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Cooperative bi-literacy: Parents, students, and teachers read to transform

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ABSTRACT: Thousands of students in California learn English as a second language in schools that utilize exclusively monolingual – English Only – literacy programs. With such programs students do not have the opportunity to use the knowledge of their first language in order to acquire and master their second language. The project of cooperative bi-literacy described in this article was created to explicitly construct linguistic and cultural bridges between the language spoken at the community – in this case Spanish – and the language of school, English. Through one school year, 2005-06, twenty-nine, fourth-grade students, their parents and two teachers read, deconstructed and analysed bilingual books to supplement the monolingual programs mandated by the school district. The outcomes of this project suggest that when teachers have the power to develop activities that analyse the connections between languages, students increase their academic performance and parents engage actively on the learning process of their children. Most importantly, the participants learn within a context that promotes cultural and linguistic coexistence.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic coexistence; monolingual programs; cooperative bi-literacy; linguistic bridges; active participation.

INTRODUCTION

Everyday, thousands of Latino women and men cross the border from Mexico to the United States looking for an educational system which could open the doors to a better future for their children. In South Los Angeles, the majority of these children learn how to read and write utilizing EO (English Only) programs. Oftentimes, the absence of their first language, Spanish, eliminates the possibility of obtaining the brilliant future wished by their parents. Thus, this dream becomes an idea deficient of references to their language and culture. This article traces a teacher-research project designed to address not only these students' competencies but also their parents' aspirations. By making parents active participants in their children's learning, the students' literacy in both languages is enhanced.

Without an initiative such as the one described here, devoid of links with the community's language and culture, first generation Latino students learn to speak, read and write in English completing activities neither contextualized nor enriched with the cultural experiences inherent in their mother tongue, Spanish. Without meaningful activities that construct bridges across two languages, students lose the opportunity to acknowledge that the language they speak at home, Spanish, and the one they learn at school, English, belong to the same body: knowledge.

Research shows that students acquiring a second language reach high levels of academic achievement when activities are introduced using students' first language

and culture as tools to contextualize ideas (Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 1999). Rea & Mercuri (2006) found in their studies that second-language learners benefit from strategies (that is, cooperative learning, thinking aloud, building background knowledge) when teachers used those to help students, "use language as means toward understanding ideas and concepts" (p. 3). Perez (2004), in her study with Mexican-Origin and Mexican American students and families in San Antonio, Texas, showed that the implementation of bi-literacy initiatives utilizing languages as tools to construct knowledge increases student performance and also empowers parents as active participants of the learning process. Furthermore, Campano (2007) explains that the key to developing effective literacy programs, when working with immigrant and first-generation students, is to incorporate reading and writing activities that connect to the students' cultural and linguistic memories, helping them to visualise the commonalities between different languages. Thus, understanding the importance of developing initiatives that use students' first language and culture, two teachers during the 2005-2006 school year supplemented the monolingual scripted literacy program, Open Court®, with an initiative of cooperative bi-literacy.

Throughout the school year, the two classroom teachers worked with the 29 fourth-grade students assigned to their class and with the families of these children. The 29 students were struggling with learning how to read and write in English at *Nuestra Vecindad* (a pseudonym)[1] Elementary School, a school with 706 students[2] located in South Los Angeles. Students at each grade level were grouped, at the beginning of each school year, based on their language proficiency. In this school, 90.0% of these students were Hispanic; for 55.4%, Spanish ws their first language, and, of these, 99.8% were part of the Compensatory Education Program[3] (CEP). The demographics district-wide showed almost the same percentages: 90.0% Hispanics; for 43.7%, Spanish was their first language, and 94.3% were part of the Compensatory Education Program.

The administrators at *Nuestra Vecindad*, though they did not offer any economic support to the project, welcomed the initiative as an enrichment to the standardised programs offered by the district. After talking with the two teachers, the administrators agreed that the initiative of cooperative bi-literacy could help students, first, to increase academic achievement and performance; secondly, to enrich their standardised education with meaningful bi-literacy, which incorporates their language and their culture as mechanisms of their social and individual transformation (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The cooperatives of reading were created to implement the district-mandated literacy program. This program created by Open Court® was a scripted guide all teachers from kindergarten to six grade followed by reading and analysing with the students monolingual stories grouped in thematic units. From Monday to Thursday, teachers and students worked on language-arts assignments related to the stories and on Fridays students were assessed to evaluate their level of mastery on the state standards covered that week. The majority of the parents at *Nuestra Vecindad* were not involved in the learning process owing to their lack of knowledge in English. Thus,

[1] All the names that appear in this article are pseudonyms.
[2] www.ed-data.k12.ca.us
[3] The goal of this program is to improve student achievement in reading and mathematics.

the two teachers bought bilingual books to enrich the mandatory literacy program. Following the six steps of McNiff's model (2002) for action-research, they developed after-school reading activities and began to include the outcomes of these readings in the daily classroom activities. Below are the six stages parents, students and teachers followed throughout the 2005-06 school year:

1. Teachers reviewed the impact of the English Only practices implemented in previous years with the students and how the absence of the students' language and culture affected their academic performance.
2. Teachers set a main goal: to improve the literacy programs mandated by the school district.
3. Reading cooperatives were created to offer parents and students the opportunity to dialogically read and critically analyse bilingual books.
4. Quantitative (that is, test scores) and qualitative data (that is, interviews and observation notes during communal readings, informal conversations and classroom and community projects) were gathered throughout the year.
5. The plan was modified through the school year to meet the needs and questions posed during the implementation of the cooperatives of reading.
6. The impact of the project was evaluated utilising both quantitative data (that is, California Standards Test growth in reading competency) and qualitative data (interviews with parents and students).

What follows is the journey taken by the participants on their search for an education that includes their linguistic richness and utilises the knowledge embedded in the community as an asset to enrich the learning process.

FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY: CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

In the 1990s, bilingual programs in South Los Angeles were eradicating cultural borders by promoting an atmosphere of tolerance among languages. Yet, in 1998, Proposition 227[4] eliminated the majority of the bilingual programs that had been implemented, hence leaving an enormous, linguistic void within the Latino community. One decade has passed since the bilingual programs disappeared in California. Since then, thousands of students and their families have stopped hearing the echo of their language, Spanish, in California's public schools. Has this loss of a polyglot acoustic (Philips, 2007) created an improvement on student achievement?

Gándara (1999) indicates that there is no empirical evidence that could show a substantial growth in the test scores of the first-generation of Latino students after Proposition 227. Eliminating their language, and hence their culture, has developed a linguistic prejudice, broadening ethnocentric sentiments in the barriohoods surrounding the city of Los Angeles. Without their identity – defined by McCarthey (2002) on her research with third/fourth graders in Texas as the "intersection of [linguistic and cultural] features at any given moment" (p. 12) – the learning process of those children on the northern side of the border lacks cultural references

[4] "Proposition 227 was designed to teach English as rapidly and effectively as possible by heavily exposing LEP children to the language. Its foundation was: Linguistic conformity vs. respect for cultural diversity and subtractive vs. additive bilingualism" http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/Prop227PPT/sld004.htm

indispensable to construct a model of comprehensive education that would support the individualities of the participants within the globalization process (Bove, Dufour, Luneau, & De Casparis, 2001).

Teachers conducting research

Two weeks prior to the beginning of the school year, the two teachers reviewed the academic portfolios of the 29 students assigned to their classroom. The data revealed that for the majority of the students, despite the fact that they had been fully immersed for four years in California public schools that utilised monolingual programs, their level of proficiency in English continued to be in the early stages of ELD (English Language Development). Seventeen students (57%) showed proficiency within the first three levels of CELDT (California English Development Test)[5]. Nine students were in the early advanced stage of the aforesaid scale, and only three were advanced. After reading these numbers, the educators had two options when planning for the school year: one, given the low level of language proficiency, to justify utilising deficit theories (Sleeter, 2007), thus perpetuating the idea of functional illiterates; or two, to incorporate the knowledge parents and students had in both languages to build a project that, by including both parties, would erect bridges between the school and the community.

To accomplish the latter, the two teachers, during the first month of the school year, visited the students' homes to talk about their views on the literacy programs implemented at school. During these informal conversations, parents began to question and show their concern about their children's academic progress. Pedro, one of the parents, asked, *"¿Por qué nuestros hijos, tras varios años de instruccion monolingüe en ingles, siguen estancados en niveles básicos de alfabetización?* [Why do our children after years of instruction in monolingual instruction in English continue to be stuck in the early stages of literacy?]." Maria expressed her concerns saying, *"¿Por qué no reconocen nuestra lengua y nuestra cultura en los programas educativos?* [Why is our language and our culture not recognised by the educational programs?]." And Mario, showing his desire for being an active part of his daughter's education, wondered, "*¿Cómo podemos ser parte activa del proceso de aprendizaje?* [How can we be an active part of the learning process?]." These questions summarize the general concerns expressed by the majority of the 29 families about the education provided for the students.

These parents' concerns suggest that the education received by the students was neither comprehensive nor democratic (Campbell & Sherington, 2006). The voices of all these families reinforce Trueba's idea (2004) that ELL (English Language Learners) students are oftentimes exposed to lecture models utilised by educators, who do all the talking rather than generating dialogue to discuss and discover knowledge (Edwards, 2001). As one of the parents, Erik, said, "*Mi hijo solo escucha nunca habla en la escuela* [My son only listens, never talks at school]". Therefore, in these classrooms, the curriculum ignores the human quality in the form of daily

[5] Every year, English language learners in California are evaluated by CELDT (California English Development Test). This test assesses the skills on listening/speaking, reading and writing using a scale aligned with the ELD standards. This scale has five levels: Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced.

experiences students bring to school. By doing that, education omits an indispensable factor of its effectiveness: its innate nature to transform.

Curriculum constructed without the community's language and culture perpetuates deficit theories that visualise students as empty boxes where knowledge should be deposited, following banking models (Freire, 1968), whereby students can function in society (Shaker, 2008). Education within this context turns into purely mechanical instruction of basic skills implemented with repetition and questions that require single-word (that is, yes/no) answers. This ignores the prior knowledge and past experiences students possess before they enter compulsory educational institutions, because its primary objective is to create a student capable of functioning; absent, however, is the ability to think or to reflect critically on what is learned.

Setting goals

After these initial conversations with the parents and the detailed analysis of data, the two teachers conducted a new set of interviews to discern the reading habits of the 29 families. These interviews were guided by two main questions. The first one was whether reading is a family activity or an individual experience. The second, in order to build bi-literacy at school and in the community, was what parents, students and educators can do to transform the reading experience.

Parents' responses reflected that reading was a practice students did by themselves to complete their homework. Familiar and cooperative reading was an unusual experience in those 29 households. The parents justified the latter by their lack of knowledge of English. Calixto, one the parents, said: "*Maestro, no leemos con nuestros hijos porque no sabemos leer en inglés y nos da verguenza no poder ayudarlos con su tarea* [Teacher, we do not read with our children because we do not know how to read in English and we feel embarrassed that we cannot help them with their homework]." They felt that this factor raised a linguistic obstacle when attempting to sit down to read and comment on the required reading of their children.

The absence of cooperative, family-based reading militated against the possibility of dialogic reading, a meta-reading where adults generate questions beyond the mere recollection of facts (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Moreover, the establishment of monolingual (English Only) programs accelerated a steady extinction of Spanish and its body of knowledge, hence eliminating the potential transfer between what students learned in Spanish with what was being taught in English. As Zaida mentioned, "*No leemos en español porque a nadie en la escuela les interesa* [We do not read in Spanish because nobody at school cares if we do so]."

The total separation of home and school languages makes English become an alien, foreign language and denies the concept that languages better interact and evolve together in communal spaces framed by multiliteracies (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2005; Schwarzer, 2001). Consequently, the teachers, in order to enlarge the established monolingual environment, constructed cooperatives of reading to engage parents and students in cooperative, dialogic reading activities that combined their knowledge in Spanish as a tool to master a second language, English. By doing that, *Nuestra Vecindad* Elementary School became their second home because, as Marta said, "*Hogar es el idioma, es la cultura* [Home is language, is culture]".

These words led the two teachers to create a project in bi-literacy with two procedures: first, they would extend the idea of "home", with its language and culture, into the school setting. Thus, the classroom of the 29 students would become a place where teaching and learning practices were implemented with the language and culture cultivated at home (Goddard, 2004). Secondly, they would invite parents to actively participate in the learning process by incorporating bilingual books as a supplement to the literacy program mandated by the district. By doing that, the learning process turned into a bilingual, bicultural bridge bonding two educational dwellings (Heidegger, 1971): the students' homes and *Nuestra Vecindad* Elementary School. Understanding that languages are different expressions of a common body of knowledge, parents, students and teachers began to read bilingual books with the conviction that when the language of the family, in this case Spanish, and the language of the school, English, both convey learning, and the students' experience becomes more productive (Olsen, 1999).

READING TOGETHER, WE GROW

In mid-October the two teachers invited parents to the first evening reading titled, "*Leyendo juntos, crecemos* [Reading together, we grow]." The teachers, once again, visited each home and personally invited each family to attend the meeting. They explained to parents and students that the idea was to read and talk about a book. Continuing the home visits fostered a personal relationship with the families, which had a positive effect on the turn-out for this meeting. Twenty-seven out of the twenty-nine families attended the meeting. As Delgado-Gaitan (2004) explains, creating bridges between school and the students' home/*casa,* increases parent involvement.

The two teachers facilitated this first meeting, that took place in the classroom, with three goals in mind; first, to promote family reading time; second, to model and practise dialogic reading; and third, to explicitly show the linguistic connections between English and Spanish. During this first **communal reading**, parents, students and teachers read passages of Sandra Cisneros's book *Hairs/Pelitos* (1994) (figure 1).

As mentioned before, the project did not have any economic support from the school, so teachers had looked for partnerships with a local business. After many conversations, the local bookstore partially sponsored the project by offering a generous discount on the purchase of the 29 new copies parents received at the reading. This bookstore played a pivotal role in this project by helping parents to select bilingual books to read with their children, having Saturday family readings using books families had read, and most importantly encouraging students and parents to read. In addition to the support of the local bookstore, the group received the support of the authors of some of the books that the families were reading. An example was the e-mail sent by Sandra Cisneros, supporting the initiative created by the teachers. This is an excerpt of that e-mail:

> First of all, I want to congratulate you for the work you want to accomplish….When I was a child, we went to the library once a week, and I remember loving the long walk there – and it was looooooong because sometimes we didn't live near a library. But the walk was part of the ritual. Looking in shop windows on the avenue, stopping for an ice cream on the way home or popcorn. Small pleasures that I remember now with such fondness. I also remember my mother reading a lot. She read, and so we read

> once we knew how. Monkey see, monkey do. This was VERY important, because kids copy what they see…Good luck with your project. Tell me how it goes. Abrazos fuertes. S.C.

Sharing this e-mail with the participants set the tone for the first and all the readings throughout the school year.

Hairs/Pelitos was selected because its main theme is family and the different types of hairs of each one of the members of that family. Opening the literary dialogues with themes that were part of their daily lives lowered any level of anxiety that participants might have had at the early stages of this project. This familiarity with the story increased the cognitive interaction with the written text; thus meaning was something readers actively produced rather than passively wait to receive from others (Buehl, 2001).

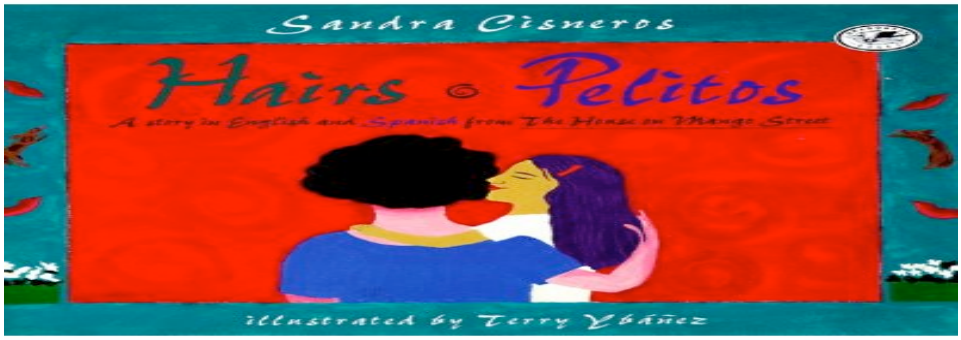

Figure 1. Sandra Cisneros's book *Hairs/Pelitos*

"Picture-walking" and reading the book

The communal reading began with a hands-on, picture-walk through the book. The two teachers, parents and students "picture-walked" through the book sharing thoughts, asking questions, drawing pictures and labeling these with words. The purpose of this activity was to activate vocabulary. Listening and talking about the book exposed students to words related to the story. Ferreiro (2002), in her research, explains that students' reading skills increase when they are orally exposed to the text before reading it. What follows is an excerpt of the picture-walk (parents and students had the option to speak Spanish or English) where parents began to develop vocabulary (that is, mother, daughter, hair, purple, black, love) that would later be utilised during the dialogic reading to pose questions.

> **Teacher 1:** Buenas tardes a todos. Hoy vamos a leer de un libro que habla de los miembros de una familia y de sus diferentes tipos de cabello. [Good evening, every one. Today we will read a book that talks about a family and the different type of hair its members have].
>
> **Teacher 2:** ¿Qué vemos en la portada? [What do we see on the cover?]
>
> **Student A:** Teacher, I see a mother hugging her daughter.
>
> **Student B:** Teacher, the mom has black hair and the daughter has purple hair.

Teacher 1: A ver papas, ¿qué ven ustedes en la portada? [Let's see parents, what do you see on the cover?]

Parent A: Yo veo una madre e hija que se quieren mucho [I see a mom and a daughter who love each other very much].

Parent B: A mi me gustan los chiles que decoran la portada [I like the red peppers that decorate the cover].

The picture-walk continued through the book. Parents, students and teachers shared their thoughts and drew pictures. Cesar, one of the parents, after the picture-walk said, "*Es impresionante como las ilustraciones sin leer las letras echan a andar la imaginacion, hacia un mundo lleno de colour de vida. Con esto los niños se motivan* [It is unbelievable how the illustrations without reading the text activate the imagination towards a world full of colours and life. This motivates the students]".

After the picture-walk, parents, students and teachers began to read the first two pages of *Hairs/Pelitos*. The two teachers modeled dialogic reading, asking questions that required making inferences and thinking beyond the text (that is, why do you think mom and daughter are hugging each other; why do you think the girl likes to smell her mom's hair?). Then each family, in different areas of the classroom, **read**, **analysed** and **discussed** the next three pages of *Hairs/Pelitos*. Reading together in their groups and listening and seeing other groups going through the same experience built a sentiment of community – a community that fuels cultural and linguistic closeness (Hill Boone, 2007). The two teachers at this point worked as ethnographers collecting the "qualitative data" participants animatedly shouted during the reading and taking notes of the ideas and comments shared by parents and students (Grimshaw, 2001). Gathering comments such as "*Ayúdame a leer esto* [Help me to read that]", "*Fíjate eso se dice así en ingles* [Look! You say it like this in English]", and "*No lo pronuciaste bien* [You did not pronounce it correctly]," helped teachers to redefine the goals and to adjust the activities to the needs of the participants.

After the reading, the participants debriefed as a whole group on their first impressions of the experience. One common idea among parents in this sharing activity was the importance of finding time in their busy lives and the place in their homes to enjoy the pleasure of reading together. The majority of parents commented that the activity had helped them to feel closer to their children, which reinforced the first goal of this project: to support the family in home reading (Datesman, Crandall, & Kearny, 2005). Supporting these thoughts, Jacinto stated: "*Creo que es una buena iniciativa para el impulso de los niños a la lectura y al estudio. Es muy necesario inculcar esto hacia ellos ya que tambien se desarrollan en todas las areas y etapas de su vida* [I like this project. It helps children with their reading and study skills. It is very important to emphasise that because they develop knowledge in all the areas while they're growing]". And Maite stated, "I think is very important to read together. I as a parent can learn with my child."

The comments shared by the parents after this first meeting confirmed their engagement and involvement with the project. Ludovica said, "*Fue muy interesante. Nunca me habia retirado de una junta tan satisfecha como el dia de hoy, ojala lo hubieran hecho mucho antes* [It was very interesting. I have never felt as accomplished, leaving a meeting as I do today. I wish you had done this before]".

Manuel expressed his contentment saying, "*Excelente programa y proyecto. Gracias esto ayuda a romper esquemas de nuestra cultura (mexicana)* [Excellent program and project. Thanks, projects like these help to break stereotypes about our culture (Mexican)]".

To extend this cooperative learning between parents and students, families were asked to read the rest of the book at home and to write down all the questions that emerged from the dialogic reading and to bring them to the next month's meeting scheduled for the first week of November. The objective of this activity was to reinforce the cooperative reading initiated at school with literary dialogues conducted at home by parents and students without the guidance of the two teachers.

Constructing cooperatives of reading

The twenty-nine families met again the first week of November to debrief on the questions and ideas shared by parents and students at their family reading at home. The turn-out was the same as the first meeting. The conversations at this meeting showed that parents and students had really analysed and enjoyed the book. Josefa, one of the mothers, said, "*Creo que al menos hemos leido el libro diez veces. Mi hija incluso se lo llevo a Tijuana para leerselo a sus abuelitos* [I believe that we have read the book at least ten times. My daughter took the book to Tijuana, Mexico to read it to her grandparents]."

Such comments indicated that parents and students were accomplishing one of the goals set by this project, increasing family reading at home. Little by little, families found the time and the place at home to read with their children as well as to critically and dialogically analyse the readings (Luke, 2000). Illustrating the idea that bilingual books not only convey two languages but also facilitate literary dialogues, families began to construct their personal commitment to the story-reading experience.

To maintain this commitment and to continue solidifying the idea of cooperatives of reading, parents at this meeting received a new book: *Esperanza Rising/Esperanza Renace* (2002) written by Pam Muñoz Ryan. This book tells the story of a girl who has to leave Mexico because her family lost everything. Once in the United States, she struggles to adapt to a new life. The school librarian helped to find 29 copies in English. The 29 copies in Spanish were sponsored by Scholastic Publishers®, which economically helped the teachers.

Reading this book introduced families to chapter books, which brought a challenge: reading without the support of illustrations. Thus, to lower the anxiety students and parents may have felt when reading the book for the first time, teachers introduced the story and talked with parents and the students about the cover. Parents and teachers made predictions about the meaning of the plot and setting of the story. Gala, one of the students shouted, "The story is about a girl starting all over." Listening to their thoughts supported the ideas teachers had planned for the families. They asked parents to:

a) Read one chapter per week. Parents read the book in Spanish and students in English;

b) Respond to homework questions included at the end of the book. Homework was due every Monday;
c) Identify words that have linguistic similarities (that is, train/*tren*, asparagus/*espárrago*);
d) Continue their dialogic reading by asking questions that require critical thinking;
e) Discuss themes from the book related to their lives.

After the November meeting, the participants met once a month, from December to April, to discuss the chapters they had read as well as to review their homework assignments. In one of these monthly meetings, Juan shared with the group how he and his daughter, Xochilt, realised that all the words that end in English with -tion have a similar ending in Spanish, -ción. Not only that, but they also observed that these words oftentimes have the same meaning. At another meeting, Guadalupe, a mother, explained, "*Mi hija y yo, poco a poco nos hemos dado cuenta que leyendo una historia en dos lenguas te enseña a ver como las frsases tienen su propia vida en cada lengua pero a la vez tienen un vida común. Yo leia, 'Aguantate tantito que la fruta caerá en tu mano' y ella leia,* 'Wait a little and the fruit will fall into your hand. You must be patient, Esperanza.' Eso nos enseñó a ver las hstorias con unas gafas que tienen una lente en español y otra en inglés [My daughter and I, little by little, have seen that reading a story in two languages teaches you how sentences have their own life on each language, yet they have a life in common. I read, *'Aguantate tantito que la fruta caerá en tu mano'* and she read, 'Wait a little and the fruit will fall into your hand. You must be patient, Esperanza'. Reading this sentence taught us to see the stories with glasses that have one lens in Spanish and another in English]." By doing that, parents and students achieved the second goal of this project: to acquire in a natural way, discovering that their first language, Spanish, could play an instrumental role when building their second linguistic code, English (Adamson, 2005).

To support and to ensure that parents felt comfortable through the process, the teachers created two groups of support. First, teachers continued conducting home visits with all the families. Secondly, collaboratively working with the local bookstore, they scheduled Saturday readings for families where personnel from the store read chapters from *Esperanza rising/Esperanza renace* and other picture books (that is, *Estrellita de Oro/Little Gold Star* {Hayes, 2000}*, La abuela fina y las sombrillas maravillosas/Grandma Fina and her wonderful umbrellas* {Saienz, 2001}).

These two factors helped to maintain a high turnout for all the meetings at school. The enthusiasm and energy was constant throughout the meetings. As one of the parents, Gerardo, pointed out: "*Leer este libro esta siendo muy importante porque nos hace estar juntos a mi y a mi hijo. Me ayuda a aprender como ayudar a mi hijo en su tarea y para saber mejor como va en sus actividades escolares* [Reading this book is very important because it is helping my son and me to be closer. It is helping me to learn how to better support my son with his homework and to understand how he is doing on his classroom activities]." These words demonstrate one of the goals of this project, that parents actively and intellectually participate in the learning process of their children.

Integrating communal reading and state standards

Ana Maria Matute (2003) explains that in order to increase levels of literacy, the first thing children have to see is their parents reading books. Creating after-school readings and reinforcing the idea of family reading offered parents the opportunity to read **with** and **to** their children. Thus, students began to read **by** themselves inspired by their parents' engagement in reading stories. Not only that, students began also to read to their parents in English, which produced a bilateral (figure 2) process in the construction of bi-literacy between parents and students (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2003).

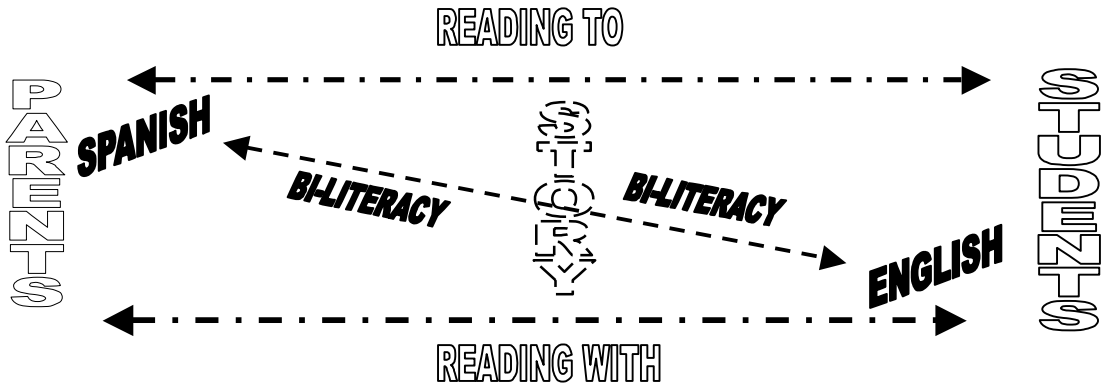

Figure 2. Constructing bi-literacy between parents and students

Once parents and students felt comfortable reading to each other, teachers began to include the family reading activities and weekend homework as part of the classroom activities schedule. To do that, teachers asked administrators for permission to utilize, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 45 minutes out of the three hours of English-Language Arts instruction mandated by the district. The teachers presented a plan that explained that students and parents were cooperatively reading bilingual books and that they were working on homework assignments related to the book. The initiative was so well received by the administrators that occasionally they attended some of the monthly meetings, where parents, students and teachers reviewed, talked and discussed the chapters read during that month, and parents and students presented and discussed the monthly projects. The plan included weekly activities divided into three sets:

1. Mondays: Students and teachers read and share homework activities;
2. Wednesdays: Students and teachers read aloud a few pages from the chapter assigned for that week;
3. Fridays: Teachers explain homework questions to be completed during the weekend.

On Mondays for fifteen minutes, in groups of three, students reread some passages from the chapter assigned for that week and shared the "dialogic questions" that appeared during their family story-readings. Throughout this time of literacy work in cooperatives of students, teachers divided their time between two tasks: one teacher worked individually with students to improve reading skills (that is, fluency, comprehension), while the other teacher, continuing the joint work of ethnography,

walked around the classroom to listen and to take notes on the dialogue and reading conducted by the students. The outcomes of these dialogues confirmed the idea that literacy at home could be extended by literacy at school, and that this flow is a two-way exchange (Lee, 2007). Mario, one of the students, during one of these readings, said, "On Saturday, when I was reading the doing the homework with my father, my oldest brother sat with us and helped us to answer some of the questions. We laughed and had fun." Sharing these stories, schools lost their condition of "no-places" – defined by Marc Auge (1999) as places with no identity, no history – and turned into "*hogares* [homes]", where students, parents and educators critically read to transform their reality, their environment and most importantly the way they approach literacy (Vázquez, Muise, Adamson, Heffernan, & Chiola-Nakai, 2003).

After the work in small groups, teachers guided a whole-class activity where students shared answers and comments with the whole group. During this activity, students also talked about the Saturday reading at the bookstore or any other activity that involved reading the world or the word. Lizett once explained, "My mother and I went to the supermarket and read the labels in English and Spanish. It was fun to learn that cucumber is *pepino*; watermelon is *sandia."* Without knowing, students and parents were constructing a new world, a new world where languages which had previously been isolated were now being used to develop bilingual, bi-literate and bicultural knowledge.

To reinforce this process of bi-literacy, on Wednesdays, students and teachers read passages from "*Esperanza rising*". When reading passages from the chapters, the teachers explained to the students that the homework for the weekend was for them and their parents to analyse how the way Esperanza behaved in previous chapters – she mistreated a homeless boy on the train – later influenced her relationship with Alfonso. Guiding the family reading at home helped teachers to contextualize the standards[6] (that is, 3.2: Identify the main events of the plot, their causes, and the influence of each event on- future actions) later introduced in the classroom.

At the end of each Wednesday session, students took a short test, which included two multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question that required making inferences. This is an example of one of these tests:

> Question 1: *Read this sentence on page 29: Las papayas:*
> *Mama did not answer but maintained her composure.*
> *Which word is a synonym for maintained?*
>
> *A ignored*
> *B kept*
> *C neglected*
> *D loved*
>
> Question 2: *After the death of Esperanza's dad, Tio Luis and Tio Marco treated Esperanza and her family with…*
>
> *A* love
> *B* respect

[6] California State Standards: www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/elacontentstnds.pdf).

C reverence
D dishonor

Question 3: *Explain what Esperanza meant when the author says: "Tio Luis sat in Papa's chair as if it were his own. And then Esperanza noticed the belt buckle. Papa's buckle on Tio Luis's belt. It was wrong. Everything was wrong."*

Students answered the question and on Fridays took the test home to review and analyse the questions and answers with their parents. This assignment involved parents in the test-taking process. Parents working cooperatively with the students on test-taking strategies, moving assessment from a tool that identifies what is right and wrong to a mechanism that, according to Butler and McMunn (2006), "is the act of collecting information about individuals or groups of individuals to better understand them ….Assessment is not a thing that is done to students but a process that can lead to improved learning. In essence, assessment raises or answers questions" (p. 2).

Academic instruction and test-taking strategies were implemented with the monthly projects completed by parents and students. On Fridays, teachers explained the monthly projects and students, working in small groups, began to develop the project. An example of this project is the activity that required students to interview their parents. In these interviews, students asked their parents the reasons that motivated them to come to the United States. Students, assisted by the parents, wrote summaries of these interviews. Later, students orally presented a summary of this interview in front of the class.

This project and others (that is, drawing family trees and describing the members of these trees) were analysed and shared by parents and students with other families during the monthly meetings. What started at school and at home with the after-school readings and family reading time, went through the classroom activities, came back to home at school building a cycle of cooperative bi-literacy (figure 3)

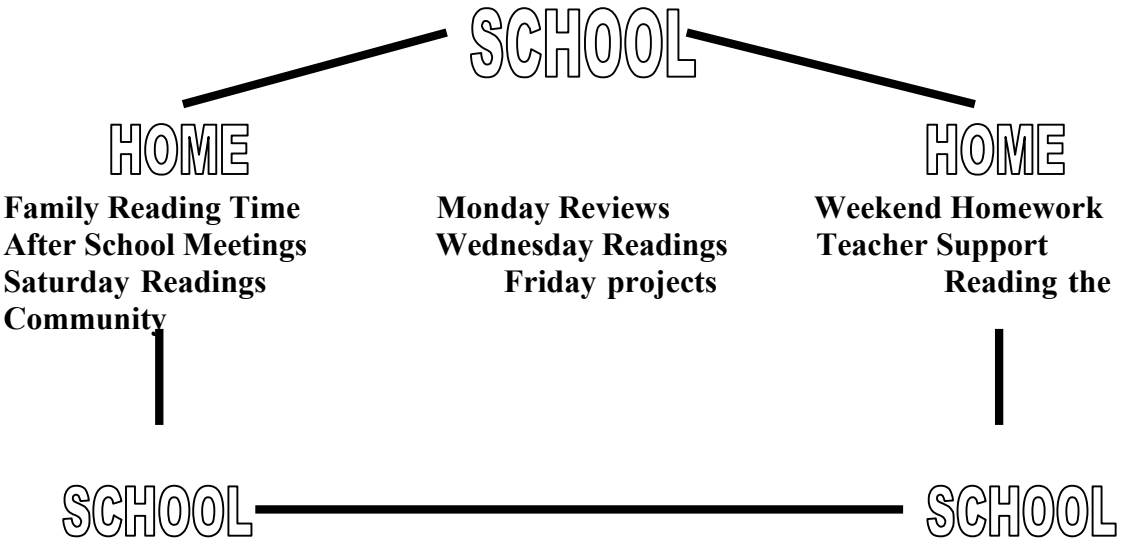

Figure 3. Cycle of cooperative bi-literacy

Outcomes of cooperative literacy

This cycle of reading cooperatives offered to all the participants the opportunity to become the knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1962) at some point (that is, students teaching English to their parents, parents teaching Spanish to their children, classmates comparing and contrasting their readings) during the reading cycle. Reading bilingual books improved not only reading skills but also writing skills (Halasek, 1999).

Creating educational partnerships reversed the low level of engagement and involvement that students and parents had shown towards the reading process, a monochromatic, monolingual experience that was creating a precarious level of literacy among the students (Bahloul, 2002). Supplementing the monolingual program established by the state with "cooperatives of reading" increased the time parents and students dedicated to reading, which improved the reading skills of the students. Thus, students began to feel more comfortable reading books – books that in the past were viewed as inaccessible.

Reading *Esperanza rising* and others (for example, *The house of Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros and *The day it snowed tortillas* (2003) by Joe Hayes) that followed, opened the doors to more in-depth reflections during dialogic readings. Parents and students realised that two languages that had been isolated in their own "linguistic niches" belonged together and described their reality in their new country of the United States (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). What began as a free reading became an "intellectual contentment" (Wagensberg, 2007) displayed on two different levels. First, parents, students and educators through conversations realised that being a dynamic part of the learning process is a condition *sine qua non* to reach social justice; they understood that they had the right and responsibility to learn a language without renouncing their own. Secondly, the participants recovered the joy of reading. Xisco, one the fathers, said, "*Ya hemos comprado el libro que vamos a leer cuando nos vayamos de vacaciones a México* [We have already bought the book that we will read on our vacation in Mexico]". Paloma, a mother, shared their excitement, shouting, "*Quiero que mi hija les enseñe a leer a sus buelos en Jalisco como puede leer en español e inglés* [I want my daughter to show her grandparents in Jalisco how she can read in English and Spanish]".

These quotes reflected the strength exhibited by 29 families from *Nuestra Vecindad* during the implementation of this project, which proved that when reading is presented as a transcultural (Nicolescu, 2008), multilingual instrument for learning, participants can not only create a better future for themselves but also create alternative responses for questions like the one cited at the beginning of this article, when Pedro asked, *"¿Por qué nuestros hijos, tras varios años de instrucción monolingüe en inglés, siguen estancados en niveles básicos de alfabetización?* [Why are our children after years of instruction in only one language, English, still in the early stages of literacy?]".

The answer to this question changed because the 29 students who were part of this project and used to struggle before taking CST (California Standards Test) increased their test scores in reading and language arts (table 1). Building bridges between two languages, through linguistic investigation of texts, lowered the anxiety students and

parents faced when acquiring a new language (Cromwell Tuszynski & Yarber, 2003). By doing that, students felt "stress free" when taking the State exams, which allowed them to perform better. The increase in scores from the previous year is illustrated in table 1.

CRITICAL NUMBERS

The students' scores in table 1 have a greater relevance when they are compared with the scores of other Title 1[7] schools within the district and statewide. Title 1 schools like *Nuestra Vecindad* receive state and federal support: "Title I is designed to help students served by the program to achieve proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards. Title I schools with percentages of low-income students of at least 40 percent may use Title I funds." The scores of the 29 participants of this project were better compared to the schools that utilised only the English Only scripted mandated literacy programs.

Student	CST SCORES 2004-05 *	CST SCORES 2005-06 *
A	4	5 (+1)
B	2	4 (+2)
C	2	3 (+1)
CH	3	4 (+1)
D	Data not available	3
E	Data not available	5
F	3	3 (=)
G	1	2 (+1)
H	4	3 (-1)
I	Data not available	4
J	3	4 (+1)
K	Data not available	3
L	Data not available	5
LL	3	4 (+1)
M	2	4 (+2)
N	3	4 (+1)
Ñ	2	4 (+2)
O	2	4 (+2)
P	2	5 (+3)
Q	Data not available	3
R	Data not available	4
RR	1	3 (+2)
S	2	3 (+1)
T	3	4 (+1)
U	Data not available	4
V	2	4 (+2)
W	Data not available	3
X	Data not available	4
Y	2	3 (+1)
MEAN	**2.3**	**3.5 (+1.2)**

Table 1. CST (California Standards Test) scores showing gains[1]

[7] Data gathered at: www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html

[1] The state of California scores students proficiency level in language arts according to five levels: Advanced (5), Proficient (4), Basic (3), Below Basic (2) and Far Below Basic (1) www.star.cde.ca.gov

In making the connection between the shared reading activities and the test outcomes, it is worth examining the specific skills tested on the CST. Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of skills and compares the scores of those students in the project with other students in the district and in the state.

When students answered questions in cluster 1, Word Analysis and Vocabulary Development, they utilised the work conducted with their parents, teachers and peers on phonetic, semantic and syntactic similarities. Freeman & Freeman (2000) explain that students who are able to mix cues from both languages when reading and writing improve their levels of reading comprehension.

After taking the test, students reported that searching for linguistic commonalities between languages while working on their reading cooperatives helped them to answer CST questions[8] like: *Read this sentence from sample D: Maybe she knew that there were abundant bamboo pieces for both,*

Which word is a synonym for abundant?

A plentiful
B few
C tasty
D poor

Average Percent Correct

Reporting Clusters	STATEWIDE STUDENTS	DISTRICT STUDENTS	**STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT**	Proficient Range
1- Word Analysis and Vocabulary Development	65 %	57%	**74%**	69-82%
2- Reading Comprehension	60%	49%	**67%**	62-79%
3- Literary Response and Analysis	66%	59%	**77%**	72-83%
4- Written Conventions	64%	57%	**71%**	68-81%
5- Writing Strategies	57%	48%	**62%**	57-74%
6- Writing Applications	51%	49%	**49%**	51-56%

Table 2. Comparing project student with district and state counterparts

Julio, one of the students, mentioned that during the test, he remembered the word "abundant" because when he was reading *Esperanza rising* with his parents, his father told him, "*Mira Julio* "abundant" *es abundante en español, y esta palabra significa*

[8] Questions are released by the Department of Education at: www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/css05rtq.asp

mucho [Look Julio, "abundant" is *abundante* in Spanish, and this words means a lot]*."* Having this semantic memory helped Julio through his process of elimination, disregarding answers b, c, and d. Julio's first language was utilised as support to construct meaning in his second language.

Working on cluster 2, those questions tabulated in Reading Comprehension, students had a better understanding of the stories, because the reading cooperatives had added two new dimensions to reading: social and affective. Dickinson, McCabe and Essex (2006) in their studies have shown that, "long-term literacy and associated academic success require more than the acquisition of perceptual, linguistic and cognitive skills that enable to read and understand. One also needs affective-behavioral self regulatory skills" (p. 12).

Nancy's mom commented that after her daughter had completed the CST exam, Nancy told her, "Mamá cuando estaba tomando el examen note que tu me ayudabas en todas las preguntas. El leer juntas me animo a pensar y analizar las historias de la misma manera que lo hacíamos en casa [Mom, when I was taking the test, I felt like you were there with me. Reading with you at home encouraged me to think and analyse the stories the same way we did at home]." Reading together, Nancy and her daughter not only strengthened their relationship, but also realised that academic success is a communal goal for each family.

This success was also evident in the skills of Literary Response and Analysis. In this cluster, the impact of dialogic reading implemented during the reading cooperatives aided students when comparing and contrasting the stories. Tabors & Snow (2002), in their research with young bilingual children, underscore the importance of posing questions that require critical thinking while reading stories. Parents, students and teachers utilised the word "**why"** as the epicenter of their reading activities, which enlightened students with tools to respond to questions that require making inferences beyond the text. When students were asked during the CST exam to compare and contrast the stories "Why crow caws*" and* "How elephant got the long trunk" they had to respond questions such as:

> *In <u>both</u> passages, the main characters are only able to get something after first*
>
> *A getting themselves into trouble*
> *B performing brave deeds that help others*
> *C understanding the meaning of life*
> *D trying to solve a problem*

or:

> *<u>Both</u> Elephant and Crow gained something because they were*
>
> *A gentle*
> *B brave*
> *C smart*
> *D curious.*

To answer, they used the same strategies Melissa and her mom applied when they read, analysed compared and contrasted *Domitila: A Cinderella tale from the Mexican*

tradition by Jewell Reinhart Coburn (2000) and *Estrellita de Oro/Little Gold Star: A Cinderella cuento* by Joe Hayes (2000). During their family reading, Melissa's mom asked her, *"¿En qué se parecen Domitila y Estrellita de Oro? ¿Tu crees que las dos historias explican lo mismo?* [Are Domitila and Estrellita de Oro alike? Do you think that the stories explain the same idea?]". These questions, as Melissa explained after the test, echoed while reading the stories about crows and elephants. Remembering her experience helped Melissa (student P) to improve her score from Below Basic (2) to Advanced (5).

By analysing the data in table 2, three significant outcomes can be drawn: first, the excellent averages obtained in cluster 1, word analysis, a cluster where students responded to questions that required semantic skills, were based on the intensive work in the three levels of reading cooperatives conducted by students and parents, students, and educators who collaboratively analysed words in English and Spanish with similar etymological roots (that is, Latin and Greek). Secondly, their scores on cluster 2, regarding reading comprehension, is evidence that the cooperative analysis of both languages helped students to construct bridges between languages by using their first language to increase their comprehension in English and vice versa (Gottlieb, 2006). Finally, their performance on cluster 3, literary response and analysis, which asked students to understand the meaning of the story, reflected the impact of dialogic reading and the habit of generating questions (beyond the mere recollection of facts) that participants of this project had utilised when reading their books.

Though the students' scores substantially improved and their levels of proficiency were higher compared to similar students who were exposed to monolingual programs without the implementation of this project, the most important outcome of this project was for students and parents to eradicate functional illiteracy. Both parents and students, empowered by the communal readings and the test results, were not only capable of developing more meaning while interacting with the written text but also their attitudes changed when "negotiating" their second language. Their previous self-image of "linguistic misfits" (Rose, 2005) made way for a new vision of themselves framed by a critical literacy, understood, as Lankshear & McLaren (1993) explained when analysing Freire's ideas, as follows:

> Critical literacy makes possible a more adequate and accurate "reading" the world, on the basis of which, as Freire and others put it, people can enter into "rewriting" the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally (p. xviii).

CONCLUSIONS

Schools in the inner-city of Los Angeles daily open their doors to first generation Latino students who sit in their classrooms with the *"esperanza* [hope]" that at some point in the learning process, the language and culture lived at home will echo in their activities, exercises, readings and dialogue. However, oftentimes these readings and endeavours are neither adapted to their level of language proficiency nor are connected to their personal experiences. Guided by this idea, educators implement their teaching practices forgetting that English Language Learners always carry

previous knowledge and semantic meanings in their first language that can be utilised to enrich the learning process as well as to educate students. Pinker (2007) notes that the strength of semantics, "is about the relation of words to reality; it is about the relation of words to a community; it is about the relation of words to emotions; it is about words and social relations" (p. 3).

Schools having the opportunity to create models of multi-literacy and transculturalism often opt instead to develop practices with an exclusive linguistic code: English. Hence, learning a second language turns into a monolingual occurrence, pushing students to leave their language and their culture hanging on the coat rack along with their jackets and lunch-boxes. The effect of this phenomenon creates reluctance among parents to collectively participate in the reading experience as a journey in the search for knowledge.

This project has shown that when transforming education generates *"confianza* [trust]" among families, and their language and culture becomes an instrumental part of literacy, reading becomes a social, communal activity. "Reading to transform" empowered the participants of this project to redefine the dreams they carried when they crossed the border. Through bilingual books, parents realised that there is a path to participate in the learning process of their children.

The cooperatives of reading answered the questions posed by a community of immigrants that wanted to accomplish their dreams in their new country without renouncing their unique identity. In South Los Angeles, reading *can* be transcultural and meaningful if the language and culture of each community is recognised by educators who are willing to create, using Palmer's (2007) words, "a capacity for connectedness . . . a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p. 11). It is in the hands of the educators, administrators and the State to reopen the doors that were closed after Proposition 227. Keeping these doors locked supports the idea that reading is an activity isolated from the identity of each student who comes to school with a different language than the one utilised in the written text.

IMPLICATIONS

At the dawn of the 21st century, education is facing socio-cultural challenges that will affect the future of millions of students all over the world. Populations, cultures and languages once homogeneous have now become heterogeneous owing to the constant movement of humans across geographical borders. Thus, transforming educators who are looking for effective ways to meet the academic needs of culturally diverse students enrolled in compulsory educational settings must embrace the students' cultural and linguistic richness and utilise the latter as an asset to create critical literacy, which will ensure equal access to education.

The two teachers created this project to open doors for a new dialogue on education. Though there is a benefit in ensuring that all students acquire the standards set by Departments of Education, it is also necessary that teachers and schools have the freedom and power to design and implement initiatives that better fit the needs of each student or group of students. All over the world, educators, philosophers and

sociologists clamour for educational programs that: first, empower schools to adopt programs based on the needs of their students; and, enrich these programs with projects that integrate the language taught at school and the language spoken in the community.

Gregorio Luri, a Catalan educator, claims in his book "L'escola contra el món: L'optimisme és possible/The school against the world: Optimism is possible" (2008), that schools that attempt to fully educate students, must be, "un lloc on s'exrecitin la paraula assenyada, i no solament un lloc on s'apliquin uns procediments i unes normatives preestasblertes [A place where students not only learn the procedures and pre-established standards, but also they learn the literate, sagacious word]." Steve Lukes (2008), a professor of sociology at New York University, when quoting the British philosopher Mary Midgley, writes, "Cultures shade into one another. And in our day there is such a pervading and continuous and all-pervading cultural interchange that the idea of separateness holds no water at all" (Midgley, 1991, cited in Lukes, 2009, p. 116).

English is taught as a second language to millions of students all over the world. They want to learn English and their parents know that by doing so, students will have a better opportunity to succeed within the educational system. Understanding this reality, school districts have the responsibility to provide students with an education that promotes the coexistence of languages. Languages and cultures have coexisted and enriched each other for centuries. This project of cooperative-bi-literacy has shown that schools in the 21st century can transmit this historical memory of coexistence and recreate environments that promote linguistic and cultural synchronicity.

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