Bicultural Literacy

A Personal Exploration

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My grandfather would return from work and, after dinner, invite me to sit on his lap to read La Opinion. On those occasions, I imagined myself reading. My eyes searched unrelentingly to locate the exact place where his eyes met the print. Sometimes I thought I had found the exact spot, but I was not always sure unless I asked and he pointed.

If it is true that people are shaped by the total of their life experiences, then it is likely also true that professional identities and ideologies form in the same way. Who was it that said, "We teach who we are?"

I am informed by my experiences and observations as a teaching professional in and out of schools. In educational environments, particularly policy-making environments, there is little written or verbal discussion of bicultural experiences such as mine, experiences similar to those of many of the students I have taught. In this essay, then, I want to reflect on the complex nature of my own literacy, or biliteracy, and suggest a broader concept of literacy, one that validates those experiences within the family setting that may be outside of the mainstream experience but important to the print and oral literacy experience nevertheless.

Though I am a Latina, I cannot remember a time during my developmental years that I have not been surrounded by both Spanish and English mixed with urban community dialects. My parents both spoke English primarily. Since they worked full time, I came to spend many days and some months each year with my Spanish-speaking grandparents. At other times, I listened to my parents read stories to me in English, not unlike Anglo children who also grew up in Los Angeles in the years following World War II.

It was in the home of my mother's parents that I began to understand my bicultural self and to form the attitudes that affect my educational philosophy and performance as a teacher and leader.

My earliest memories of literacy events took place mostly in the large living room and adjoining kitchen of my grandparents' home in a central Los Angeles neighborhood inhabited primarily by immigrant Chinese, Italian, Russian, and Mexican, with a sprinkling of African-American families, and mixed marriages across these groups. Here most residents owned their own homes and took pride in that fact. My grandmother chose this multicultural place because of the clean, well-maintained streets and yards.

Four of my mother's brothers, all of whom had fought in the war, lived in the large house, working by day and gathering around the dinner table at night. Speaking only Spanish, my grandmother, a formidable matriarch whose school years were cut short because she was needed to care for an ailing mother, told captivating stories about her girlhood in Mexico and about her journey in 1912, when she was sixteen, with her family, through Tijuana and San Ysidro to Los Angeles. Over the years, she lived in three homes in Los Angeles and returned to her birthplace in Irapuato, Guanajuato only once. Eventually, she learned to speak English fluently and write her name in order to become a United States citizen in the 1950s.

My grandfather, on the other hand, was a more mysterious character. He was some-
thing of a rebel and more ambivalent about
taking on North American ways than was
my grandmother. As a young man, he left a
prospering business family and subsequent
inheritance in Mexico to set out on his own
under a special permit to work on the
transit system in Los Angeles. Yet he
remained an outsider in his chosen country.
Since his family claimed Mexican land and
business ownership, and since he held a
senior position in the family, I suspect that
he had completed some part of a formal
education. I know for sure that he was an
avid and fluent reader of Spanish texts.
Though I believe he knew more English
than he let on—after all, he worked for the
local transit company alongside English-
speaking peers for forty years—he spoke
only Spanish at home and would not answer
family members, including my grand-
mother, if they tried to speak to him in
English. I am not sure if this reluctance
to speak English was motivated by cultural
pride or grew from a lack of confidence in
his speaking skills. However, because he
came to this country literate in Spanish, he
seemed to have no trouble acquiring the
necessary English writing skills to fill out
the paperwork for resident status, employ-
ment, and the purchase of a home, but he
would only go so far. Until the end he
refused to become a United States citizen,
despite my grandmother’s pleas.

As I recall, my first efforts at reading were in
Spanish at my grandparents’ home. My
grandfather would return from work and,
after dinner, routinely invite me to sit on his
lap as he read aloud from La Opinión, the
local Spanish-language newspaper, while my
grandmother listened to Mexican folk music
and local Spanish language news on the
radio. I remember imagining myself
reading, listening attentively to each word
and carefully watching his twinkling, brown
eyes, framed by skin weathered in the sun
and clouded behind heavily smudged
eyeglasses, move across the page. My eyes
searched unrelentingly to locate the exact
place where his eyes met the print that
coincided with the sounds of the words
calling from his mouth. Sometimes I
thought I had found the exact spot that he
read, but I could not be sure unless I asked
and he pointed.

On those occasions I wasn’t, of course,
actually reading, but rather exhibiting what
primary teachers describe as pre-reading
behaviors. Now when I observe primary
teachers working with small groups of
children, I am reminded of those days on
my grandfather’s lap.

Beyond his reading, he explained the world
to me in Spanish. He commented on reports
disasters in the macabre detail typical of
Latino humor, and he sprinkled his analysis
of the foolish goings on of local politicians
with a tone of detached cynicism. During
those formative years, he was my filter for
the world outside of my family, and I did not
recognize him as being different linguisti-

cally and culturally until I attended school.
He had his own set of biases, less familiar to
more mainstream thinkers, and they would
influence me into becoming something of a
rebel, like him.

Now when I hear some teachers conjecture
about the dearth of texts in Latino homes, I
wonder if they realize that there are many
homes like my grandparents’ home, whose
occupants may not subscribe to Newsweek
or purchase novels listed on the New York
Times Best Seller List, but where Spanish-
language newspapers and magazines are
read and where events and ideas that affect
the community as a whole are discussed
vigorously and intelligently in Spanish.
When I entered kindergarten, I was a fluent
speaker of both Spanish and English but,
sensing that I was somehow different, I had
little to say in either language. I remained
silent in school while chattering unceas-
ingly at home. The school I attended had no
bilingual program in any language and it
was quite clear to me from the outset that
my family expected me to learn to read and
write English. There would be no discussion
to the contrary.

But my early experiences in my grandpar-
ents home had created for me a bond with
the Spanish language and culture that was
not to be broken. In seventh grade I began
reading, even though I had no formal
schooling in Spanish, short stories and
novels in Spanish that I found on the shelves
of my grandparents’ home. These books
were written primarily for adults, often
difficult to understand, and perhaps too
provocative for a budding romantic, but
they nevertheless lured and motivated me to
read. It was not until high school that I
studied Spanish in the classroom—and then
with a teacher who would tolerate only
formal Spanish dialects.
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By my account, then, I would consider myself a biliterate learner living a bicultural life in those early years, that is, participating in literacy events in two languages in distinctly different cultural contexts simultaneously: English in school and with my parents, and Spanish in my grandparents’ home. What I recognize now is the absence of encouragement and opportunities to develop my bicultural voice through reading or writing during all of my school years. What could have been a liberating experience, one that could have validated my pride in my bicultural identity, never happened. My school experience was typical for the time and, sadly, is still typical for many bilingual children presently in California schools. Bilingual children, especially those in low socioeconomic settings, still find few opportunities to explore ways to construct the unique stories of their bicultural or multicultural experience. This phenomenon has become more obvious to me as I have become aware of the institutional biases and the political agendas that produce legislative mandates that have little to do with the needs of diverse individuals.

It is true that I managed to function in the mainstream, middle-class “contact zone” of an all-English classroom, from kindergarten through college, but as a teacher I have seen far too many Latino students who are not surviving in school. They are dropping out as early as junior high school.

This exploration is an attempt to broaden the conversation, and to encourage readers, particularly those in power, to recognize that all of these children also have their stories of literacy. The current demand for accountability sets forth a multitude of specifics that leave little room for the special histories of English-language learners. My concerns about the cultural, social, linguistic, and literacy development hurdles that students learning English must overcome in order to survive—and about the dilemmas and frustrations of teachers who lack institutional or professional support—have compelled me to write these recollections and reflections. I hope that educational decision-makers who read this might consider a less myopic view of teaching and learning for the diverse students within our classrooms today.

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