

**RETHINKING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BILINGUAL STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL
NEEDS:
CHALLENGES, STRUGGLES AND GROWTH**

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Literacy development of special education students is a topic that has been at the center of debates revolved around school reforms. Drawing on socio-cultural theoretical framework, this case study examines the literacy development of a special education bilingual student, Angel. A qualitative method is used to analyze texts Angel produced over the course of one academic year in order to examine in what way and to what degree he grew academically. Findings suggest that the teaching practices of Angel's teachers, his self-motivation, and support received from his family contributed to his literacy development. The authors point out the limitations of this case study and propose that the literacy development of Angel be contextually situated and analyzed to avoid possible generalization about the literacy development of all special education bilingual students.

Special education bilingual (SEB) students have faced many linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges in the U.S. school system (Yates & Ortiz, 2004; Ortiz & Garcia, 1995). This is even more so for those from lower socio-economic background. At school, SEB students face the challenge of learning not only a new language and understanding a new culture but also of taking up new identities and roles as learners (Smith, 2001; Mercer & Mercer, 1998; Robertson et al., 1994). Unfortunately, many teachers who are expected to guide them through this difficult process are sometimes not prepared to take on this gigantic task (Fu, 2003; Birch, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004). As a consequence, schools become for SEB students a site with serious academic, psychological, linguistic, and cultural hurdles to overcome (Nieto, 2005; Cummins, 1988). In addition to facing the challenge of learning the English language, they are to acquire learning strategies to achieve academically (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Cummins, 1989).

Like their monolingual counterparts without special needs, SEB students want to achieve in school. The challenge, however, is that achieving requires them, among other things, to develop creative ways of using language to make meaning of texts often not designed for them (Ortiz & Garcia, 1995; Yates & Ortiz, 2004; Valdes & Figueroa, 1994). Furthermore, the school system wherein SEB students are expected to succeed is mainly structured for students without special needs (Male, 2003; Layton & Lock, 2002; Ortiz, 2000). However, some SEB students manage to succeed academically. The questions then become: What are the resources that have enabled them to do so? To what extent do special education teacher's teaching methods and strategies and support from family contribute to the development of their literacy skills? This case study sought to answer these questions. Drawing on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Bloome et al. 2005; Bloome & Willett, 1996; Street, 1995; Bahktin, 1986) and data gathered over a year period, the researcher and a middle school teacher examined whether or not teachers' teaching method and strategies enabled Angel to acquire literacy skills over the course of a year. Second, we analyzed texts that Angel produced within a year to examine in what ways and to what degree he grew academically. Finally, we explored in what ways and to what extent Angel's self-motivation and the support received from his family contributed to his literacy development. In the sections that follow, we briefly review sociocultural theory informing this case study. We then describe the larger context in which this study took place. We go on to delineate the methodology used and discuss the findings of the study.

Theoretical Framework

As noted earlier, this case study is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Bloome, 1999; Bloome & Willett, 1996; Street, 1995; Bahktin, 1986). We drew on this theory because of an interest in learning what classroom literacy events and pedagogical choices that may have enhanced Angel's literacy development. In addition, we used socio-cultural theory as our analytical lens to explore how Angel may have used these literacy events to co-construct knowledge with his teachers and peers and develop academic language to produce texts. A text is broadly defined here as the transcript of a face-to-face conversation between two people; the interaction between teachers and students; a transcribed interview; or a sample of students' essays. Finally, we used sociocultural as our conceptual framework because it enabled us to examine how Angel used language to make meanings in texts embedded in and informed by his classroom situational context.

To achieve these goals, we drew on, among other terms, Vygotsky's concept of knowledge construction. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is not constructed in isolation. It is collectively constructed and historically and socially situated. Language plays a central role in co-construction of knowledge and meaning making. In effect, it is the medium whereby people attribute meaning to and deconstruct meaning from texts. It is also the tool used to produce texts in specific contexts. As Knapp & Watkins (2005) put it:

Texts are always produced in a context. While texts are produced by individuals, individuals produce those texts as social subjects; in particular, social environments. In other words, texts are never completely individual or original; they always relate to a social environment and to other texts. (p. 18)

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1946) took the word context a few steps further, linking it to the social function of language. To better understand and describe in depth the immediate context in which texts are produced, he coined the term context situation, which, in his view, needs to be linked to a broader influential context, which he calls *cultural context* (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). As demonstrated later, the written texts that Angel produced in his classrooms were constantly informed and influenced by the cultural context of the school. Moreover, the language that Angel used to produce and make meanings through the texts (e.g. short sentences, essays) has various functions: social, linguistic, and cultural (Halliday, 1994). Sociocultural theorists explore these multiple dimensions of language (Vygotsky, 1978; Bloome, 1999; Street, 1995; Bloome & Willett, 1996; Gee, 2001). Bloome et al. (2005) examined the extent to which language is used by teachers and students through classroom interactions to co-construct knowledge and make meanings of texts. Bloome et al. (2005) also pointed out the importance of language in conducting research and analyzing literacy events taking place in classrooms. They stated that:

Our approach to the micro-ethnographic analysis of classroom language and literacy events is informed by our continuously evolving understanding of language, literacy, and classrooms. For us, language is not a transparent vehicle for the communication of information. Any use of language (spoken, written, electronic, etc.) involves complex social, cultural, political, cognitive, and linguistic processes and contexts—all of which are part of the meaning and significance of reading, writing, and using language. (p. xvii)

What Bloome et al. (2005) pointed out does not happen in a vacuum; the meaning that people make through the social use of language can be best understood by placing it in context. In Vygotsky's conception (1986), establishing the link between text and context is key in knowledge construction; for example, how students construct knowledge and/or make meaning of texts in their community differs from the way they construct knowledge with and/or make meaning of texts with their teachers and peers.

According to the proponents of sociocultural theory, language and texts are equally important factors in the domain of knowledge construction. People use language to co-construct knowledge both verbally and textually; as such, texts (written, oral, visual or otherwise) are the centerpiece of knowledge construction (Fairclough, 2003; Freire, & Macedo, 1987). Just as people construe meaning verbally, they do so through written texts (Fairclough, 2003; Halliday, 1994). We were interested in looking at how Angel used language to make meaning of texts read in class as well as how he utilized it to produce texts.

Halliday (1994) and Fairclough (2003, 1995) argue that the content of texts have different social effects on people depending on how they interpret and analyze them. Making meaning of texts, as Fairclough

(2003) eloquently puts it, *depends upon not only on what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit—what is assumed* (p. 11). What is assumed to be in the text is frequently a reflection of the meaning analysts attribute to it. One can therefore only provide one's interpretation of texts, and such an interpretation needs to be substantiated with evidence from the text (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). This is why making meanings of texts requires situating and linking such meanings to context. Freire (1970) maintains, *The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context* (p.67). In the case of a text written by an individual, *what is 'said' in [such] a text always rests upon 'unsaid' assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed*" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). In trying to identify what is assumed in texts analysts sometimes bring in their own assumptions into such analysis. However, these assumptions need be critically examined to avoid possible misinterpretation of texts. With this in mind, when we first started interpreting and analyzing the texts Angel produced, we discussed our interpretation and analysis of his texts with colleagues and peers. This enabled us to gain a better understanding of what purposes Angel was trying to achieve in his texts.

Context of Study

This study stems from a collaborative research project in which a middle school teacher, the co-researcher, and the researcher were involved. At the time of this study, the co-researcher was pursuing a master's degree at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst through ACCELA (Access through Critical Content and English Language Acquisition). ACCELA is a home/university collaboration between the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and two urban school districts. Through this partnership, urban elementary and middle school teachers in Springfield and Holyoke, Massachusetts, enroll in an inquiry-based master's program during which they acquire theoretical and applied knowledge in L1 and L2 literacy and in multicultural education. As an ACCELA fellow, the researcher helped the co-researcher critically examine her research and meet the technical challenges of their inquiry-based Master's projects.

Angel was placed in the classroom of the co-researcher for about a semester. As the researcher and the co-researcher were working collaboratively, they witnessed Angel's slow but steady academic development. Because they wanted to document an SEB student's academic growth over a relatively long time period, they became particularly interested in Angel, who, over the course of a year, achieved significant gains in his literacy skills. The relationships they established with Angel, and subsequently with his single mother, enabled them to explore to what degree his family contributed to his literacy growth.

The Focal Student

Angel is a special education bilingual student whose native tongue is Spanish but received instruction in English. He could speak both languages, but could neither read nor write in Spanish. Angel was a quiet young man who at times portrayed himself as a very emotionally needy student. He often shut himself down refusing to participate in class.

Angel was well liked by his teachers and peers. He seemed to do better in a classroom with well-established routines and procedures. Angel usually answered questions very directly without elaboration. His classroom work was modified, and he required much scaffolding and had to be engaged in meaningful activities to more or less grasp what was happening in class.

At the time of the study, he was completing his third year at the middle school, where he participated in the Learning Life Skills program. This program is designed for students with significant learning challenges. Students are placed in this program only after an extensive evaluation that demonstrates that they are functioning in the intellectually deficient range of cognitive development I.Q. score below 70, and their adapted behavior (what students can produce) in the classroom is commensurate with this diagnosis.

The School

This study took place at a middle school located in Massachusetts. At the time of the study, the city where the school is located was in receivership. During that period, the school district lost over 1,000 teachers. Most of these teachers were highly qualified and experienced. Uncertified teachers on waivers replaced them. The school served approximately 1220 students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Most students who attended this school were Latino/as and African Americans of working class background.

Approximately 250 students spent their academic day in an exclusive English Language Learners program, and 320 students received some level of special education. There were four Assistant Principals at the school. One was in charge of the sixth grade and the Inclusion Special Education programs along with the Developmental Skills, Life Skills, and Language Learning Disability program; the seventh and eighth grades each had a counterpart assistant principal. The other assistant principal was in charge of the Bilingual program and supervised the self-contained special education programs and the Social Emotional Behavior Support program.

According to the coordinator of special education, previously one of the four assistant principals covered all the special education programs. The school then decided to involve all assistant principals in the special education program at some level so that they would be familiar with the laws and regulations regarding special education programs.

During this study, the school had many programs including Talented and Gifted programs (TAG). TAG was designed for students who were considered gifted and talented. These students' talent and gift were evaluated based on their academic performance and scores on standardized tests. According to the school bilingual counselor, bilingual students rarely made it to the TAG program.

Method

Data Collection

For this study we used a qualitative approach, specifically a case study approach. Case studies, which are part of the framework of qualitative research, enable researchers *organize the data by specific cases in order to accomplish an in-depth study* (Patton, 1990, p.23). Examining case studies through a similar lens, Nieto (2005) contends that, *case studies can help us look at specific examples so that solutions for more general situations can be hypothesized and developed* (p.6). Case studies also entails collecting data through participant observation and keeping a record. This *includes taking field notes, taking photographs, making maps, and using any other means to record your observations* (Spradley, 1980, p.33).

Our role as participant-observers in this study allowed us to take field notes and conduct informal and formal interviews with Angel. Some of these interviews occurred during the course of our participant observation. We collected artifacts including previous tests of Angel and essays that he produced over the course of one academic year. In addition, we videotaped Angel's classroom interaction with his peers and teacher. From these videotaped sessions, we extracted transcriptions of student/teacher and student/student interactions. In addition, we used a reflective journal that Angel's special education teacher kept over a year. This journal was designed to enable that teacher to reflect on her own teaching practices.

Data for this study were systematically collected from September 2006 to May 2007. The first set of data was collected in the co-researcher's classroom where Angel spent a semester. The rest of data was collected in Angel's special education class where he was placed for the remaining academic year. Two to three days a week were spent observing Angel in the co-researcher's classroom as well as his special education teacher. Over the course of one academic year, we were able to collect a rich set of data consisted of audio and videotape recordings of teacher-student interaction, transcription of teacher/student and student/student interactions, field notes, test results of Angel, as well as samples of his writing classroom projects and art work. Other body of evidence included: several short interviews that we conducted with Ms. Santana; the school bilingual counselor; and with Angel about his reading comprehension. We used this data set to document Angel's early struggles with literacy skills such as reading and writing.

Data Analysis

We focused on Angel's reading skills in order to understand his literacy development. To this end, we took a closer look at how he drew on his limited vocabulary and reading comprehension to navigate through texts of which he was expected to make meaning. In addition, we analyzed major components of his reading ability, such as his strategy to identify and read challenging words, his vocabulary and background knowledge, and reading comprehension. Moreover, we reviewed and analyzed Angel's prior literacy assessments, looking for connections between formal and informal assessments, and the implications these assessments had for his literacy development. We went on to analyze a reading miscue test that we administered to him. Finally, moving from the analysis of the reading miscue test, we examined his writing and drawing skills.

To document whether Angel's writing skills improved over time, we made specific use of short essays that he wrote in class over the course of two semesters. We collected two short essays out of many short essays he produced during that time period. We first did a broader analysis of them all, looking for possible growth overtime with his writing. These essays were short reactions papers that Angel wrote about short stories he read in class about heredity and global warming. After carefully reading and analyzing all the essays, we then decided to select two of them that seemed to illuminate the gradual improvement of his writing skills. While carefully analyzing the first paragraph essay, we noticed that he seemed to struggle to make complete and coherent sentences. However, the analysis of the second essay revealed significant progress in his writing.

As we were analyzing the gradual writing progress of Angel, we sought to find out what could possibly be his audience and the purpose he was trying to achieve with his writing. Moreover, we tried to explore whether or not the writing assignments were meaningful to Angel's life. To this end, we did a line-by-line analysis of his short essays to determine how much he seemed to invest in them. In addition to the essays, we analyzed a self-portrait that he drew in class. This self-portrait stemmed from a classroom activity focusing on heredity in which Ms. Santana engaged all of her students for about a week.

We administered a reading miscue test to Angel as a strategy to assess his reading proficiency. A miscue analysis looks at the multiple cueing systems that a reader utilizes as he or she reads. As Wilde (2000) eloquently puts it, *more specifically, miscue analysis helps us understand what strategies struggling readers are using and how effective those strategies are, in a way that doesn't focus on weakness, doesn't oversimplify, and doesn't label readers* (p.4). Taking Wilde's statement a step further, we argue that miscue analysis is an important tool for teachers and researchers to use, for it might help them understand how readers construct meaning from texts. From the information gathered through this analysis, we gained a better understanding of what strategies a struggling reader like Angel used to deconstruct meaning from texts.

Findings & Discussion

We began the analysis by using the Burke Reading Interview protocol (Wilde, 2000), which allowed us to identify Angel's miscues. Angel seemed to have a good self-knowledge of his limited reading ability. It is evident that he relied on other people to help him when he *got stuck* on a word, as he stated in the interview below.

Researcher: When you are reading and come to something you don't know, what do you do?

Angel: *I raise my hand and ask.*

Researcher: Do you do anything else?

Angel: *Try my best.*

Researcher: Do you think you are a good reader?

Angel: *A little.*

Researcher: What do you need to do to get better?

Angel: *Keep on studying. Try to learn by myself. Ask my brother.*

When we asked Angel how he learned to read, he stated, *Trying to put the words together* (field notes, November 2007). Moreover, Angel acknowledged in this interview that he would like to learn how to read better. He showed a reliance on his family to achieve this goal, as evident by his first strategy, that is, going to his brother for assistance. Angel chose the text *The Pig Who Learned to Read* from a group of four selections that were offered to him. He stated that he chose this because he likes pigs (see Appendix A for the miscue analysis of Angel's reading comprehension of *The Pig Who Learned to Read*).

We asked Angel if the pictures were part of this decision, and he stated that, *I like to read about things that I like* (field notes, November 2006). We went on to ask Angel to read out loud the selection the way he would normally read, and to do the things he would do if he came to a challenging word and there was not someone to ask. In having Angel read this text, our overarching goal was to find out whether he would be able to make meaning of it on his own. We started with word recognition and pronunciation. As illustrated in our miscue diagnosis test above, Angel mistook many words for others as he was reading them out loud. For example, he mistook *went* for *want* and *special* for *surprised*. We underlined words that Angel either mispronounced and/or was not able to identify at all. We wrote his mistaken words over the words he was asked to identify. When coming across the word he could not identify, sometimes he simply said, *I don't know* (field notes, December, 2006). We registered the

response he provided, as we wanted to investigate further what prevented him from identifying these words.

As we recorded his miscues, we had reservations about whether the text was too difficult. At first glance Angel seemed to struggle. After we completed the analysis, we realized that he had done a lot better than we had anticipated, especially with retelling the story in his own words. He was able to retell the story while expressing his opinion about it. Angel's retelling of the story was simple, yet comprehensible. He gave a fair description of the story line and character development. Angel was able to demonstrate what he knows, not what he doesn't know, which is important to focus on for students with special needs like him. He answered his own questions about the plot when reflecting upon the story.

Researcher: Did the Pig learn to read in the story?

Angel: *Don't remember.*

Researcher: Does his father help him?

Angel: *I think so.*

Researcher: Does he learn to read?

Angel: *He learns to read.*

In listening to Angel's retelling, we noticed that he showed some understanding of the story. We went on to ask him what crossed his mind as he was reading it. Angel stated that the main character reminded him of his own learning struggle.

Researcher: Did you think of anything else when you read this story?

Angel: *Reminds me of when I couldn't read.*

At the end of this session, we asked Angel some more questions about his reading strategies, which gave us more insight about where to go next. We went on asking how he identifies and deconstructs words. In so doing, we noticed that Angel struggled with words that have more than one syllable, in particular the word *because*. This led us to wonder if Angel developed some skills along the way to deconstruct challenging words, but sometimes reluctant to use these skills.

Researcher: Did you have a hard time with some of the words?

Angel: (Pointing to the word *because*) *Too long.*

Researcher: What do you do when you come to a word like this?

Angel: *I try to understand the first letters.*

Researcher: OK good (covering up *cause*), what does the first part of this word say?

Angel: *Be*

Researcher: How about this letter (pointing to letter *c*).

Angel: Reads out loud letter *c*, and then says *because*.

Researcher: When you are home, what do you do when you come to a word like this?

Angel: *If I don't get it, I skip it or I ask my brother.*

The excerpt from the interview above gave us a good sense of Angel's strategy and stance towards school-based reading, and his focus on obtaining extra help from family when encountering challenging words embedded in texts. Though Angel is cognizant of what he does not know, his perseverance in reaching out to people for extra help shows his level of motivation to learn. Moreover, although Angel seemed to feel challenged decoding the meaning of some words, he was able to connect with the story. This led us to infer that special education students like Angel can develop a personal sense of learning ownership while reading if they get to read texts that are meaningful and matter to their lives. In extending the analysis of Angel's reading and developing literacy, we explored the relationship between his reading and writing skills. Specifically, we took a look at the texts that Angel produced in one of his special education classes.

Angel's Drawing and Writing

As Angel's special education teacher was working on the heredity unit, she engaged her BSE students in classroom discussions where they talked about their physical traits such as the color of their hair, their eyes and their height. After spending about two days explaining to her students what heredity entails, she then asked them to draw a self-portrait. After students finished drawing their portrait, they shared it with the class, explaining different components of it. Like his peers, Angel drew a portrait that he felt was a true representation of him. After several drafts and with the help of Ms. Collin and his classmates, Angel drew the self-portrait and explained in what ways and to what degree it represented who he is (see Appendix B for a copy of Angel's self-portrait).

When asked Ms. Santana why she allowed her students to draw in her class, she stated that many of her bilingual special education students expressed themselves best through drawing, and that she felt that she had to accommodate the needs of all of her students. As participant observers in this study, we could confirm Ms. Santana's statement. For example, while being in Ms. Santana's class, we noticed that some of her students had difficulty composing long and comprehensible essays. However, they did not seem to struggle drawing.

From our experience working with special education students and teachers, we learned that what is equally helpful is teachers' willingness to allow BSE students to use creative ways to express their thoughts and ideas about themselves and others. Drawing seems to be one of the creative ways that BSE students often use to do so. Ms. Santana showed that she understood this. She created space in her class for her BSE students to communicate their thoughts through drawing.

Alongside the self-portraits, Ms. Santana asked her BSE students to describe themselves through writing. She provided her students with a list of adjectives from which they chose several. She also helped students generate through dialogue adjectives that were not included in the list that she provided. Indeed, through brainstorming and scaffolding some students generated additional adjectives. Students were allowed to use as many adjectives as they needed to describe themselves. As demonstrated later in his first paragraph essay, Angel used a few of the adjectives that he and his peers generated in class to describe his physical traits and characteristics. Specifically, he described the color of his hair, eyes, and height. Ms. Santana also encouraged Angel and his peers to mention in their descriptive paragraph essay physical traits that they thought or knew they inherited from their parents and grandparents.

Ms. Santana used themes such as heredity to which her students could relate. Students usually engage assignments that are meaningful to their lives and stir up their interests. This somewhat confirms what scholars such as LeCourt, (2004) and Zamel & Spack (1987) claim about writing: when the purpose of writing is clear or made clear to students and/or when they have the opportunity to write about what matters and is relevant to their identities, writing can be very meaningful to them. In a short paragraph essay that Angel wrote about him, he described physical traits and characteristics that he thought he inherited from his father. He also attempted to compare himself to his father (see Appendix C for a sample of Angel's short paragraph essay).

Although the paragraph essay that Angel produced is short, it is evident that he engages the writing and shows some level of investment in it. The meaning embedded in the essay is clear. His sentences are coherent and syntactically correct. Even though Angel does not fully succeed in using comparative adjectives correctly in sentences such as *I am tall from my dad* (rather than *I am taller than my dad*), this does not seem to prevent him from expressing his ideas. In fact, misuse of comparative adjectives seems to be one of the most common mistakes made by non-native speakers of any language, especially those with special needs. Angel demonstrates that he understands what he was asked to write about, and tries to do so in spite of some linguistic challenges. In addition, he used basic sentence structure and explained the writing purpose in context.

Unlike the first essay, in the essay that follows, Angel is asked to express his point of view about global warming. Before writing this essay, Angel and his peers read a short text on global warming. First, Ms. Santana had each student read this text silently. Then, she had each student read a portion aloud. Finally, she engaged the whole class in a discussion about the text, as a way of assessing reading comprehension. After this discussion, each student was to write an essay stating three major things that might happen to the world as a result of global warming. Implicit in the assignment is a demonstration that Angel can follow the writing steps written and posted on the classroom wall by Ms. Santana.

05/15/2007

Teacher's prompt: *Explain what you think will happen if we go into global warming. Two paragraphs.*

Angel's answer: *If we go into global warming it will get hot, we could die. First it will get hot because the temperature will go up the humidity will go up with the heat the rivers could dry up. Secondly, the oceans will rise. The penguins will die. Lastly we could die because our plants will be because they could die. We will not have fresh water we will not have a place to live.*

Angel begins by writing a thesis statement signaling the three points that he will be making and elaborating on. He then lays out three things that could happen as a result of global warming. Angel's use of the temporal connectives *first*, *second*, and *lastly* connects points in his argument. Moreover, he shows that he understands the need to elaborate on each point made in academic writing, through proper use of causal conditional connectives such as *because*. In addition, Angel demonstrates that he is capable of putting forward a point of view and using concrete examples to support it.

Angel consistently uses modals of possibility in sentences, such as, *The river could dry up; We could die* to express his projective viewpoint. Angel uses these modals in a sophisticated way. Furthermore, there are two important new developments in Angel's writing: He uses phrasal verbs such as *dry up*, and *go up* to make meanings; and he uses future tense to indicate that he is referring to things yet to come.

More importantly, Angel makes intertextual links between his text and the text on global warning he read in class. That is, he strategically draws on some of the information and words such as *humidity*, *heat*, and *dry* provided in the text to take a position and justify it with evidence. Structurally, this essay shows improvement in organization from the first text that Angel wrote. His command of modals, connectives, verb tense, punctuation and sentence structure is strong. Equally important, in this essay Angel makes statements through which he represents the *reality* about global warming.

Given that Angel is considered a bilingual student with special needs, it is remarkable that he was able to produce an essay that is coherent and whose meaning is clear after being in Ms. Santana's class for about a semester. This suggests that Ms. Santana's teaching methods and support and Angel's self-motivation played a significant role in Angel's literacy development. Equally important was the support that Angel received from his family, namely from his older brother and his mother as he was striving to improve his literacy skills.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

Analysis of the data revealed that Angel drew on many available resources to grow academically. When we first started this study, Angel was not able to write a complete sentence. However, at the end of this study, he composed short paragraph essays to achieve his purpose and was beginning to write longer paragraphs. This serves as evidence of Angel's literacy growth over a year period. Although Angel struggled writing and reading, he saw himself as a writer and a reader. This means that he did not give up despite the challenges that he encountered as a BSE student. He showed the desire to become a better writer, stating that he needs to *keep on writing* and *try to learn by myself* (field notes, March, 2007). It can be inferred from this statement that he wanted to take ownership of his learning. Thus, what special education teachers working with BSE students can do is to build on these students' *funds of knowledge* (Moll, 1988) to explicitly and systematically teach them effective writing strategies so they could strengthen their writing skills. Moreover, special education teachers can best support BSE students in their effort and desire to learn by focusing on their strengths, rather than on their weaknesses. Doing so may help them in their struggles to acquire stronger literacy skills such as reading and writing.

Furthermore, carefully analyzing the reading and writing skills of BSE students can help teachers become more attentive to them in terms of where these students might need help with their literacy skills. Additionally, as this study shows, analyzing BSE students' writing skills without putting a *failure* or *at risk* label on them can inspire these students to take ownership of their own learning. By focusing on the positive aspects of BSE students' limited reading and writing skills, special education teachers can make a difference in helping build on these skills.

Importance of Study

Many studies (Ortiz & Garcia, 1995; Yates & Ortiz, 2004) have explored the academic growth of BSE students. However, these studies have mostly focused on elementary and high school BSE students. Moreover, these studies generally address the outcome of BSE students' academic achievement. In contrast, this case study examines a different age group— BSE students in middle school, which in Massachusetts encompasses sixth, seventh, and eighth grades —and centers on the processes leading to BSE students' literacy growth. In this sense, it will contribute to the small number of socio-cultural studies examining the processes of *successful learning* in a different context. The context of this case study differed from others done in suburban areas in that it was conducted at a poorly funded urban middle school located in a city with a high rate of crime and poverty. Additionally, this study will add

to the literature examining the literacy growth of Puerto Rican BSE students. These are an ever-increasing group of Latino/a students who, unlike their Mexican counterparts, have yet to be fully studied. Finally, this case study underscores the role of teachers' teaching practices; students' self-motivation, and support from family in SEB students' literacy development.

Limitations of Study

A major limitation of this case study that needs to be pointed out is its focus on one Puerto Rican BSE student's academic growth. Given the limited scope of this study, it should not be used to generalize about Puerto Rican BSE students' academic growth. Nor should it be used to generalize about all BSE students. Another limitation of this study is that we did not observe the classrooms of all the teachers who were involved in Angel's learning; nor did we interview all of his teachers. We only interviewed and observed the classroom of Ms. Santana, his special education teacher. Furthermore, we were only able to observe her classroom twice to three times a week. Given these limitations, more studies need to be conducted to further explore the literacy development of BSE students.

With that said, Angel's academic growth must be analyzed and understood in its own context; failure to do so may lead to the over-generalization of his academic trajectory and diminution of his individual accomplishment. In other words, not acknowledging the context in which Angel was recognized as an academically advanced BSE student may lead, on the one hand, to romanticization of his story or, on the other, to condemnation of those who fell behind his academic growth. Instead, we must critically examine the lack of resources that may have prevented his peers them from doing as well as Angel did.

Drawing on Angel's case, we propose that, to gain a fuller understanding of how certain group of BSE students advance academically, it is imperative that researchers critically explore to what degree resources such as students' family background, parental involvement, and investment in their learning have enabled them to do so. Moreover, we strongly suggest that researchers carefully investigate the root causes that have prevented non-achiever BSE students from taking advantage of the resources that enabled Angel's academic development. In Angel's case, his teacher, family, and his motivation contributed greatly to his academic growth. For students without access to these advantages, what can take their place? The resources that led to Angel's academic growth can be best documented through case studies; test scores, for example, are simply too one-dimensional to assess his intellectual development. Had Angel been judged merely on his test scores, his school would not have recognized him as an academically advanced BSE student. Furthermore, despite what Angel achieved at school, perhaps he would not have been recognized as an *achiever* had he been in at a school with privileged BSE students. Given this reason and others already mentioned, we recommend that BSE students' institutional literacy development be contextually situated and critically analyzed.

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Appendix A

Miscue analysis of Angel's reading comprehension of *The Pig Who Learned to Read*

Miscue A
2-26-10

1. ^R The Pig ^{uc} Who ^{uc} Learned to Read ^{uc} YYP.

2. Once there was a pig. YYN

3. His name was ^{uc} Pete. YYP

4. He lived on a farm. YYN

5. He was not like other pigs. YYN

6. He was ^{uc} special ^{uc} surprised. YYN

7. He ^{uc} wanted to learn to read. YYN

8. ^c He ^c His father said, "But pigs ^c can't read!" YYN

9. ^c "I ^{uc} don't ^{uc} care," said ^{uc} Pete. YNY

10. "I want to read." YYN

11. One day ^{uc} Pete ^{uc} went to a boy ^{uc} who ^{uc} lived on a farm. YNY

12. ^c "I ^c don't ^c know ^c teach me to read," he said. YNP

13. The boy said, "But ^{uc} you're a pig. I don't know if I can. YYP

14. But ^c I'll ^c do ^c what ^c my ^c mother and father did ^{uc} with me." YYY

15. ^R Every night before bed, the boy read to the pig. YYN

16. The pig loved the stories. YYN

Appendix B
Angel's self-portrait



Appendix C
Angel's short paragraph essay

Angel 10/26/06

Why I LOOK like me
I am a boy I have black heavy hair
my skin color is tannish and my eye color is brown
and I am tall from my dad.

Rubric
Skills: 3 out of 4
Content: 3 out of 4
Total: 75%