why are these children fighting?”

“Pues, porque unos son azules y unos son verdes. Son diferentes.” (Well, because some are blue and some are green. They’re different.)

A number of discussion points come up. Who is different from you? How do boys and girls treat each other? Why is fighting bad? And what can you do when you meet a different person? These ideas are reflected in the children’s subsequent journal entries (see box on p. 12 for one example).

The next day I show the picture again and ask them to remember our discussion. I suggest that they might want to write about a time when they saw someone different from themselves, and I share a story I am writing about meeting a fellow teacher in a wheelchair. Those who choose to write about meeting a person different from themselves typically stress positive, proactive solutions (tolerance, helping others). Francisco, however, had been absent the day of our discussion, and in my rush to pass out paper I quickly ask him if he has ever seen anyone who looks different from him. “Sí,” he responds, and I immediately send him to go write about it.

His written response is brief yet telling, “A mí no me gusta jugar con los negritos porque son de otro color y me pegan su color.” (I don’t like to play with the black kids because they are a different color and their color will stick to me.)

I ask him to read it to me and he does, afterwards looking up at me with inquisitive eyes, seeming to wonder if he got the right answer. Later I realize that Francisco, having missed the dialogue the day before, is out-of-the-loop on prevailing ideas and language in our class. His seems the pure expression of voice, a personal response to the reality presented him. It seems less tainted and more honest. And while I recognize his thoughts to be limited and uninformed, I have to ask myself: Are they not also authentic?

*Hands Tied*
Two blocks from school, 6:00 a.m. during the middle of the strawberry-planting season. An unmarked bus makes its usual stop in front of the neighborhood market to pick up campesinos on their way to the fields for another back-breaking day of labor. But this time, those driving the bus aren’t field managers, and their final destination is not the field. A community watches shocked as INS agents take the bus and those undocumented workers on it directly to a nearby holding camp and eventually to the Mexican border. Stories abound in the neighborhood and at school of families torn apart, children being left behind as parents are sent away, and even of documented residents being mistakenly deported.
The students in Room 11 have many of their own stories to share the next day: an aunt who didn’t come home from the field, the cousin who was sent away. Of immediate importance to me is finding out that no classroom parents are deported and all students are still safe and cared for at home. While relieved for my students, I am angry. Angry at the injustice and lack of compassion thrust upon families in our community. I also feel scared and helpless, all the while hoping that a mistake has been made, that family members will be returned. I want to discuss at greater length the events and feelings about them with the class, but feel my own hands are tied: how can my students come to feel positive and empowered about what has happened in their neighborhood, when even I don’t?

Two weeks later I show a code from the book La Mujer Que Brillaba Más Que El Sol: The Woman Who Outshone the Sun (see Figure 2). The picture of the main character Lucía being chased and yelled at reminds me of some recess yard scenes I have witnessed lately. Maybe, I predict, our discussion will lead students to reflect upon including others in games and treating classmates with greater respect.

After our quickwrite we sit together to discuss the picture. What is happening? They were making the girl run away, chasing her out:

“Como aquella vez maestra que vino la policia a correr a los cholos donde está mi casa.” (Like that time teacher that the police came to where my house is to run out the cholos.)

“Oh también cuando la migra corrió a toda esa gente a México.” (Or also when the migra sent all of those people to Mexico.)

My heart skips a beat. But I press on: do you think it’s O.K. what the migra did?

“No. No deben de correr a la gente de aquí.” (No. You shouldn’t chase people from here.)

“No es bueno eso. Mi tio...” (That’s not good. My uncle...)

“Pero maestra,” one boy interrupts, “si ellos no son de aquí, deben de ir a México. No son de aquí.” (But teacher, if they aren’t from here, they should go to Mexico. They aren’t from here.)

A dissenting opinion ... the first we have heard. Students are able to fuel the conversation themselves now. In the end, while no single solution has been formed, the dialogue seems to strike a personal connection with all students. Our discussion not only shows me how aware my students are of the events occurring in their surroundings, but also that they have well-developed feelings and opinions about them. I have underestimated their abilities to discuss the complex, controversial issues of their community that made me as well as my students feel uncomfortable.

**Commitment to Voice: Five Implications**

What have I learned from the experience of working on voice with my students? First, that teachers and students need time set aside to work on the development and expression of voice. Getting used to reflecting upon our lives critically, listening to others and writing for an audience take practice and time. Class communities, particularly of young children, need these opportunities, not just monthly as I provided them, but daily or weekly. As teachers, we need to look at how we structure our day and find ways to make voice development part of our routine.

Second, teachers must continuously reflect upon their own cultural, linguistic, class and gender experiences, and how these affect their assumptions about and interactions with students. We are kidding ourselves if we think we leave our backgrounds at home when we go to work in the morning. All professional development opportunities for teachers should provide the time and safe context for reflection on and sharing of our experiences.

Third, teachers must be encouraged to become ethnographic researchers of their own school communities. It isn’t always possible for us as teachers to live in the communities of our students. Yet the more we listen to the experience of their daily lives, the more informed our practice is, particularly in the development of voice. Administrators must be responsible for providing teachers the time and support to conduct home and community visits and to share what they’ve learned with colleagues.

Fourth, schools must look at the ways they encourage or discourage critical perspectives and risk-taking behaviors among students, and attend to how these behaviors influence expression of voice. While we
Julio Encounters the Codes

Julio has been typically characterized an “average” student by his previous teachers. Now a second grader, his writing demonstrates use of correct spacing most of the time as well as conventional spelling, while punctuation and capitalization are less consistent. Often his written pieces are short and Julio has to be encouraged to elaborate on his ideas. Julio is extremely participatory in class, a student so eager to contribute to discussions, he frequently falls out of chairs, interrupts others and forgets to raise his hand. While he contributed a lot of ideas, he also did a lot of fidgeting, jumping and urgent calling, “Teacher! teacher! teacher!” He also has a great sense of humor and shares this with the rest of us at times I usually find inconvenient (though he’s the type of student I have to laugh with anyway.) His language of preference and that of literacy instruction is Spanish.

I was intrigued with what Julio’s entries would show me, particularly because it didn’t seem he was always listening attentively during discussion of the pictures. His typical brevity in his writing also made me wonder if I would see more elaboration in the voice-journal entries.

1/26: The Rainy Day
Before the discussion, Julio began to write: “Yo salí a jugar pelota y llovío.” (I left to go play and it rained.) He erased this though, and wrote over it: “Yo salí a jugar afuera pero no pude salir a jugar.” (I went outside to play but I couldn’t go out to play.) His illustration shows a house, outside of which a boy and girl stand next to a flower and an apple tree. A cloud hangs over the house and rain falls on the house.

3/19: The Invisible Girl
Before the discussion, Julio had written his name and the date, and drew a line under them. After the discussion, he wrote: Estimado amigo, te agradeczo porque tu te sientes feliz porque estas jugando bonito y juegas bonito con tus amigos.” (Dear friend, I appreciate that you are happy because you are playing nicely and you play nicely with your friends.) His illustration resembles the picture shown in the code with different colored people and objects resembling rocks and slingshots. During our class discussion, we had not talked about writing a letter to friends. At other times of the day though, we typically give appreciations to other students, and frequently write letters. Is Julio extending a structure we use in our class in solving the problem of this code and communicating with his abstract audience?

5/21: The Woman Who Outshone The Sun
Before the discussion, Julio wrote: “Ellos están enojados porque quieren luchar con las señoras y con los señores que están pobres y tristes y los señores malos agarraron palos para pelear con los pobres y tristes y quieren correr a las personas que no quieren en el pueblo. Ellos no quieren a la señora porque no la quieren en ese pueblo.” (They are mad because they want to fight with the women and the men that are poor and sad and the bad men grabbed sticks to fight with the poor and sad ones and they want to run the people they don’t like out of town. They don’t like the woman because they don’t want her in that town.)

After the discussion, he wrote: “Yo me siento triste porque corren a la gente que no quieren en el pueblo de ellos. Porque no ayudan a los otros señores y por eso los corren del pueblo.” (I feel sad because they run the people they don’t like out of their town. Because they don’t help the other men and that’s why they run them out of town.) Below, there is an illustration of a house with three figures outside. Two in red appear to be sad, one in yellow, angry.

Reflection: Julio’s entries taught me that he was indeed listening to discussions. All of his entries include language and ideas brought forth by classmates (jugar, bonito, pueblo, señores). What I found particularly interesting, though, was the way Julio extended what he heard in class discussions. Even with the first code, where his writing is brief, he related personally to the character. In the second code, he almost seems to suggest a solution to fighting by composing a letter of appreciation to a friend. And in the last code, he doesn’t just relay what is happening in the picture, he responds to it emotionally and is critical of it.
may say we value democratic principles, how do we really live them on a daily basis at school? We must continue to reflect upon, question and discuss the reasons for doing what we are doing.

My reason for committing myself to generative themes has been to communicate more effectively with my students, shattering the off-putting image of the powerful red pen, big desk, and stapler. I hope my students will leave my class with voices of strong conviction, developed partly thanks to our ongoing dialogue.

**Note**
Darder utilizes the term “bicultural” to refer to those that, in her words, “must contend with: (1) two cultural systems whose values are very often in direct conflict; and (2) a set of sociopolitical and historical forces dissimilar to those of mainstream Anglo-American students and the educational institutions that bicultural students must attend.” (1991, p. xvi)

**References**


**Cathy Carmichael is now a second-grade teacher at Davis Bilingual Elementary in Tucson, Arizona and a doctoral student at the University of Arizona. Her research here was conducted as a Fellow of the Central California Writing Project and thanks to the support of colleagues at TREE (Teacher Researchers for Educational Equity) and the National Writing Project.**