

**Reimagining Resources:
Creating Spaces that Explore Multicultural Literacies**

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Abstract: This manuscript describes the ways in which we, university professors and directors, reimagined and transformed existing university classrooms to become shared spaces where the cultural identities of children of historically marginalized communities are recognized as rich contexts for learning. A summer camp for emergent bilinguals (*Camp Somos*) and The Williams Family Multicultural Literacy Collaborative (The Literacy Collaborative) invite unique connections between our university and partnership schools. In these spaces, children’s cultural identities and multicultural literature are central to the physical environment, curriculum development, and program experiences. *Camp Somos* and The Literacy Collaborative celebrate diversity in caring, inclusive, and equitable spaces.

KEYWORDS: multicultural education; multicultural children’s literature; school-university partnerships; bilingual education

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Essential 8: Boundary-Spanning Roles: A PDS creates space for, advocates for, and supports college/university and P–12 faculty to operate in well defined, boundary-spanning roles that transcend institutional settings.

Essential 9: Resources and Recognition: A PDS provides dedicated and shared resources and establishes traditions to recognize, enhance, celebrate, and sustain the work of partners and the partnership.

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“If you build it, they will come.” Ray Kinsella’s mantra (*Field of Dreams*, 1989) ran through our minds as we sought ways to build strong collaborations and respectful relationships between our university and local schools. As professors and directors at a university, we are committed to creating culturally responsive and sustaining learning contexts within and among our partnership schools. Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation states “A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge” (NAPDS, 2021). Doing this innovative work requires that we think outside the box, as we seek to identify and utilize resources readily available to us in new and creative ways. For us, this meant transforming existing university classrooms to shared spaces (expanding boundaries) where the cultural identities of children of historically marginalized communities are recognized as rich contexts for learning (expanding knowledge). Providing unique connections between our university and partnership schools, the summer camp for emergent bilinguals (Camp Somos) and The Williams Family Multicultural Literacy Collaborative (The Literacy Collaborative) are intentionally designed to celebrate diversity in caring, inclusive, and equitable spaces.

Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

How do we create and sustain culturally responsive learning contexts that are inclusive, caring, equitable, and that celebrate diversity? This question guides our work as we intentionally seek to address educational inequities that harm students of historically marginalized communities. “Opportunities to gain access to the most generally useful knowledge have traditionally been poorly distributed within and among most schools” (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromely, & Goodlad, 2004, p.30). We work to disrupt that narrative with our partnership schools by providing spaces for children where they are seen, heard, and valued through culturally relevant and culturally sustaining teaching practices (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Of critical importance to these practices is the centering of “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Culturally sustaining teaching utilizes culturally authentic texts and materials in ways that are designed to “build, extend, and sustain students’ local and cultural knowledge” (Nash, Panther, & Arce-Boardman, 2017, p. 605). These tenets guide our decisions as we select texts and materials, develop curriculum, and plan experiences.

Through the careful selection of read-alouds, reader response activities, and classroom materials, we provided mirrors (Bishop, 1990) for children to see themselves and share their lives. It was important to us that we focus on multicultural literature in these spaces as most of what children see in classrooms and marketing materials highlight the works of White authors and illustrators (McNair, 2008). Therefore, our intention was to strategically select texts and experiences that cultivate a space for children “where who they are and what they know is understood and treated with respect” (Fu, Hadijoannou, & Zhou, 2019, p. 28). Collaborating with school partners, teacher educators, PK-12 educators, and teacher candidates, our hope is that the Camp Somos and The Literacy Collaborative centralize and honor the voices and cultural identities of students.

Camp Somos

Our camp, located in a University early childhood laboratory school, offers an engaging and creative space for young emergent bilingual children to develop biliteracy skills (Spanish and English). Camp Somos prioritizes young children’s cultural and linguistic identities in a joyful,

caring space that intentionally reflects the lives and values the linguistic repertoire of the emergent bilingual campers (Figure 1). According to one camp teacher, “*The children are the heartbeat of this classroom. They choose which language to speak at any given time; their photos are on the wall; they are choosing the topic of their books that they are creating in the book center; their family portraits are hanging on a bulletin board in the classroom.*”

Campers are organized into two groups: kindergarten and first grade; and second and third grade. Two teachers, one bilingual and one English-speaking, and two University faculty work in each classroom. Additionally, bilingual peer mentors, ages 11 through 16, provide support to the teachers and campers by setting up materials, engaging with the children, and facilitating activities (Figure 2). Many of the campers are transported to and from camp via school bus, donated by a partnership school. The bus stop is conveniently located at a Hispanic church within walking distance for most campers. The curriculum focuses on cultural identity and includes camp meetings (to share bilingual children's books, sing, and dance), center activities (art, music, blocks, dramatic play, manipulatives, science, reading, writing), and outdoor/gym play (Figure 3). High-quality picturebooks created by Latinx/Hispanic authors/illustrators (many of which were bilingual or translangued), multicultural art materials, and a book-binding machine were foundational resources. For example, after reading a selection of books including *Viva Frida* (Morales, 2014), *How Alma Got Her Name* (Martinez-Neal, 2014), *A Billion Balloons of Questions* (Moreno, 2022), and *¡Esquivel! Un artista del sonido de la era espacial* (Wood, 2016), campers created cultural x-rays (Short, 2009) by decorating outlines of their bodies with images and words that reflected aspects of their personal and cultural identities (Figure 4). Additionally, campers created books that captured aspects of their cultural x-rays in more detail (Figure 5).

To date, Camp *Somos* has experienced much success. “*I do not know what magic you all use, but my child says he wants to come to the camp every day and all summer,*” one mother explained to the camp teacher. Camp *Somos* teachers and researchers who do not come from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the campers have expanded their knowledge of strategies for getting to know children and families, designing culturally relevant and sustaining classroom environments, and creating and implementing culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum. The number of camp participants doubled and we are now hosting camp for two weeks instead of just one. We are hopeful that Camp *Somos* will continue to grow and flourish, generating valuable insights regarding biliteracy and bilingual education in an inclusive context.

Figure 1

Two campers joyfully read Un caso grave de rayas, the Spanish translation of David Shannon’s A Bad Case of Stripes (1998).



Figure 2
Camp Somos participants

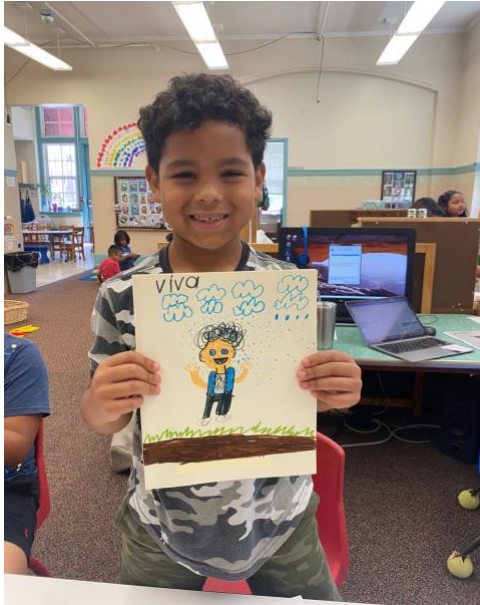


Figure 3
Campers exploring sea shells during center time.



Figure 4
One camper's cultural x-ray



Figure 5*One camper’s book*

The Literacy Collaborative

The Literacy Collaborative is designed to be an inspirational space that encourages, promotes, and sparks a love for literacy for PK-12 students in our community. Placing an emphasis on multicultural literature, we created a caring, equitable space where children and educators (current and future) read and respond to books that reflect a wide variety of cultures (Figure 6). As we envisioned The Literacy Collaborative, we embraced a broad definition of literacy that included engagements like bookmaking, digital literacies, storytelling dramatizations, music, and art. In this inclusive environment, multicultural books and engagements allow readers to explore and celebrate literacy experiences that honor ethnic, cultural, and social diversity. One Saturday morning, children from a partnership school studied Oge Mora’s (2019) award-winning picturebook *Saturday*. We began our day by having children select picturebooks from the shelves that hold the hundreds of multicultural titles to find a book to which they could relate. They then introduced themselves to us through the books; one child shared *Drawn Together* (Lé, 2018) and another shared Derrick Barnes’s (2020) *I am Every Good Thing*. Then, we read *Saturday*. As they read about the misadventures of a young girl and her mom, children discussed what they like to do with their caregivers on the days they spend together. Children then created their own pages of text and used multicultural art materials to create collage illustrations. They wrote a brief biography for an About the Authors page and we scanned each illustration. Using a book-binding machine, we created published copies of books for each child to take home and one to add to our library.

The strategic inclusion of “collaborative” in The Literacy Collaborative reflects the wide variety of stakeholders involved. Participants include partnership schools, other community agencies, university faculty and students, and Camp Somos campers. Professional authors and storytellers enhance and extend children’s love and craft of language and literacy through engagements. The Literacy Collaborative also serves as a resource for university classes. For

example, the class in Figure 7 explored multicultural literature and discussed the power of reading children’s books that reflect the lives of learners often underrepresented in picturebooks. Likewise, the university students’ explorations of multicultural children’s literature offered a window, expanding their worldviews beyond their own experiences. Additionally, university students volunteered to work with children in the events that we hosted, which provided hands-on literacy experiences for these education majors. In this unique space, students of all ages develop critical literacy skills and explore new ways to apply them.

Figure 6

The Literacy Collaborative



Figure 7

An early childhood class explores multicultural children’s literature.



Resources to Create and Sustain Culturally Responsive Learning Contexts

As we began envisioning both of these spaces, we recognized the wealth of resources available to us. These supports enabled us to build innovative spaces that are inclusive, caring, equitable, and celebrate diversity. College leadership encouraged us to dream big, supported us throughout our planning and implementation, and spread the word about our exciting innovations. We thought creatively about how to use existing physical spaces in our building. Camp Somos is housed in the college’s early childhood laboratory school during the summer, when the school was closed. With the support of the Dean and our IT department, we were able to repurpose an out-of-date computer lab that was seldom used for The Literacy Collaborative. Through the generous financial support from donors and funded grants, we renovated the space, purchased multicultural materials and children’s literature, and supported the overall operations of Camp Somos and The Literacy Collaborative. Both innovative spaces provide opportunities for collaboration with our extensive Partnership Network (teachers, students, and administration). For example, a district provided transportation, schools recruited students, and teachers participated in camp and

engagements. Using creative problem solving, we re-imagined existing resources and sought new opportunities to create inclusive spaces that invite culturally responsive learning contexts.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on our journey in creating these spaces, we learned the following lessons:

- Focus on the resources that ARE available to you (not on those that are missing). Considering possibilities instead of limitations enabled us to creatively approach the opportunity to reimagine and innovate.
- Collaboration is key. Find ways to draw together a wide variety of stakeholders, capitalize on their strengths, and highlight the positive outcomes for all involved.
- Situate yourself as a learner. In anchoring quality multicultural literature as central to curriculum and creating learning experiences that honor and respect children’s cultural identities, we continue to grow in our understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Identify strategies to create buy-in from community and school partners so that more children can experience these innovations. This has been a limitation for us and one we continue to problem-solve.

We hope that these lessons offer support to others who will engage in similar endeavors.

Looking Ahead

In considering these innovative spaces, our vision is not to recreate school settings based on mainstream education norms, but to utilize students’ strengths as they engage in literacy experiences that value cultural identities and spark joy (Love, 2019). As we continue to reflect (Essential: Reflection and Innovation) on our practices and experiences in Camp Somos, we look forward to collaborating with our university’s World Language Studies programs and deepening our partnership with the Dual Language Immersion program in a local school district. Additionally, we believe sharing our growing understandings about emergent bilingual learners and implications for classroom practices can make a broader impact on pedagogy in our partnership schools. The Literacy Collaborative provides extensive opportunities to expand our multimodal literacy engagements for PK-12 students in our Partnership Network (Figure 7). Initial engagements targeted elementary-aged children and we look forward to working with older audiences of historically marginalized students. Additionally, The Literacy Collaborative will serve as a demonstration site for teacher candidates as we share multicultural literature and literacy practices (Figure 8). We hope that others might be inspired to think about ways they could create similar, innovative shared spaces with partnership schools to create and sustain culturally responsive learning contexts that are inclusive, caring, equitable, and celebrate diversity.

Figure 8

Senior intern reading Fry Bread (Mallard, 2019) with kindergartners.



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