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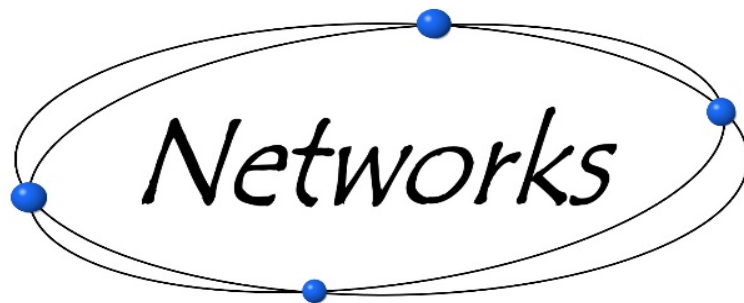
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Teacher Research**

## **A Teacher's Inquiry into Bringing in Biliteracy in a Fifth-Grade English-Only Classroom**

**Stephanie Lynn Abraham - Rowan University**

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### **Abstract**

This teacher inquiry project explored how I, a non-Spanish speaking teacher at the time, implemented critical, bilingual pedagogies to foster biliteracy development among my fifth-grade students. One, the project showed that students could further their biliteracy by incorporating their funds of knowledge through a family stories writing project. Two, many students were anxious about reading in Spanish, and dual poetry alleviated this due to its compactness and linguistic scaffolding. Finally, the project showed the continual issues of unequal power relations concerning bilingualism and biliteracy in US classrooms by showing how I failed to include languages other than Spanish in this project and how I succumbed to school pressures of high-stakes testing, often abandoning a critical, bilingual pedagogy in the process.

Keywords: Biliteracy; Teacher Inquiry; Critical Pedagogy

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I handed Gisela, *Plumas para Almorzar/Feathers for Lunch* by Lois Ehlert (1996), and I asked her to help me read the Spanish text. She looked at me, and exclaimed, "But I can't read in Spanish!" "Neither can I," I responded. "But do you think we could read it together?" As I began, "¡Oh, oh! Han dejado la puerta un po-," Gisela piped in with the word, *poquitito*. She smiled. And I continued to read, painstakingly pronouncing the words of a language that I did not speak.

This was the beginning of a teacher inquiry project that documented how I, a non-Spanish speaker at the time, could help my bilingual students also become biliterate. I knew that many of my bilingual, Latino students had been schooled in English-only settings, and they were not given the opportunities in our school or in my classroom to develop their Spanish literacy skills. In a way of "righting this wrong" I started to share dual language books and Spanish texts with my students. However, I did not realize that even my "strongest" readers, like Gisela, would not attempt to read in Spanish, what I perceived

as a simple picture book, independently. The phrase, "But I can't read in Spanish," became a common response when I asked my students to read in Spanish. So what could a teacher, who doesn't read Spanish either, do to help students read and write a language that she doesn't know? This became my inquiry for the 2008/2009 school year, as I began asking this question of myself I started to think about the pedagogies that I could put in place for these students.

The school and my fifth-grade classroom were culturally and linguistically diverse; the school-wide student population was 70% Latino, 25% African-American, and the remaining 5% of students coming from various racial/ethnic backgrounds including White/Anglo students, Vietnamese, and Indian. Located in a small city in Georgia, the school received Title I funding with 98% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. I had twenty-one students, and nineteen students participated in this project: Seven who identified as Latino, nine who identified as Latina, two girls who identified as African-American and one boy who identified as African-American. All, but one of the Latino students, had family connections to Mexico, while the one had connections to Guatemala. These students spoke a combination of Mexican Spanish, African-American English, Southern American English, Spanglish, Dominant American English, and indigenous Guatemalan languages. It's important to note, that six of my students, bilingual and monolingual, had Spanish as a daily class for 45 minutes; these were the students who were not in the Early Intervention Program (EIP), nor those who were still receiving ESOL services. Our community had a growing Latino population, and there were small neighborhoods, stores, and churches where Spanish could be seen and heard.

My first language is English; I was born in Georgia and I am White/Anglo-American. At the time of this project, my Spanish consisted of common words such as *casa* (house), *escuela* (school), *comida* (food), and common phrases such as *como estas* (how are you?). Importantly, I had studied French for five years, and I understood some metalinguistic features that Romance languages share, feminine and masculine nouns and pronouns, and the complex conjugation of verbs. Additionally, I was also fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), and before I was a teacher, I worked as an interpreter for the Deaf. Because of this, I understood the power relationship that could exist between languages, especially between spoken English and ASL, and I transferred that knowledge to what my emerging bilingual students were experiencing between their acquisition of Spanish and English.

## **What I Knew About Biliteracy**

Most of my students spoke Spanish as their home language, and they fluently engaged in Spanish with their peers during recess and lunch, and when their families were at the school, they would often translate and strategically switch between English and Spanish. I wanted to create a literacy pedagogy that would draw on these student funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) to help scaffold their biliteracy development in the classroom. I defined funds of knowledge as the bodies of knowledge that people accumulate over time that allow them to function in society and their home (Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil, & Moll, 2001). For instance, during my class students demonstrated their vast knowledge of Spanish by telling me familiar stories and explaining cultural practices, like cooking traditional foods and immigrating to a new country. I designed my classroom pedagogy to reflect this knowledge and used it to scaffold authentic

learning of Spanish literacy based on the belief that using funds of knowledge as a basis for learning would create a more rigorous pedagogy where my students would experience engagement and success.

Simply, biliteracy is the ability to read and write in two languages; in this instance, I wanted my students, who could speak English and Spanish, to also read and write in both of those languages. However, I knew that more than decoding letters was at play in becoming a biliterate person, and I knew that I needed to address the sociocultural and political factors that were at work in language learning (Reyes, 2012). For instance, I knew that English was marked as the language of instruction in my school and classroom, giving it power, but Spanish was reserved for areas like the hallway, cafeteria, and playground, and it was not viewed as appropriate for instruction. To create a space where my bilingual students could at least start to engage their Spanish in my classroom, I knew that I needed to create a space where Spanish went unmarked, at least ideally, so students would feel that it was acceptable to switch to Spanish for speaking, reading, and writing (Moll, Sàez, & Dworin, 2001). I attempted to "unmark" Spanish in my classroom by adding more Spanish books and dual language books to our classroom library, and sharing comics and photographs with captions in Spanish for morning work.

Reyes (2006) claimed that for biliteracy to happen students must have peer and adult support at school and at home. So, I encouraged students to engage with these "new" texts in multiple ways by reading with a partner and taking dual language books home to read with their families. Additionally, when designing my literacy pedagogies for my classroom, I intentionally stocked my classroom full of language-rich resources that highlighted dialectical and vocabulary differences in English. Novels by Barbara O'Connor and Walter Dean Myers were already a part of my classroom, as well as a good collection of texts that ranged across literary genres. In this project, one change that I made was to take this same approach as a means for a biliteracy pedagogy, so I looked for texts in Spanish that would also give my bilingual students access to the same wide range linguistic repertoires that exist in Spanish. Also, many of the Spanish texts or even dual language texts that were available in our school library were simply translations of a text that was originally written in English. I knew that for students to become literate in a language, then the texts written in that language should showcase real, authentic experiences where the language would have been used. To do this, I began buying and checking out books from our public library that showed Spanish in authentic use, such as *¡Si, Se Puede! / Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.* (Cohn, 2005) and *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad* (Jimenez, 2000).

And one of the most important activities that I incorporated was the Family Stories Writing Project (Dworin, 2006). The students collected a family story from a family member using an interview protocol. I told them that they could conduct their interviews in Spanish or English, and the story could be written in either language, or in both. This writing project was such an important piece because the students, bilingual or monolingual, could use their families' funds of knowledge as a basis for writing, which extended their linguistic repertoire by using more advanced vocabulary and concepts. As Garcia (2009) claimed, "bilingualism is centered, not on languages...but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds"

(p. 140), and writing families stories became one concrete way to focus this biliteracy pedagogy, not on my ability to speak Spanish, but on the Spanish that the children were already using in their lives, at home, at school, and with friends and family.

## Documenting the Project

This project was situated in the tradition of teacher research, where I sought to solve a real problem that had arisen in my classroom. Importantly, while there's been extensive investigation into how bilingual educators can develop biliteracy in a bilingual and/or dual language classroom, this project provided an answer to the question: how can a teacher, who doesn't speak Spanish, develop the biliteracy skills of her bilingual, Spanish-English speaking students in a traditionally monolingual classroom? During the project, more focused questions emerged such as: What were the resources needed to scaffold biliteracy? How did bilingual writing scaffold biliteracy? And what issues of power emerged through these practices of biliteracy?

For data collection, throughout the school year, I observed my classroom, kept a reflective journal, interviewed students, and collected student artifacts. During observations, I took notes about biliteracy events (Hornberger, 2003) on sticky notes and stuck them on my whiteboard, and at the end of each school day I wrote a reflection that included a summary, concerns, and questions evoked by the day's events. I interviewed 19 students, asking about their reading outside of the home, where they spoke Spanish, when they heard Spanish, and where they read Spanish. And I collected numerous examples of student work, including personal narratives, and poetry that demonstrated their emerging biliteracy.

In terms of analysis, this project was framed as teacher inquiry, meaning that I was actively questioning what was happening in my classroom, and receiving answers through the interviews and observational data. As my research questions were being answered, I began to change my pedagogy. For instance, it became a common theme in the student interviews that students could not locate books in Spanish in the classroom. Therefore, I designated a couple of tubs as the places to store bilingual and Spanish texts, and they were placed in our reading area along with the other books. I also changed my instruction by adding bilingual comics to morning work, and using documentaries in Spanish or English with subtitles in the other language (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). As I made changes to my classroom pedagogy, I began to focus on the biliteracy events, or significant moments where biliteracy was highlighted as being vitally important (Heath, 1982) as place of departure for analysis. This led to the organization of the following sections into three main instances of the biliteracy events: 1) Biliteracy, Poetry, and Critical Pedagogy; 2) Biliteracy, Families Stories, and Funds of Knowledge; 3) Biliteracy, Failures, and Power. As these themes became evident, I read through my data to code moments of when these ideas were prominent. Also, using the entries from my reflective journal, I turned to Anzaldúa's *autohistoria – teoría* (1987) to narratively embed each event in my lived experience as the teacher researcher while also theorizing how that experience contributed to development of critical, bilingual, and biliterate students.

## Biliteracy, Poetry, and Critical Pedagogy

As the school year progressed, in interviews and observations, students often said, "Reading in Spanish is hard" or "I don't like to read in Spanish." So, I began to look for texts in Spanish that were more accessible, of equal quality and rigor, and that were more relatable to their lives. This became especially evident when I read *Skippyjon Jones* (Schachner, 2005) to the class; it had been on display in our library, and unfamiliar with the book, I picked it up, and read it aloud to my class that same afternoon. Although, some students found the Mock Spanish in the book humorous, many bilingual students commented that adding the letter "O" to the end of an English word did not make it Spanish. None of the students commented on the covert and overt racism in the book, nor the story-line that perpetuated racist stereotypes of Mexicans and used Mock Spanish to devalue the complexity of the language and the people who use it (Hill, 2005; see Martínez-Roldán, 2014 for further analysis of these books). In search of alternatives to this, I found the quality, rigor, and critique that I wanted in bilingual poetry, especially the poetry collections by Jane Medina and Francisco Alarcon. As Cahnmann-Taylor and Preston (2008) claimed, it was in "[p]oetry's compressed investigations of personal and cultural struggles and linguistic tensions [that] help[ed] us navigate new territories, becoming more comfortable with discomfort and unknowing" (p. 243). And certainly, both the students and myself, needed help with navigating how to learn to read and write well in Spanish, but also, we needed help to discuss some of the critical issues that were happening around us and in the lives of my students. These poets, Medina and Alarcon, were apt to help us do this. For instance, the state of Georgia had just passed an Arizona-style anti-immigrant law, and many students were afraid for themselves and their parents as being at risk of deportation. The poetry by Jane Medina helped us take a "critical approach" recognizing that "language produces us" in a certain way and "words are not innocent, but instead work to position us," and we also recognize that "our world – geographically, environmentally, politically and socially – is not neutral or natural" (Janks, 2013, p. 227). This non-neutral and unnatural world became especially evident during shared reading and the pains that students experienced when asked to read in Spanish, and the issues that were brought forth in the bilingual poetry that they ended up reading aloud.

One day in September, during shared reading time, I asked for someone to help me read a bilingual poem, "T-Shirt," by Jane Medina (2004). Kamesha responded to my request, "They don't like reading in Spanish." I nodded, but continued to wait for a volunteer, and finally Josefina stood and read with me, and after shared reading she kept the book for the next 30 minutes reading the poems in Spanish and English. It took several weeks for students to volunteer to read in Spanish without my prompting, and Antonio was the first to do so. After he surprised us with his willingness to read a poem in Spanish and English, I asked him why he volunteered so quickly, and he responded, "I've never read Spanish in front of anyone before, I wanted to know what it was like." Because of the new energy and willingness (and sometimes arguments) to read bilingually, a schedule of daily readers was created and posted in the room.

After a bilingual reading of "Quitting" by Jane Medina (2004), I posed a question following the last line of the poem, "Maybe he quit being my brother/Quizás, dejo de ser mi hermano." This brief poem had disclosed a story of an older brother's choice to quit high

school and the subsequent changes to his relationship with his little sister, but at the same time it allowed us to discuss and deconstruct some of the perspectives and beliefs surrounding high school drop-outs. "How many of you know someone who quit high school?" Every hand went up in the classroom, including my own, thinking of my mother. For a few minutes the students shared their connections and thoughts on why those individuals quit high school and what they were doing now. Several students mentioned that these friends or relatives were not allowed to return to school, even if they wanted. Briefly, we explored reasons for this, taking on the perspectives of the student, the parent, and the school system. We questioned school policies that would expel students from high school permanently or so it seemed, and we discussed that the students felt powerless and could not complete school even if they wanted to. Taking on perspectives and questioning power are two important aspects to critical pedagogy (Jones, 2006).

Poetry helped open a space where we could discuss any topic (Jones, 2006). Soon our school's dirty bathrooms were included in discussion, and we questioned why the predominantly White school down the street did not have smelly restrooms like our school did. Students questioned why some teachers in our school constantly corrected the grammar of the African-American students demeaning them in the process, and they created a circle graph illustrating the racial/ethnic diversity of the required biographical readings as stated in the Social Studies Georgia Performance Standards. Here they discovered that nearly 70% were White males, only one African-American woman was included in the list, and absolutely no Latinos or Latinas were required for study. Outraged as a class, they began supplementing this list with various people who were African-American, female, Latino/a, Muslim, and Asian. So, biliteracy began to take on a life of its own because once George Lopez, Cesar Chavez, Gabriela Mistral, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, Oscar de la Hoya, and Ellen Ochoa were added to the readings, Spanish words began to appear in bilingual biographies, websites, speeches, and posters.

Another poem, "The Sign," (Medina, 2004) brought to light the absence of Spanish text in our public, community spaces, and the only times people seem to publish things in Spanish are to list rules for Latinos. I mentioned that I had seen a sign posted in Spanish at a local school supply store, often visited by students and their families. The sign was on the entry door and said children cannot be left unattended in the store; however, the sign was only printed in Spanish and this discriminated against Spanish-speaking customers, implying that their children are the only ones who are disruptive in the store. In closing, Cahnmann-Taylor and Denson (2008) argued that

Just as poetry allows a place for writing the taboo of vernacular language in the English classroom, poetry also allows students to address the dark places of their lived experience, seldom considered legitimate for classroom reading and writing. These dark places come with students whether they are addressed in class or not; when teachers provide an expressive classroom space, they affirm these lived difficulties are not classroom distractions, they are classroom materials. (p. 244)

In the next section, I will show how "dark places" became part of this teacher inquiry, the biliteracy pedagogy that I was trying to implement, and the student's writing over the remaining months of the school year.

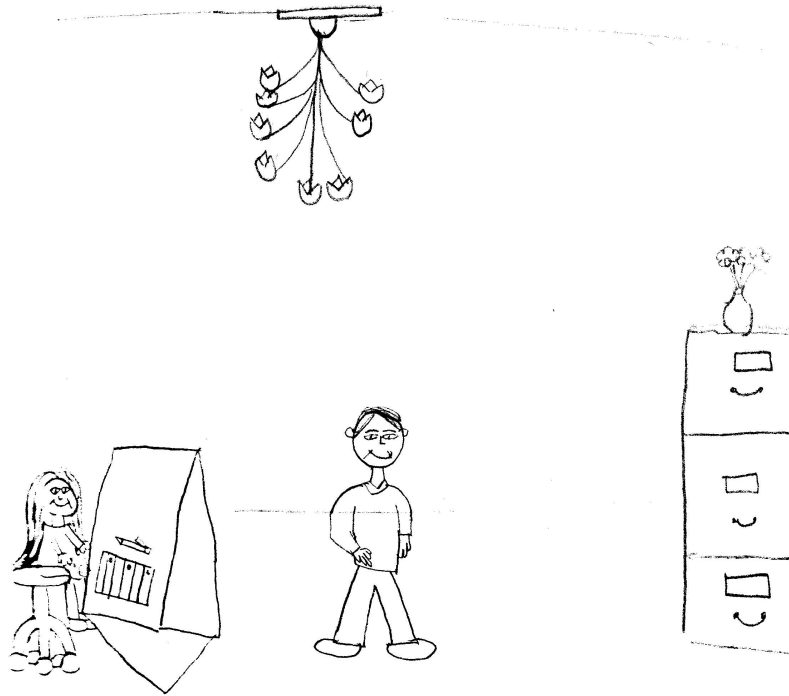
## **Biliteracy, Family Stories, and Funds of Knowledge**

The first week after winter break, I shared the family story writing assignment with the class. “We are going to collect family stories,” and I began to share my own collection of a “family story” passed down from my father. I showed the students my messy notes and shared the story of my great-grandfather losing his wife and how he walked a hundred miles from his cabin in the North Carolina mountains to the city, so he could work in a factory to raise enough money to pay for his children’s train tickets into the city, where they would begin a new life. For the next few days, I shared other published family stories, such as *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco (1998) and *The Christmas Gift* by Francisco Jimenez (2000). As family stories began to appear, students asked if their dad riding a bull or being afraid of cows could be used as a story, and I responded, “Of course!”

Gisela pulled me aside one day to tell me a brief version of the story she had collected. She told me about coming home to find her mother gone. She called her father to ask where her mother was, and he said, “She’s in jail.” Her mother was stopped in her car, and it was discovered that she did not have papers. Her father was desperately trying to find lawyers and money to get her out of jail. She asked if she could write about this, and I responded with teary eyes, “Yes, but I would you like to you write some of it in Spanish.” At first, she was hesitant, seeing that she still held to the idea that she could not read or write in Spanish. I suggested that she write only her father’s words in Spanish, reasoning that those words would be spoken in Spanish to her, and she could use those as a source or fund of knowledge for generating Spanish text. She took the suggestion, and an excerpt of this bilingual story can be seen in Figure 1.



She had to go to jail. My dad was going to leave us with my mom's sister which is my aunt. Because he was going to pay my mom's ticket to get her out. When he got there they told my dad my mom can not get her out because she was on the immigration list so they were going to take her back to México.



**Figure 1** Gisela's story about her mother

While students set up storyboards during our Language Arts/Writing block to draft their family story. I watched Gisela struggle to write hers. She asked if she could work at home, and I agreed. The next day she came to school with a handwritten, single-spaced, story that was more five pages long. Awed, I began to read. I realized that during the past couple of weeks, Gisela's mother had come home, but she needed to return to court to receive her sentencing. Using Microsoft Word, Gisela began laying out her story, so that she had space to add illustrations when it was finished. This same week, I interviewed her for this study. She told me that she didn't like asking her parents for help with homework, but her mother was instrumental in providing her with Spanish books. After hearing this, I sent home a literacy kit with bilingual directions and a collection of bilingual poems, *My Name is Jorge on Both Sides of the River* by Jane Medina (2004). A couple of days later, she returned with a bilingual poem, "My Shadow/Mi Sombra," along with an illustration (see Figure 2).

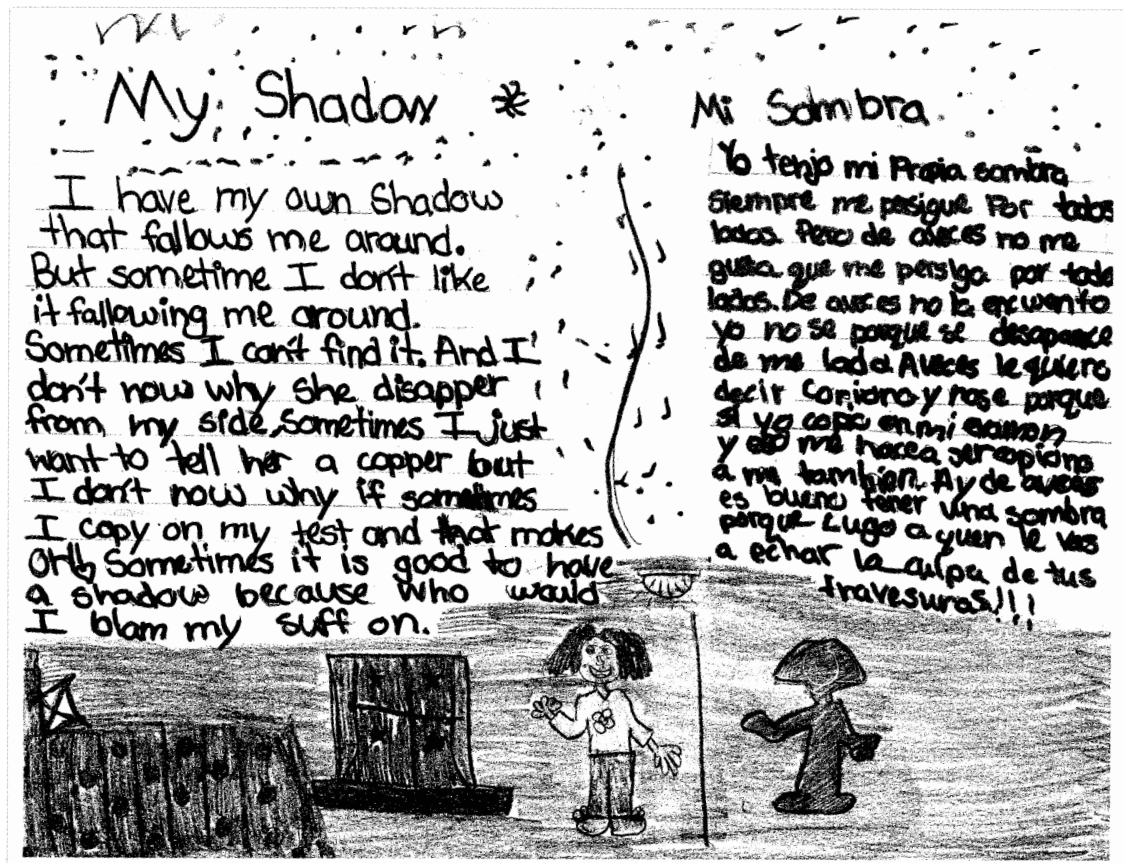


Figure 2 Gisela's story about her shadow

Gisela was checked out early one day in February for what I thought was a doctor's appointment. Later I found out more of Gisela's family story. Her mother and their friend had picked her up so that she could go to court with her mom. While waiting her turn for appearance, Gisela and her mother witnessed another undocumented immigrant receiving his sentence. He was taken into custody, and so were his children who were with him. They began to cry as the DEFACS workers took them from the courtroom. As the judge adjourned for his lunch, Gisela's mother told her to wait in the car, and that if she did not come back, their friend would drive her home. Her mother was now afraid that not only might she be taken into custody, but her daughter might be taken from her as well. Gisela's mother was ordered to deport by May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, or she would be taken into custody. The family planned their move back to Guanajuato, Mexico for the first week in May, and Gisela's story ended (see Abraham, 2015 for further analysis of Gisela's story).

For his family story, Antonio wrote a short, but funny, bilingual family story retelling his childhood fear of cows; the full story is included below, with one of his illustrations in Figure 3.

When I was three years old I was scared of cows. Then I wouldn't get close to them because I was scared.

Quando yo tenía tres años yo tenía miedo de vacas. Luego yo no me acercaba a ellas por que tenía miedo.

So when I had to feed the cows I left the tray far away and then the cows started to get closer so I started running.

Luego cuando les tenía que dar de comer les dejaba la comida un poco lejos y luego las vacas venían donde estaba yo pero yo corría.

I was scared because I thought the cows were mean because of the way they looked.

Yo tenía miedo porque yo pensaba que estaban enojadas conmigo.

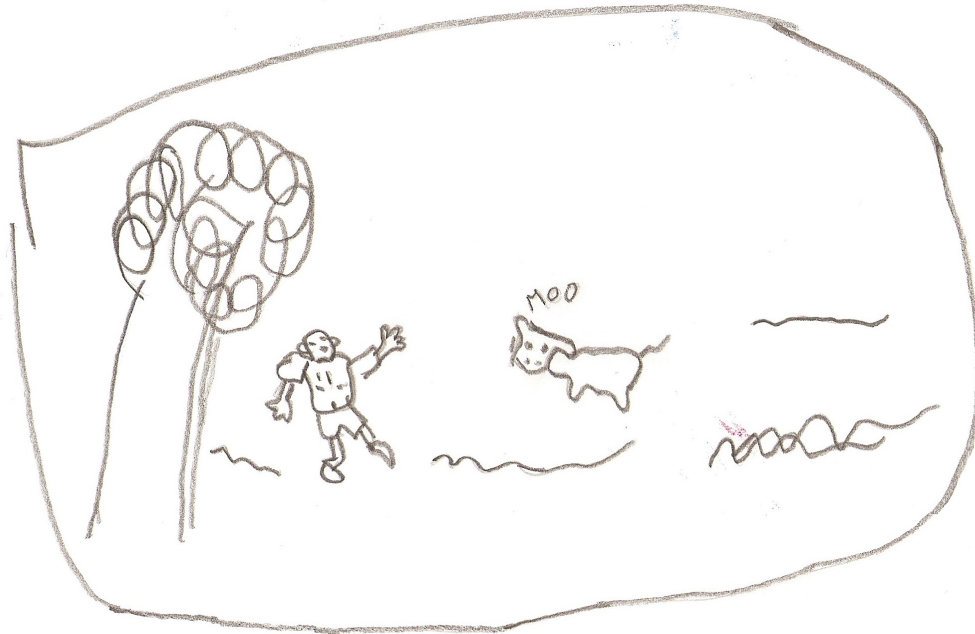
Then when I was four years old, I was no longer scared of cows because I learned that if you look mean doesn't mean that you are.

Luego cuando yo tenía cuatro años ya no tenía miedo de vacas porque aprendí que no son malas.

I complimented Antonio on his story and translations during his interview, and he stated that he did so well because, "Carlos helped me." Carlos was one of the students who went to Spanish class daily, and it appeared that peer support was vital for the translation tasks that I had asked the children to perform. Antonio's mom came to portfolio night, and she read the story aloud in Spanish to her other children, and we all laughed at his silly fear and poignant illustrations. The last drawing had a tiny cow giving a meager "Moo," with a huge, muscular Antonio bravely waving. If the story had been written in only English, his family may not have had the same kind of access or response. His mother spoke a little English, as I spoke only a little Spanish, but with the bilingual stories, parents accessed their child's work and immediately connected, critiqued, and responded to it.

THEN WHEN I WAS FOUR YEAR'S OLD I WAS NO LONGER SCARE OF COW  
BECAUSE I LEARNED THAT IF YOU LOOK MEAN DOESN'T MEAN THAT YOU  
ARE.

LUEGO CUANDO YO TENIA CUATRO AÑOS YA NO TENIA MIEDO DE VACAS  
POR QUE APRENDI QUE NO SON MALAS.



**Figure 3** Antonio's story about cows

By initiating the collection of a true family story, some serious topics were brought to the forefront. One day, during math time Lora stopped what she was doing, and she came up to me to tell me, "I have to pray now. My mom is trying to get across the border again." A few days later, she told me that her mom had arrived safely at home, and she and her mother wrote a family story together telling the story of Lora's mom crossing the border between the United States and Mexico (see Figure 4). Lora's family story entitled *La Vida de Mi Mama/My Mother's Life*, written in Spanish, chronicled her mother's journey back to the US from Mexico.

Pues allí iba comenzar lo peor de mi vida. Me quitaron dinero para comprar comida para dos días de camino que ese era el tiempo para llegar a los Estados Unidos me cargaron con una mochila que llevaba 2 galones de agua ,gaytores, manzanas , y unas barras de pan . Pomada para rasaduras bastantes pastillas para el dolor. Lo que recuerdo era muy pesada...



**Figure 4** Lora's story of her mom crossing the border

Lora's story led to a discussion of undocumented immigrants, the jobs that they had, and how they were treated. We read *¡Si, Se Puede! / Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.* (Cohn, 2005) and eventually students wrote persuasive papers arguing for labor rights, better food in the lunchroom, and cleaner bathrooms. As Zipin (2009) claimed, Gisela and Lora presented some "dark" funds of knowledge in their family stories demonstrating that when students write about real experiences, those experiences may be sad, violent, or scary. However, these dark funds of knowledge should not be silenced in the classroom. These experiences are of equal pedagogical value and may rewrite some of the harmful narratives that have been circulated about these children and their families, and in these instances, they disrupted harmful narratives about the poor, Mexicans, and the undocumented.

## Biliteracy, Failures, and Power

At times, encouraging biliteracy was easy especially during read-alouds, writing assignments, and independent reading. However, during math, science, and social studies,

biliteracy was a distant thought. Certainly, a bilingual teacher could have bridged these concerns by switching into Spanish for content area instruction, but my lack of Spanish proficiency limited those abilities. This was evident during a promising biliteracy event between friends, Lora and Leidy. Leidy had emigrated with her family from Mexico to Georgia in 2007. She had strong Spanish literacy skills, and she was acquiring English at a surprisingly fast pace, but she often struggled with science and social studies content related vocabulary. In this instance, we were discussing Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the invasion of Poland, thus beginning WWII. Lora, also bilingual, had four historical photographs pasted in her War & Peace scrapbook and began a retelling of the events in Spanish using the photographs to illustrate and guide her teaching. Certainly this could have been duplicated with other students, but feeling rushed, I moved the class on to another event. In hindsight, I realize that I could have deferred to Lora's fund of knowledge for translation into Spanish, and given her the floor to retell the events to the class in Spanish.

Another failure became evident on portfolio night; Lora shared her finished and published family story with her mom. However, her mom was more concerned about Lora's recent math grade, than her story. She also expressed concern in nearly tears, that I had taken Lora out of Spanish to put her in the Early Intervention Program for extra math help. My conversation with Lora's mom exposed my hypocrisy and linguisticism. I had succumbed to the pressure of our school's discourse on standardized testing, and I was scared that Lora would fail the math standardized test at the end of the year. Her mother brought back to the forefront that Spanish is more important, and she should still receive those services as well.

Another concern was that even though I attempted to value and incorporate the languages that my students used at home, I failed to recognize and include languages other than Spanish and English in the classroom. Juan showed me my failure to do this. He was born in Guatemala, and he was brilliant, easily testing into our gifted program, and the gifted teacher partnered with the middle school to get advanced math textbooks for him. He was always carrying around enormous novels, reading during lunch and recess. On the last day of school in 2009, Juan asked to use my cellphone to call his dad. I dialed the number and handed him the phone. As Juan began to speak, a language other than Spanish or English came out. When he hung up the phone, I asked Juan, "What language were you speaking?" He answered with, "Oh, that was the language of my father." We talked a bit longer, and I realized that Juan spoke Spanish, English, and two Guatemalan indigenous languages, which he called the languages of his father and mother. At this moment, I had failed to ask about what other languages my students knew besides English and Spanish.

Power was at work in all of these instances. Power worked to include some languages, English, sometimes Spanish, but excluded the indigenous languages. Power can value and devalue, make ideas seem more important than others; it makes us change our minds. The power found in my teacher authority prohibiting me from giving over instructional time to a child to teach content in a language that I did not speak. The power found in the discourse of standardized testing shaped my decision and actions to remove Lora from Spanish class. And the historical power, that rid our society of many indigenous

languages, still so strongly circulated that I did not even imagine that my students would still be able to speak one.

## Conclusion

In reflection, I saw how I could further the biliteracy development for my bilingual students by building on their linguistic funds of knowledge. First, it required a shift in thinking on part; I had to believe and act on the idea that my students were engaged in rich language and literacy practices that I was ignoring in my pedagogy. Also, I had to actively disrupt what my school and classroom dictated as valuable literacy practices: only English, school-governed writing prompts, and the completion of test-prep workbooks. Finally, literacy is a social practice, and we are always expanding our literacy practices as we pass through life. However, unlike monolingual, English speakers who readily expand their linguistic repertoires in US society and schools, bilinguals, especially children, must be allowed and encouraged to grow their biliteracy in and outside of school spaces.

As a message to other teachers engaging in teacher inquiry, I ask you to look for what you don't know, instead of what you do, and when you realize that there are issues in your classroom that you don't understand, what will you do about it? What changes will you make to your pedagogy, your life? Wynne (2002) wrote that her students "were silenced by language bias born of racism, biases that crippled their inquisitive manners" (p. 206). This project showed that when students can "use their language and their stories in the classroom" it might be the greatest way that teachers can empower students (p. 206). Drawing on the funds of knowledge of my students was one way that I could let students do this. This gave us access to my students' linguistic repertoires and biliteracy became a more natural occurrence in the classroom because students can share their personal experiences that included linguistically diverse events (Manyak, 2002). This project further illustrated Reyes (2006) statement, "when children have access to writing systems and to various literacy activities in both their languages, they are more likely to become biliterate rather than literate only in the dominant language" (p. 289). I hope that teachers will read what I did here and begin to include the many funds of linguistic knowledge that their students have in their classroom pedagogy. While remembering that languages are caught up in larger systems of power, which often results in the valuing of certain languages and language forms, while devaluing others, but when teachers intentionally try to disrupt that, students may have the chance to demonstrate their understandings of the world in new ways, and even may change their world for the better through their reading and writing.

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