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"¿Y Que?": Diverse Literacy Experiences within a pre-College High School Program

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The challenges faced by children in American schools are significant. These challenges are further exacerbated when issues of race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, social class, and language minority status are factored into the equation. In this article, four Latina staff members from a college access program in Michigan examine the literacy practices of the emergent bilingual Spanish/English-speaking high school students they assist. Their college access program serves students in grades 9–12. Services are provided daily during the academic school year and over a six-week period each summer.

Many of the students enrolled in the program have recently immigrated from Guatemala. In many cases, the language spoken at home is neither English nor Spanish, but an Indigenous Guatemalan language. In addition, these students are often the first generation in their homes to receive any formal education and many are the first in their families to learn to read and write. Nevertheless, the authors remind us that the parents of these students still demonstrate different forms of literacy—literacies which have a long history of being discounted and marginalized within our traditional schooling structures.

In this article, the authors explore these various challenges and ponder ways in which Western standards of teaching and learning can be bridged with culturally sustaining practices, as they prepare their students for post-secondary education. To produce this article, the authors recorded, transcribed, and thematically organized their conversation around various themes. Structured in a question-and-answer format, this article will explore the following four contrasting themes:

- Western vs. Indigenous Forms of Literacy
- Linear vs. Circular Ways of Knowing and Teaching
- Bilingual vs. Monolingual Brains
- School-based vs. Summer Literacy Enrichment Activities

While we hope the resources and information provided will be helpful to our colleagues in the field of education, it is also important to note that each Latina/o/x and/or Indigenous community is unique and varied and therefore, the experiences shared in this article are not meant to be generalized.

Western vs. Indigenous Forms of Literacy

Q. Many of your students' parents cannot read or write—in any language. Does this mean that they are "illiterate"?
A. Many of our students come from Guatemala, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America. For most families, Spanish is the dominant language. However, we also have students who speak an Indigenous Mayan language. In our program, it is not uncommon to serve parents who do not read or write. We are often asked if we see a relationship between low parent literacy and student struggles: 1) in reading and writing, 2) on standardized tests, and 3) with low English Language Arts grades. The simple answer is, "Yes, we do." But, for us, the answer is much more complex than that.

We would like to take this opportunity to disrupt the "low literacy/illiterate" trope and provide an alternative way of understanding literacy. Though not all of our families speak an Indigenous language, many observe traditions and practices that are deeply rooted in their Indigenous culture (Batalla, 1996). Therefore, many of the practices we use are informed by this history and the rich cultural traditions that shape our students' identities.

According to Hernandez-Zamora (2010), for many Indigenous people in Latin America, literacy is not just "the simple acquisition of a technical ability" (p. 9). It is not just the ability of a person to decode a script. Literacy is socially and culturally constructed. It is an important part of one's identity. It is a way to deepen one's relationship with the earth. Literacy provides the context for how one reads, understands, and responds to the world around them. It provides the context for how people understand each other and themselves.

In an Indigenous tradition, literacy can be taught by teachers and elders as well as by the earth: so, the trees teach; the water teaches; as does the wind and the rain. Literacy is how people share their experiences. Literacy is not about establishing a truth (Gonzales & Rodriguez, 2017).

On the contrary, most literacy practices in U.S. schools are anchored in the positivistic tradition which centers accuracy, logic, and truth (Green, 2017). Educational institutions privilege and routinize ways of organizing, analyzing, summarizing, documenting, talking, and knowing that are Western in orientation. It is often implied that literacy is a "neutral, transferable and measurable skill" (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010, p. 8). Yet, we must recognize that a wide variety of discursive practices exist, each with their own framework for reading and writing their world.

For example, in an Indigenous literacy tradition, one learns how to read basket-weaving patterns. Patterns can recount creation stories, denote one's historical lineage, or remind us of important values. The colors used can express the philosophical perspectives of a family or a community. The type of material used can denote purpose. If it is a sweetgrass basket, it can be used for ceremonial medicines. If it is a reed mat, it exemplifies the ways in which we each are a part of the woven fabric of our community. When we sit on this mat, we are reminded that the community can hold us and support us wherever we are (Gonzales & Rodriguez, 2017). Ojibwa scholars Christenson and Poupart (2013) called these elder epistemologies. They are literacies passed down by one's ancestors. Many Latina/o/x students are still oriented around these paradigms.

The literacy discourse of schools has more of a Western orientation. Literacy in schools is to support students in having access, ownership, and power (Gee, 1998). Thus, we feel that our families are not illiterate, but rather they are being asked to appropriate Westernized discourse practices, because those are the practices at the top of the global food chain: these are the practices that will determine their level of access to not only postsecondary education, but also to the skilled and

unskilled labor opportunities they may seek. We are not arguing for one way over another, but rather that diverse literacies should have parity in our classrooms. Moje and her colleagues (2004) argue that, in addition to the Indigenous and the Western, a third space is needed where these two orientations can coalesce and where students can engage in safe ways around language, culture and literacy.

It is critical that our students know that their literacies matter. According to Hernandez-Zamora (2010), literacy is not just about decoding words and texts in measurable ways. It is also about using their words and texts alongside their traditional literacies to decode their world in ways that are dynamic and unique to who they are and where they come from.

Linear vs. Circular Ways of Knowing and Teaching

Q. As a college access program, how does the way that you teach literacy differ from the traditional school setting?
A. Traditional classrooms are often organized in ways that are Western and linear. In a linear and Western framework, knowledge is removed from the natural world, packaged and examined as a series of methodical steps (Smith, 2012). There is a pre-determined or standardized "right" or "correct" way to do things. There is an emphasis on time on task and there is a designated timeframe in which mastery must occur. One step must be completed before going on to the next step. One must master first grade before moving on to second grade; master high school before having access to college. Math must be completed from 8:00 am to 9:00 am, Science from 9:00 am to 10:00 am, and English from 10:00 am to 11:00 am.

Many Indigenous cultures, on the other hand, are organized in ways that are more circular and relational. Students learn in time or with time, but learning is not bound by time. Core concepts are learned according to and alongside the natural cycles of the earth, rather than in a classroom and through a book which can rupture and displace one's connection to the land (Smith, 2012). In the circular way of thinking, things are also methodical but in a different way. For example, one might not break a story into separate parts for the purpose of analyzing or labeling in a stand-alone and pre-determined way that is separate from the whole and graded for accuracy. Rather, the point of a story might be the moral, values, or intention, or the ways in which a story speaks to each unique student and deepens their understanding of self and their relationship with creation. When asked, "How do you know?" students' responses might not be about "how I know" or "what I know." Rather, using circular thinking, they might more naturally consider what they should do with the information in-context. Again, they may be oriented by their cultural experiences to cue in to different kinds of information. It can take students twice as much time to complete an assignment, because they have to try and translate words and context, mediate cultural experiences and ways of knowing and then navigate between two distinct literacy frameworks.

Our program is sensitive to these diverse ways of knowing and expressing knowledge. We look for culturally responsive ways to scaffold for students to make meaning. As an afterschool program, we are able to create that third space (Moje et al., 2004) described above, where students are invited to display their cultural literacies. We do this by showing images of murals and cultural symbols and objects, as well as historical iconography from our students' community and inviting them to read their world by telling us what they see, what they know and what it means. Then, we look for ways to scaffold and connect to Western literacy practices. Some literacies have to be translated and mediated across cultures. For example, the Virgin Guadalupe painted in a local mural, hovering over a cornfield, might also be recognized as the earth mother, Tonatzin in the Indigenous Mexicatl tradition (for context see this article in *Indian Country News*—a Native news source: https://www.indiancountrynews.com/index.php/news/education-life/6538-a-short-history-of-tonantzin-our-lady-of-guadalupe). One student might say the corn is sick and asking for our prayers; another might say the virgin is telling us that she is with us while we work in the fields; a third response might be,

Tonatzin is reminding us that we are the People of the Corn. This kind of contribution invites rich dialogue from which we can scaffold to a variety of Western terminology and concepts, such as, the elements of a story or writing for different purposes. Sometimes, cultural practices and orientations are difficult to translate. For example, in the Indigenous world, the water is alive and has a spirit, though in a Western framework, students are taught that the water is "abiotic" and non-living. When these differences arise, we teach students how to:

1) mediate language and meaning (This is one way of understanding the world, but it does not mean that other ways do not exist.)
2) make their cultural concepts relevant (Students can speak up or speak with the teacher, bring in artifacts, or invite a speaker to supplement the curriculum.), and
3) create a space for their values, traditions and/or beliefs when these orientations are not reflected by the curriculum. To do so, we teach sentence stems so students can "honor and add" to the curriculum, such as: "This (Western concept) is important for me to know, ***and*** in my culture, we do/we believe/we create/we honor/we celebrate . . ."

Additional strategies we use to teach students to align their circular ways of thinking with linear ways of writing or storytelling are:

1) Engaging in backward mapping. After completing the body of a paper and possibly even the conclusion, the student can then go back and review what they wrote to pinpoint what to write about in the introduction. This method seems to resonate culturally with the students, as opposed to forcing them to complete the first paragraph first, before being able to move on—in linear fashion—to the next paragraph. In fact, insisting on conforming to this linear writing structure can cause anxiety in our students, leading to writer's block.
2) Creating voice recordings, on their cell phones, in their own language, can provide a safe space for students to think through an assignment or a response. After completing the recording, students can go back, hear the recording and listen for the main points and translate to English.
3) Metacognition can be used as tool to increase student awareness and understanding of their own thought processes. This concept could also potentially be a good way to increase our students' reading comprehension by having them map out what they are thinking while posing questions for them, such as: "What are you trying to say?" or "What thought process led you to get there?"
4) Minimizing the emphasis on standardized assessment. We don't want students to be constrained by their test scores or literacy levels. These frameworks can invalidate critical knowledge constellations that are needed for student achievement (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010).

Since we are not under the same kinds of standardization and assessment pressures as today's teachers and administrators, we have the flexibility and privilege to operate at the periphery of traditional schooling structures. Today's classroom moves so quickly that teachers may not get to spend the time they would like going through the curriculum at the pace needed for ESL students. Likewise, our students may lack the confidence, the comfort-level or the language to ask questions; and they get frustrated when they do not understand content and have limited classroom resources to help bridge the circular with the linear. This is why the third space is important. In the third space, we can work to support both teacher and student success and to honor all these diverse skill sets and ways knowing.

Bilingual vs. Monolingual Brains

Q. What is a bilingual brain and how is it related to literacy?

A. Examining the research on bilingual brains has been critical to our work, especially with regards to literacy. We learned that most of the early research that supports classroom literacy theory was developed based on how language functions within the brain of monolingual English speakers.

However, subsequent research developed out of a need to understand how language functions within the

bilingual brain. According to Kokkola (2013), literacy development occurs differently for monolingual English speakers than Spanish-speakers learning English. This is because bilinguals tend to activate both sides of their brains to perform linguistic functions like code-switching. Code-switching, where a bilingual or multilingual speaker shifts between languages and dialects within an utterance, is a healthy way for Spanish speakers to use both English and Spanish together while learning (Kracht & Klein, 2014). This can help with reading comprehension, language proficiency and concept development (Escamilla & Coady, 2000; Ramirez, 2000). For example, bilingual brains can start sentences in Spanish and finish them in English; or, they can use cue words, such as cognates, that help develop connections to what they may miss in their second language.

Thus, bilingual learners can use their first language to develop concepts and connections in the second language. For example, with our Spanish speaking students, cue words such as "Y que?" which roughly translates to "so what" or "and why," are a way to help them write a thesis and organize their thoughts. "Y que?" is a way of getting them to think: "Why does your thesis matter?" "Why should a reader take the time to read the rest of your essay?" "Does your essay answer the 'so what'?" This is also a way of helping our students move past their opinions and more towards providing textual evidence in their writing.

We also encourage what García and Wei (2014) call "translanguaging" which is a pedagogical practice that embraces the use of diverse linguistic skill sets. According to García and Wei, we need to move beyond educational policies that promote the idea of bounded languages and allow students to utilize their full repertoire of resources that better reflect their realities.

For example, we encourage students to write freely, in whatever way comes most naturally to them. This means that we have to move away from standardized English writing practices such as recognizing and correcting conventional expressions that are taught and assessed in classrooms and on standardized tests. These practices can be disruptive to a student's thinking process as they have to translate meaning and context across cultures, worry about rules, and stylistic differences in formality, etcetera. This is an example of bounded language expectations. It can stifle student creativity, process, and—in the end—success. We do not want our students to worry about these things. We do not want them to have to stop what they are doing midstream because they might lose what they want to say and the motivation to say it.

An example of this comes from one of our students who has low English Language Arts scores in school as well as on standardized tests. However, he is able to stylistically and creatively use his language to rap. Both summers he has been with us he has showcased his rapping talent in his own language. He is able to make connections in his native tongue but still struggles to transcribe his message into his second language. We celebrate our students at each stage of their process and do not stigmatize or shame them when they choose to not use the English language. Additionally, we recognize that the work he does when creating songs will build confidence and easily translate into his second language as he develops his bilingual brain capacities. Translanguaging is another tool that can be used to engage this student in all his linguistic skill sets.

School-based vs. Summer Literacy Enrichment Practices

Q. Is there a difference in the literacy practices used by schools in comparison to the practices used in your summer program?

A. During the academic school year, we find that—regardless of book type—students read to complete an assignment, not necessarily because they are motivated to read on their own. For example, some teachers incorporate books related to a students' cultures. Others incorporate trending or popular young adult literature. Assignments we have seen include reading and writing in relation to book prompts/reports; workbook writing that includes designing paragraphs, reading and responding to short stories, identifying the components of an essay, completing fill-in-the-blanks with the correct word usage; etcetera.When students read for school

assignments, we find that they can often say the words on the page, but comprehension might be missing. By the time students reflect and translate to build meaning, the rest of the classroom is already two steps ahead, and they fall behind. Oftentimes our students need more time and context than they are given to engage with all the various facets of a book or a story. However, in a fast-paced classroom environment, it is easy to understand how assignment points can take precedence over comprehension.

Sometimes, during the school year, students will be given reading comprehension worksheets where they are asked to read a passage and respond to a series of questions about the passage. To complete these kinds of tasks, we find that students seek out cognates, or words that may be etymologically related. Students will respond to assigned questions, such as, "What is the main idea of the passage?", based on the one or two cognate words they recognize. For example, students may read a passage and see the word "surprise" in English, which is the cognate of "sorpresa" in Spanish, and think that the passage must be about a surprise of some sort. They may also make this mistake with false cognates or words that seem related but are not. For example, they may see the word "embarrassed" used in the passage and make a connection to the Spanish word "embarazada," which means to be pregnant, and think that a character in the passage is pregnant rather than embarrassed.

Sometimes their cognate connections are accurate and can be a helpful scaffold that leads to greater meaning making. However, sometimes, cognate connections, even when accurate, can lead to the wrong answers, as in the case of "surprise/sorpresa." Nonetheless, cognate connections may be the only contextual cue students have for completing a task or assignment. For example, students may rely on cognate cues when following directions or answering comprehension or vocabulary-oriented questions. A Google image search for cognates and false cognates representing various languages groups is a good place to start for teachers who want to learn more.

What we notice is that students engage differently with these school-based literature assignments during the academic year versus the literacy activities we engage them in during our summer program. In the summer, we work in the third space where translanguaging is embraced and where these same students have time to reflect and respond to content. The books we choose for the summer contain readings in both Spanish and English from authors who represent different locations throughout Latin America and the U.S., such as *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, *Peluda* by Melissa Lozada-Olivia, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, and *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.

Reading comprehension for the summer program was assessed by having students relate their life experiences to themes in the literature. Simply providing access and time to do this work was not enough to get them motivated to read. Discussion groups with peer mentors prompted and gave students a space where their thoughts could be shared and their voices heard around topics such as immigration, assimilation, belonging, citizenship, and navigating between two different cultural worlds. Students were keener to complete the activities in an intentional way when they could relate the content to their own lives, rather than hunting and pecking for answers to themes unrelated to their experiences and for which they had little or comprehensible input, such as stories about baseball or libraries or the circus when students had no exposure to these referents.

The student's comprehension of context is key to a positive learning outcome. Oftentimes students will recognize words but are not sure of their correct meaning or usage because they lack context. This can make messaging confusing and inappropriately altered, depending on the contextual reference.

In the summer, when students were prompted to answer questions, they would say "the problem is this" or, "the answer is this"—as if completing a worksheet, reciting words from the text without demonstrating comprehension. They wanted to make the teacher happy, so they answered what they thought the teacher wanted to hear, not fully incorporating their own

interpretations or their own ways of thinking. We find that students do not know what they know but if a question is broken down for them, they realize they know more than they thought about the subject, despite low word knowledge. Students need help getting there; they need help navigating from one way of thinking to another. A simple turn-and-talk to prompt self-reflection and the space to debrief their thoughts and opinions in a way that invites translanguaging can go a long way in confidence building. All of these various processes were addressed during our summer program.

Conclusion

After working in schools with newly arrived Spanish and Indigenous language speakers as well as ESL and bilingual high school students, who are first generation students in the United States, we feel it is important that educators expand understanding of diverse literacies and give them an equal space in the classroom. Doing so will move classrooms beyond dualistic frameworks of right/wrong, good/bad, and literate/illiterate, and toward more dynamic and multimodal ways of thinking, being, and engaging. Toward this end, we recommend the following:

1) Leverage the diverse literacies practiced by the students' families, and create bridges to help students code-switch or translanguage when needing to conform to more Western literary conventions in their classrooms.
2) Recognize circular and non-linear ways of knowing and learning and utilize these in addition to Western, linear conventions to encourage increased engagement and creativity, while decreasing anxiety and writer's block among learners.
3) Harness the power of the bilingual brain to encourage a diversity of thought and to teach students how to be effective code-switchers and translators of different languages, cultures, and perspectives.
4) Build knowledge with regards to cognates and false cognates and look for ways to utilize this resource with students in the classroom.
5) Utilize multicultural literary texts to help increase student engagement and support positive classroom climates where students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the texts that they read for school.

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