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## Multicultural Children's Literature as a Practice to Encourage Interest in Books and Reading With English Language Learners: A Participatory Study

■ This article examines the multiple in-class uses of multicultural children's literature to develop interest in books and reading with English Language Learners (ELLs). Specifically, it focuses on using books to spotlight oral language development and using various types of stories to create an atmosphere for successful learning through authentic material. The article presents the design and results of an 8-week study with a group of third-graders in a San Francisco inner-city school setting, during which a series of multicultural children's books were introduced, followed by dialogue reflection on the stories, which highlighted several key factors. First, the participatory research technique is identified as a significant factor in getting these children to engage in reading for critical reflection on their own lives, thus increasing students' motivation to practice their oral language development and interest in books and reading. Additionally, the children's perceptions suggest that they had not been secluded from the realities of their own worlds. They had, from such a young perspective, a clear understanding of how the dynamics of everyday life function, often generating solutions for given situations that revealed

an unexpected maturity in their thinking and experience. Using multicultural children's literature as the initial focus for dialogue helped the children move toward critical reflections on their own academic lives, viewing themselves as decision makers in their learning and empowering them with the courage to question the current mandated curriculum for English Language Learners.

### Introduction

Listening to children's voices and analyzing their reflections about stories is the basis for this study. One channel for allowing children to verbally articulate their experiences is through literature that represents their own life situations. Such a practice offers children time not only to develop their conversational skills but also to think critically about their own circumstances.

Children's literature is a medium that naturally fosters critical reflection. Quality literature poses problems and challenges the imagination. Through stories, children can relate to the characters' circumstances as a mirror of their own lives. The solutions can function as a model to help work out problems and assist students in making choices and decisions about their future actions and consequences (Bieger, 1996; Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

Since many of our public schools include children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, meeting the various needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) is essential. Educators need to examine approaches that will contribute to children's success. Elementary-school educators are often challenged to provide resources and materials that are culturally and linguistically relevant in order to deliver instruction to second language learners in an interesting and purposeful way so that the curriculum is engaging and meaningful. Meeting these students' interests and needs entails a much broader approach, which the currently mandated curriculum does not address entirely. The school's content areas should allow for mean-

ingful contributions from reading picture books and discussing stories. Dialoguing furnishes opportunities to organize concepts and build background knowledge into a format that aids comprehension, promotes thinking, and offers ample time for ELLs to practice speaking in the school language. Thus, dialoguing with and about multicultural children's literature is an appropriate technique to choose. And finally, given that children respond to their education when they can see themselves as a part of it, using multicultural children's literature to help create a multiethnic and multilingual curriculum is a way to begin.

### **Participatory Research**

Mandated textbooks and the themes, the lessons, and the language derived from them are not always representative of the current, real-life cultural and linguistic circumstances of students. Because of this, many students can find their class work to be frivolous and irrelevant. When children are given the opportunity to reflect on their own educations, they become motivated, engaged learners, no matter their primary language.

This study followed the participatory research approach in which the students' voices and personal linguistic experiences were addressed and discussed in order to understand the children's needs and interests. This approach allows students to begin to think critically about their educations and provides ways for them to express what they need and want to study. It is difficult to choose appropriate instructional tools without hearing from the students about their own experiences, interests, and struggles with learning. Dialogue, writing, or indirect responses allow for this to happen. Having this information, teachers can then design a curriculum that is meaningful, effective, and reflective of the students' reality while maintaining required standards and expectations.

### **Overview of Pertinent Literature**

#### ***Definition of Multicultural Children's Literature***

Boutte and McCormick (1992) define multicultural literature as literature "that features children of differing racial characteristics, ethnic backgrounds and home circumstances" (p.141), while Kruse (1992) defines multicultural literature rather narrowly as "books by and about people of color" (p. 30). However, this latter definition does not take into account the many cultural differences, such as language, that are beyond skin color.

Sleeter and Grant (1988) give a more expanded definition for multicultural literature. They consider it to be the body of materials that "recognizes, accepts, and affirms human differences and similarities related to gender, race, handicap, and class" (p. 137). Unfortunately, this continues to neglect yet other factors such as religion and geographic region. Finally, Martinez (as cited in Madigan, 1993) views multicultural literature as that which "emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society" (p.169). This is a practical definition as it leaves space to consider the many components of cultural diversity when selecting materials for classroom use. Culture involves far more than that which is seen on the surface (Hillard, 1995).

#### ***Using Multicultural Children's Literature in the Curriculum***

Children learn a second language by being exposed to situations in which they have to use it, such as discussing in a literature circle, dialoguing about relevant stories, creating and sharing an illustration for a book, listening to read alouds, or enjoying a shared reading experience. These activities help children understand and connect to their own real-life circumstances, which in turn encourages them to use specific language or words in their speech when discussing relevant stories. Providing ample time for students to talk with one another about important, personal, and relevant issues creates an environment for the

students to begin thinking and speaking in English. These practices are especially beneficial for the child who speaks a second language, even if he or she is quietly observing before actively participating in the process of language practice (Truscott, 1997).

Using multicultural children's literature as an instructional tool offers wonderful exposure to stories representative of the students, beautiful and colorful illustrations, and enriching vocabulary. The stories include issues and topics familiar to the students, thus encouraging them to reflect and respond, practicing their oral language development. Also, through reading response in social contexts, readers build identities within specific cultural worlds (Galda & Beach, 2001). Such contexts can extend and clarify identity and an understanding of the world. It is important to view how students who are commonly marginalized in children's literature respond when they find themselves at the center of a text.

There is considerable value in the use of literature discussion groups and response journals. Reading and responding to literature in this way provides effective means through which readers of different ages and backgrounds and in a variety of settings deepen their understanding of literature and of themselves (Comba, 1991; Eeds & Wells, 1989). When readers express their interactions with literature through dialogue and written reflections, beliefs and ideas about their own identities are often brought out (Rosenblatt, 1978). Using multicultural literature provides for diverse voices in the classroom, whatever the racial, gender, or cultural or linguistic background of the students.

Teachers are also empowered in that they can plan the curriculum more appropriately to include students' interests, motivating students to take more risks, attempt new and challenging literacy skills, and become more independent learners. Ghosn (1998) argues that children's literature has a number of justifications in primary-school English Language Development (ELD) instruction. This is especially true in the cases in which

academic language proficiency is the goal of instruction and in which students' second language exposure and use is limited to the classroom and school. Literature is full of examples of real-life language in different situations. On the contrary, traditional ELD-mandated texts have been criticized as being "stiff imitations of the dynamic spontaneity of real life"; their characters as "nice, decent, and characterless"; and the situations "generally unreal and dull" (Crystal, 1987, p. 15). The excitement offered by a good story is likely to generate much more student discussion than the regular, mandated texts will. Whole-hearted student conversations will result in more opportunities for getting feedback and learning meaning as well as developing students' oral language (Ghosn, 1998).

Using multicultural literature can also help instill the love of books and reading in students. The goal of any educator is to get students excited to read, so they in turn develop their language skills. It is also important that teachers consistently read aloud, make use of the library, and offer time for language experiences after the stories. These activities encourage children to be more independent as learners because classroom routines—such as story time, literature dialogue, and sustained silent reading—are predictable and meaning based. Truscott (1997) observed Spanish-speaking students who went from being inattentive when being read stories in English, to engaged when being read stories in Spanish, to being attentive to both. This occurred mostly because the children had already been exposed to the stories in their native language before having the stories read to them in English, so the material was familiar. They even began to choose books in English during their silent reading time.

### *Transformative Literacy*

According to Ada and Campoy (1997), the theory of transformative literacy recognizes the power of literature as it confirms that "human beings are reflective beings" and provides "children with better insights into their

own beings, a better understanding of relationships to others and opens doors to new information” (p. 6). In their theory of transformative literacy, Ada and Campoy (1997) explain that transformation and dialogue take place between a reader and literature. The students need to find interests, as well as experiences from their own lives, that they can use to relate to their reading for it to have an important effect and ultimately make reading understandable, enjoyable, and meaningful:

Reading can be more than learning what the text has to say. Reading is a dialogue between the author and the reader. It enriches the author’s text with the reader’s feelings, experiences, and reflections. In doing so it allows the reader to leave the text wiser, stronger, with a greater understanding of herself, of himself, and of others, and able to face life with renewed hope. (Ada, 2002, p. 5)

Multicultural children’s literature is an effective vehicle for getting students to connect with the text, gain an understanding of it, discuss it, and develop their language skills because the stories make sense to them and they can dialogue fluidly about them.

### **Purpose**

This study explores the effectiveness of using multicultural children’s literature to cultivate reflection with a class of 18 third-grade inner-city public school children. The purpose of this study is to examine appropriate practices that encourage an interest in books and reading and at the same time encourage language development with ELLs. More specifically, the research will address oral language development by assessing multicultural children’s literature as a tool to promote student discussions, thus increasing their language skills and interest in books and reading.

### **Research Questions**

The design of this study included an analysis of emerging themes through student reflections during dialogue and reflective journal writing. The research questions for this study grow out of a participatory research approach and aim to highlight the concerns and observations of third-grade students, whose voices may rarely be listened to or recognized. The following questions were addressed:

1. To what extent do the students’ reflections and reactions to the characters and situations in children’s multicultural books relate to their own current circumstances?
2. What are the main themes established throughout the children’s dialogue when discussing the stories?
3. What do educators have to learn about children’s perceptions through the voices of third-graders?

### **Subjects**

The class of 18 children included 7 boys and 11 girls, all between the ages of 8 and 9. The entire group of students comprised children of color. The ethnic makeup was as follows: girls—6 African American, 2 Hispanic, 3 Samoan; boys—1 Pakistani, 2 Chinese, 2 African American, 1 Samoan, and 1 Hispanic and African American biracial and bicultural. The 2 Hispanic girls, 2 Chinese boys, and 1 Pakistani boy are all designated English Language Learners, though the Samoan children also identify English as their second language.

All but one of the students in the class lived in one of two housing projects near the school. The one was bused to school, while most of the children were walked to school by a parent, guardian, or older sibling, or came with friends. So their families could share household expenses, most of the students lived with large groups of people, including their parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and cousins. Only two of the children

lived in homes where the mother and the father were present full time.

All but four of the students were consistent in sharing verbally during the dialogue sessions. While the other four were shy in nature and spent more time digesting information, a connection and/or bond had been established with them and the researcher before, during, and after the 8 weeks of the study.

## **Materials and Procedure**

### ***Research Design***

In the 2002-2003 school year, the researcher spent 8 weeks with a third-grade class at an urban school site in San Francisco. Almost half of the 18 children in the class were designated English Language Learners. During this time, several multicultural children's literature books were specifically selected and then read aloud to the whole group. After each of the readings, the researcher facilitated a dialogue in order to develop the plot and the characters and to relate the stories to the real-life circumstances of these third-graders. While many of the books focused on various topics stemming from gang activity, immigration and migration, civil rights, family, race and culture, some of them included the issue of language.

Working with a typical-sized classroom of 18-20 students at this grade level was beneficial in the sense that it was both diverse and manageable, allowing the researcher to observe the children's growth through time. At the time of this study, this number was what most public schools consider a regular-sized classroom of students in an inner-city school in California. To demonstrate a workable methodology, the circumstances approximated actual classroom situations.

### ***The Research Process***

Questions to guide the dialogue were used to encourage critical reflection and to apply problem-solving skills to real-life situations. Through time the questions moved toward deeper and more relevant concerns brought up during the discussions. The student-

teacher dialogues were documented through naturalistic observation, and they were tape-recorded with simultaneous notation, which was later transcribed and analyzed, as were students' written reflections. The beginning 5 weeks of the school year were spent creating communicative bonds between the researcher and the students. This was one of the most important aspects of the study because without this trust, sharing experiences in front of a large group might have been intimidating for several of the children. Discipline issues were also addressed at this time, as was building confidence in the students, as a means to encourage a risk-free environment where it was safe for them to engage in critical discussions, some of which they might not have shared even with their own family members.

### ***Research Tools and Procedures***

**Data Collection.** The data for this participatory research study included:

- audio sessions of the dialogical process
- transcripts of dialogues following the reading of stories
- researcher's journal
- student writings and drawings, including their overall reactions and experiences to books and readings (response/reflection journals)

During the dialogues transcribed for this study, both a tape recorder and a researcher's journal were used to record student discussions. While the children were aware of the tape recorder for the first few sessions, attempts were made to make it as inconspicuous as possible so they would not feel threatened by its presence. After the researcher listened to the tapes and checked the notations, the dialogues were then transcribed. At the end of the study and after all the dialogues were transcribed, they were analyzed and categorized for overall common characteristics and themes.

**Questions to Guide the Dialogue.** The researcher maintained a set of questions to

use with this group of children after the reading of various stories. Since these questions were merely a guide, they were not intended to lead the discussion entirely. Instead, the questions were meant to open the conversation and stimulate new questions for further readings and deeper dialogues. The following questions were used to guide the dialogue:

1. Does anyone have a similar experience they would like to share about the situation that took place in this story?
2. Does anyone relate to any of the characters in this story? If so, how and why?
3. How do the issues and events in this story make you feel?
4. How might you help the characters in this story to understand their situation better so that they can handle it differently if it ever happens to them again?
5. What would you want to say to the character(s) in this story if you could meet him/her/them in the future?

### *Limitations to the Study*

Because this was only an 8-week study involving so many participants (18), there were limitations. The time frame, coupled with the beginning-of-the-year activities such as getting to know the school for the new students, getting to know the researcher for all the students, and developing a classroom environment appropriate for this study, made it challenging to engage all the students in the critical pedagogy process. The researcher's lengthy experience working with elementary-school children helped manage the problem.

The school is an Art Magnet campus. This means students are pulled from the classroom at various times during the day to attend dance class, art class, drawing, music, or singing lessons. While ideally these enrichment classes were scheduled parts of the day, they rarely followed a routine and were often changed week to week and even daily. This made it difficult to maintain a consistent meeting time. Most of the pullouts took place after lunch, toward the end of the

day, leaving the Language Arts block of time in the morning and the first hour after lunch. This is when most of the research took place. However, the time for this study was scheduled right after the lunch period from 12:45 to 1:30 on days that did not require the students to be in other places.

Because of activities over which the teachers had no control, such as assemblies, fire drills, and performances in the auditorium, there were periods when the study changed times to the late afternoon before the children left for home, and some children did not get to participate on those days. Nonetheless, once the study took on its own powerful influence, the children who missed the time on the rug with the books and the recorder made it a point to read the book on their own and talk in a small group before writing in their response journals.

Additionally, the rate of absenteeism was high for many of the students. Children who got bused in tended to be late from time to time as they traveled quite a distance to arrive at school and occasionally the buses were tardy. Students who got dropped off by parents often arrived 20 to 30 minutes late, as there were some families with several children all attending different schools throughout the area. Also, many of the immigrant students go back and forth between the US and their home country. Some drop out in the beginning and middle of the year and then return sometime at the end of the year.

Before the study, permission slips were sent out to the parents of the students asking that their children's oral and written responses be used in this study. The permission slips took quite a while to be returned. Because of this, some of the children's responses and reactions were delayed. Nevertheless, the students still participated in the dialogue sessions because the activities meet the state standards for the third curriculum.

While small groups occurred in this classroom for math and language arts, it was difficult to find time to sit in small groups and dialogue about the books. Many children who did not speak during the time they and the

researcher visited on the rug after each of the stories might have been more apt to talk in a smaller group setting. In fact, from time to time, a student would share something with the researcher about one of the stories on an individual basis, sometimes 2 or 3 days after the book had been read. This is when the researcher's journal came in quite handy as the tape recorder was, of course, not on.

## Results

### *Read Aloud and Dialogues*

After reading three of the stories, *La Mariposa*, *Angel Child*, *Dragon Child*, and *The Name Jar*, the students engaged in rich dialogue. Feelings about being a second language learner became a topic of conversation for several of the children who could identify with this issue. Others, who were not considered second language learners, also contributed to the discussions, noting their feelings about what it would be like to learn English as a second language. The following dialogues took place after the read alouds of the stories summarized below. For the sake of eliminating repetition, making some of the dialogue more understandable, and keeping fluidity throughout, pauses such as *um*, *yeah*, *uh*, and the like were deleted in the transcription phase. Additionally, when students' vernacular impeded the comprehensibility for readers, some clearer words were substituted and verb tense was adjusted. With that said, the researcher avoided any disruption to the flow of the dialogue whenever possible to keep the authenticity of the responses intact.

***La Mariposa* by Francisco Jiménez (2000).** Synopsis: The start of school is very confusing to Francisco: a different language, new faces, and a routine he doesn't understand. Because he can speak only Spanish, Francisco, son of a migrant worker, has trouble when he begins first grade, but his fascination with the caterpillar in the classroom helps him begin to fit in. He observes a caterpillar that will become a butterfly and draws what he sees around him. By the story's end, Francisco is involved in his class and has

earned the understanding and empathy of his classmates.

The students responded to *La Mariposa* with the following dialogue:

Child 1: Since he (Francisco) didn't speak English he didn't get to do a lot of what the other kids did. He couldn't tell them what he liked to do.

Teacher: That's an interesting point. Has anyone ever had this same experience?

Child 2: I felt shy because I didn't know anyone. "Jack" was the only one I knew and he had to explain to "Ms. Jackson" what I was saying.

Teacher: How does it feel not to be able to speak English with a whole bunch of kids who only speak English?

Child 2: I was shy because I didn't know anyone. I went to every class and decided which one I would like to go to because in "Ms. Jackson's" class, I saw a boy who looked like me and could talk like me.

Teacher: Now what do you do in "Ms. Jackson's" class since you are older and know English?

Child 2: I help. Help the students. Helping them make things easier. There is one student who does not know English and I am helping him speak English. It makes me feel happy.

Teacher: Why?

Child 2: It makes me feel good to help him and play with him. I am glad I had "Jack" and the other little boy is happy he has me too.

Child 3: I only spoke Spanish when I came to this school. It made me feel sad because I missed my friends from the other school who could speak Spanish. Here, kids kept saying, Huh? They didn't know what I was saying. The teacher didn't know either. I didn't know what she was saying either. My new friends had to teach me English.

Child 4: I spoke English and Spanish when I started school. It was easier to learn English and Spanish when I was in "Ms. Garcia's" class. I got to learn both languages at the same time.

Child 5: When I first started school I was happy because I had some friends and my teacher was helping me learn English. When my little cousin started school he just came from Samoa and didn't speak English very good so I just played with him. He was crying and he was very shy. He didn't have any friends so we played together. When he cried, I made him feel better. He speaks Samoan and English now. I helped him.

The main idea from this dialogue is that the children felt shy and awkward when coming to a new school and not being able to speak the language. *Child 2* sought out another boy who looked like him, knowing they might share the same language, which they did. This made *Child 1* feel needed and helpful and made *Child 2* less afraid to be there. *Child 3* depended on her new friends to teach her English, which was frustrating because they didn't understand Spanish. *Child 4* found comfort in her new teacher since the teacher spoke both English and Spanish. *Child 5* was a help to her cousin as he was learning English since she well understood the feeling of not being able to communicate. All of these children sought out others whom they could identify with to survive during the time they were learning English.

***Angel Child, Dragon Child* by M. Surat (1990).** Synopsis: Ut, an immigrant child from Vietnam, tries to adjust to a new life in America. Ut encounters ridicule about her clothing and her language; however, she befriends the most unlikely boy in her class and teaches the other children many things about her culture.

The students responded to *Angel Child, Dragon Child* with the following dialogue:

Child 1: Raymond was mad because he had to write about Ut's culture and language but he didn't know her funny words.

Teacher: Let's talk about the language. What was happening there?

Child 2: Just like in *La Mariposa*, Ut can't speak English like Francisco couldn't speak English. He spoke Spanish.

Child 3: Both of them can't speak English.

Child 4: Maybe she was Vietnamese and she spoke another language and Raymond's language was different from hers.

Teacher: How do you think you would feel if you couldn't understand the language?

Child 5: The reason why Raymond was making fun of Ut was because she really could speak some English but it sounded funny.

Teacher: How would you feel if you moved to a different place, different school, and could not speak the language that everyone else spoke?

Child 6: I would leave and run home and try to go to another school because I would be shy. I would feel shy and would want to learn how to speak their language.

Child 7: I would be bored because I wouldn't know anybody. I wouldn't understand what my teacher was saying so I would just think about my old school.

Child 8: The problem with Francisco was he wasn't allowed to speak Spanish at school and he would get in trouble if he was caught. In *Angel Child, Dragon Child*, Ut had to tell Raymond her story but the principal made her do it in English. It made her embarrassed.

Teacher: How do you think it feels for kids who only speak one language that they can not speak the language they know?



- Child 9: If a teacher made me speak only another language that I don't know, it would be hard for us and I wouldn't feel important.
- Child 10: I would want to go home because no one would understand me anyway, and I wouldn't know the school work. My parents wouldn't even be able to help me.
- Child 11: In both stories, the kids found someone they could speak their own language with. Francisco found Arthur to talk to and Ut talked with her family, but it had to be secret. That can't feel good. How do they do their homework and study at school?
- Child 12: I would stare out at the daylight because I wouldn't know how to talk their language. I would wish I could speak the language that the people spoke where I was going to school at now. I would be bored. I would think about going home and laying down so I wouldn't have a headache from trying so hard to understand what the teacher and the kids in my class were saying. I would hate not knowing what the teacher was teaching and the kids were learning.

This dialogue shows how the children empathized with those children who have to abstain from speaking their native language to learn English. Words such as bored, embarrassed, shy, and concepts such as not being able to understand, not feeling important, and wanting to go home are obvious messages about how children feel when they are required to give up their native language, the one they are most comfortable speaking, to adopt English with little or no support from anyone but their classmates.

***The Name Jar* by C. Yangsook (2001).**

Synopsis: Having just moved from Korea, Unhei is anxious that American kids will not like her. So instead of introducing herself on the first day of school, she tells the class that

she will choose a name by the following week by picking one of the names her classmates put into a glass jar. At the end of the week, with the help and encouragement of one of her new classmates, Unhei decides to keep her own name.

The students responded to *The Name Jar* with the following dialogue:

- Teacher: Who might be able to identify with some of the characters in the story?
- Child 1: Korean is a little bit like Chinese and her name looks funny like Chinese names. The little girl is kind of speaking a little Korean and it sounds funny. She wanted an American name because her name is funny and everyone can't pronounce it and she wants a name that everyone can pronounce. The same goes for me. My Chinese name is hard to say and I wanted to change it. It's hard for people not to speak the same language. They can't even pronounce a name. They don't even try very hard either.
- Child 2: Unhei wasn't a funny name to me. She should want a name in Korean and one for America.
- Child 3: I know why Unhei wanted to change her name because everyone made fun of her name. If I could meet her, I would tell her not to care about the other people who call her a different name. She should be proud of her name and language.

This book was chosen specifically for the two boys (*Child 1* and *Child 3* in the dialogue) in the class who had beautiful Chinese names but opted for their American names encouraged by their parents. After having discussed this book, both boys sat a little taller, spoke a little more openly, and smiled a little bigger after they taught the rest of the class how to successfully pronounce their Chinese names. From that time on, everyone in class referred to them by their birth names. Given some practice,

those who do “try hard” can learn the correct pronunciation, as was demonstrated by the students in this third-grade class.

## Discussion

### Summary

This study involved investigating, with an entire third-grade class, various multicultural children's stories. The goal of this study was to increase interest in books and reading while promoting the student's oral language development. The ways in which this process of investigation affected the students are documented here.

Many second language learners continue to find it difficult to participate successfully in school activities, particularly those related to language development. In addition, there is growing concern with the failure of second language learners to keep pace with native English-speaking students in their classrooms (Koskinen & Blum, 1984). In light of the complexity of learning to speak and read English and the current needs of second language learners, researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, and child advocates continue to investigate ways to create educational environments that support the literacy learning of the diverse students in their classrooms. As teachers and students openly discuss misconceptions and fears about language learning, it is hoped that more appropriate practices used to facilitate language fluency will begin to take shape. The findings confirm that, when the students are excited about school and their education and can begin to witness their own growth, they are more motivated to take risks and to achieve high expectations. Using children's literature to tap into their interests and real-life circumstances offers them a place to see themselves and encourage dialogue about how they are viewed and what is being done to support their needs. Findings also provide support and techniques for new, inexperienced, or veteran teachers who have had little contact with second language learners so that they can better meet the goals of this population.

### Findings

The children's perceptions in this study, as demonstrated in their oral responses, suggest that they had not been secluded from the realities of their own worlds. They had, from such a young perspective, a clear understanding of how the dynamics of everyday life function and often generated solutions for given situations, revealing a maturity in their thinking and experience which was not expected.

Findings suggest the following in relation to the research questions set out at the inception of the study:

1. To what extent do the students' reflections and reactions to the characters and situations in children's multicultural books relate to their own current circumstances?

It is evident that the students could relate to the stories and characters as the books reflected the students' real lives. As stated by the children themselves as they responded to children's literature, there is still a deficit when it comes to including second language learners into the mandated literacy curriculum. The students' own testimony relayed this message in that they had to seek out other children who talked and looked like them or who wouldn't make fun of them in order to simply make it through the day. This finding suggests that more attention should be geared toward language acquisition in regard to making books and reading a priority for second language learners.

2. What are the main themes established throughout the children's dialogue when discussing the stories?

Feelings about being a second language learner were topics of conversation for several of the children who could identify with this issue. Others, who were not considered second language learners, also contributed to the discussions by noting their feelings about what it would be like to learn English as a sec-

ond language. Showing this interest might not have even been considered had the children not been exposed to the issue at all. Not only were the children able to realize that the regular curriculum was geared more specifically to English speakers, but also that other languages weren't validated as much as they could be.

3. What do educators have to learn about children's perceptions through the voices of third-graders?

It became evident while examining the student dialogues and written reflections based on the multicultural stories that, when given the opportunity to use their voices to share an opinion, these third-graders enthusiastically had a great deal to say. Taking notice of interesting particulars and themes from the text, the children acted as perceptive observers, which indicated a high level of critical thinking and imaginative detail. This experience offers great insight into the aggravation and frustration that second language learners can often feel with the mandated curriculum. It also serves as a reminder that when educators include relevant stories in the curriculum, children will respond orally, thus increasing their language proficiency and reading interest. The way in which many of the children compared and contrasted characters and story events with their own lives provides further justification for this conclusion.

### **Conclusions**

Throughout the 8 weeks, the children discussed many aspects of their everyday lives. Their use of the story characters as a vehicle to reflect on their own circumstances was constant throughout the study and continued beyond the designated research time period. These young children are now learning to become comfortable with the critical-thinking process as it develops into a more natural part of their beings. They are also now learning ways to have an impact on their own lives in becoming strong individuals who appreci-

ate their native language and that of others while progressing in English. The dialogues following multicultural children's stories helped to cultivate this process.

Alma Flor Ada attributes the ability to reflect as a process appropriate for young children and one in which they should actively participate. These findings confirm that it is never too early to begin the process of reflection in young children and to use literature as a medium toward self-awareness [empowerment] and understanding (Moreno, 1990).

### **Recommendations**

A great deal of research is available that touches on the topics of second language acquisition, literacy development, programs that include bilingual education, and several other areas of interest. However, there is still work to be done in terms of longitudinal studies, authentic observations, and fieldwork with this specific need in mind: how to develop a love of books and reading with second language learners. While there is an impressive amount of multilingual literature available that includes Spanish and English, additional books containing English and languages other than Spanish are a huge necessity. Teachers whose own backgrounds represent the lives, or at least the language of their students, are also essential. The availability of materials outside of the mandated curriculum texts that are representative of the cultures in schools today is also an important focus.

It may be important to continue research that focuses on the emphasis of ESL in the state- or district-adopted curriculum texts. Too often education bureaucrats and politicians spend a great deal of time finding programs aimed at working for all students; instead they should be looking for program components that are reflective of cultural and linguistic identities and thus aim to work toward necessary goals for children in specific communities, given the demographics and resources within those specific communities (August & Hakuta, 1997). Because the school texts may not always be

accessible to the typical second language learner, supplemental resources such as multicultural literature is an engaging way to teach skills and curriculum in addition to the mandated material being used in the regular and ELD classrooms.

### **Educational Significance**

If the objectives of providing literature that aids students in understanding and developing pride in their heritage [and language] for building positive self-concept are to be met, culturally authentic materials [such as multicultural children's literature] are necessary. (Yokota, 1993, p. 160)

The reactions and reflections of the participants in this study suggest that using multicultural children's literature in the classroom positively affects student oral language development and interest in books and reading. Through this tool, instruction can be made richer and fuller. Thus, it is hoped that educators and administrators might be convinced of the necessity of using reflective and diverse literature in the classroom.

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