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My Journey as an Emergent Bilingual

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Abstract

This autoethnography was conducted at an elementary school not far from the South Texas border. I documented how my journey as a kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade student has impacted me to become a better educator. Through this qualitative study, I planned to determine if my childhood experiences as an emergent bilingual learner have made an impact in my teaching and the connections I have formed with my students. I analyzed observations of my current teaching practices and my elementary report cards and test scores. After observing my students' interactions among their peers and my reaction towards their conversations, I found that emergent bilinguals can reach academic achievement, and their learning can be enhanced. Embracing more than one language can be a powerful resource that binds students to a variety of cultures.

Keywords

academic achievement, emergent bilinguals, reading, kindergarten, student progress, education, culture, literacy, autoethnography

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My Journey as an Emergent Bilingual

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This autoethnography was conducted at an elementary school not far from the South Texas border. I documented how my journey as a kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade student has impacted me to become a better educator. Through this qualitative study, I planned to determine if my childhood experiences as an emergent bilingual learner have made an impact in my teaching and the connections I have formed with my students. I analyzed observations of my current teaching practices and my elementary report cards and test scores. After observing my students' interactions among their peers and my reaction towards their conversations, I found that emergent bilinguals can reach academic achievement, and their learning can be enhanced. Embracing more than one language can be a powerful resource that binds students to a variety of cultures.

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Introduction

Many people do not understand the struggles that emergent bilinguals face in the school system as they adjust to learning to read, write, and speak a new language while adapting to a new culture. This is significant because many emergent bilinguals may be required to abandon their native or dominant language within the structured classroom. Students may do so to try to become successful in the United States school system and honor the teacher's demands. Rowe (2018) discusses how the translanguaging skills of emergent bilinguals are valuable for learners to self-identify and for success in their academics.

My autoethnography takes place in a Texas elementary school along the Mexican border. An autoethnography studies personal experiences and uses those experiences to conduct a cultural analysis based on my personal experiences: "Autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). By looking at my personal history and learning encounters, I am able to make connections to the struggles that my students may be facing in their everyday lives. Moreover, I am addressing my research question which was to determine how my journey as a kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade student has impacted me to become a better educator.

The context of this study is the classroom I was in as a child, and the classes I have had as a teacher, which can be considered education subcultures. A subculture is the setting and training that a teacher may share as a whole. "The educational subculture frames the students' individual systems of meaning, guiding and constraining their way of feeling, interpreting and performing" (Venuleo et al., 2016, p. 323). I have been in this subculture as a teacher and literacy interventionist for 19 years. As a literacy interventionist, I provide small group instruction to students who need further assistance with phonemic and phonological literacy skills. Culture is defined as "... the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political

relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 129). This definition of culture relates to my research because although I was required to learn English in school, my language at home and with my grandparents was Spanish.

Efficient and successful readers often engage with exploring literacy in a variety of languages and methods. In other words, literacy can be integrated through demonstrations and activities such as, read alouds and writing activities that include the students’ backgrounds and cultures. Literacy is defined as “ideological, socially-situated practices” (Street, 2005, p. 418). This definition of literacy relates to my autoethnography because I can connect it to my personal struggles and ability to learn a new language in elementary school. Ellis et al. (2011) mentions that an autoethnography allows for personal experiences to be part of the research and ultimately provides for a reflection and a representation of life. This can help produce meaning to circumstances and life events. By reflecting on my bilingual childhood experiences, I can relate them to my current teaching practices and the effects they have on my students learning to read.

Theoretical Framework

The theories guiding my study include the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Semiotics. According to Street (2005), all learning should focus on the specific needs of learners that will emphasize what they already know and build on that knowledge to develop and enhance the students’ literacy. Educators should include literacy activities that are diverse and can connect the learner to individual communities and cultures. This approach can have positive learning effects on the educators and students. As part of the New Literacy Studies framework, the relationship in the classroom can motivate students through the learning process and incorporate higher-order thinking skills.

Throughout the reading process, learners are incorporating a multitude of strategies to determine the meaning of the literature and gain comprehension skills. Bull and Anstey (2018) mention that semiotics includes linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and gestural signs and symbols. The inclusion of two or more of these semiotics systems in learning can be considered a multimodal form of learning. Additionally, a multiliterate learner must be flexible with change and be ready to think critically. Multiliteracies can also “support learners to specify differences in language and promote meaning making, in a range of contexts and cultures at the regional, state and national levels” (Bull & Anstey, 2018, p. 6). These concepts of multiliteracies and multimodality allow emergent bilingual students to incorporate all the semiotic systems to create a rich and vivid learning experience. Educators can also elaborate on literacy as a social and cultural practice. Moreover, multiliteracies can support the various types of languages and celebrate the similarities and difference that are in diverse settings. Individuals that are multiliterate can develop lasting strategies to think critically and improve education and ultimately become flexible and diverse thinkers.

Literature Review

Scholars in the area of reading have expressed that teaching should include a variety of strategies to help students learn. According to Moje (2008), scaffolding on what the student already knows and using a variety of genres can assist the learner in becoming knowledgeable and a critical thinker. Students can gain a meaningful understanding of the content and literature by building on their prior experiences. Educators can incorporate and support learning by communicating with students and allowing them to use their knowledge across all

disciplines. This will ultimately engage students and challenge them to develop a stronger and more meaningful pedagogy.

Moreover, Spires, Kerkhoff, and Graham (2016) discuss that the Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) approach can engage students as they collaborate to form knowledge of contents across a variety of disciplines. PBI involves using five stages to create an effective learning experience for all learners. They can brainstorm to gather and analyze sources that will help answer their questions. Their collections can come from digital texts or other reputable sources. Through interviews, surveys, and experiments, students can build on their research. Emergent bilingual students could benefit from PBI and the variety of approaches to connect learning.

Hence, students can creatively synthesize claims and evidence. During this stage, the learners work on their claims and begin to design multimodal texts. They use digital media to support their project. The PBI cycle also allows the students to evaluate and revise the work critically. As critics, they revise the project and develop a rubric to assess their information and the project. Eventually, the students share, publish, and act on their inquiry. This can be done by sharing with classmates, family, and the community. They can even take it further and generate more inquiry from others by sharing on social media or other forms of communication. This multimodal inquiry can motivate students to become multiliterate. Through PBI, the students can gain genuine and true learning where they can dig into the content. By working collaboratively, they inquire and share their findings with their peers and community.

In a bilingual learning environment, the students are encouraged to include their home language and the environment in their learning program. The classrooms are welcoming of a culture that builds on the strengths of a second or third language. García and Kleifgen (2010) mention the importance of incorporating the community and neighborhood into the child's educational experience. The students can use the print-rich environment around them such as the television or newspaper to make sense of the text and analyze literacy. A multilingual learner can engage in several forms of learning and engagement. Through multiliteracy in the classroom, the students can reflect on language and literacy and form connections with their community, culture, and heritage.

I build on literature from Kasun (2016), who states, "physical border was not merely a physical line that impeded travel but, rather a limiting dividing device, one with long-reaching consequences for individuals, who communities, a nation" (p. 136). Furthermore, diversity in the learning environment produces "cross-cultural relationships" (Fitts, 2009, p. 102). These biliteracy practices are essential in the acceptance of multicultural learning. Rubinstein-Ávila (2007) discuss how literacy experiences and out-of-school practices can be a necessary part of language practices. She states that "Latino/a youths' expanding repertoire of practices and school outcomes ought to be examined more systematically" (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2007, p. 586). In other words, valuing additional languages can make a significant impact on the education of all students.

In her study, Fitts (2009) investigates third spaces in bilingual dual-language settings. She believes the students' strengths can be built upon from their Funds of Knowledge. Building on students' Funds of Knowledge can enhance the curriculum and achieve multicultural learning. Incorporating this strategy will improve academics for bilingual students. According to Smith and Murillo (2012), biliteracy is also essential in education and schools. "Biliteracy is a key construct for understanding human capital and education at the border" (Smith & Murillo, 2012, p. 637).

In their study, Jimenez, Smith, and Teague (2009) looked at the importance of language and literacy for transnationals. They emphasize how people maintain connections with family and friends through multiple sources such as text and emails. Digital forms of communication allow them to form lasting bonds. Jimenez et al. (2009) state that "Transnational and community literacies provide a large body of material that might be usefully considered for

weekend school classes, as texts are often printed in the language of the community as well as bilingually” (p. 25).

Additionally, translanguaging practices can unite communities and build relationships. “Translanguaging may involve thinking or reading in one language while writing in another” (Orellana, 2016, p. 105). Moreover, building on prior knowledge can enhance the practices of transnational members. “An understanding of the literacy practices involved in sending remittances can help teachers appreciate an activity in which many of the families of ELLs make use of reading and writing for meaningful purposes” (Jimenez et al., 2009, p. 13). The results of transnational community literacies can provide learners with the opportunities to accept differences and embrace a variety of cultures. Together, prior knowledge and diversity can help transnationals and mononationals appreciate and value more than one language. Jimenez et al. (2009) mention:

Language and literacy is one critical component of transnationalism that researchers are just beginning to explore. It is important because the ways in which people use language and literacy are linked to the creation and maintenance of connections between distant places, often across national borders. (p. 17)

Methods

In the passages below, I describe the setting for this study—past and present, my role in the study, and the steps of my autoethnographic research process. In keeping with the style of autoethnographic research reports, the description of these procedures is interwoven with some personal stories and reflections.

Setting

My educational journey began at an elementary school not too far from the Mexican border. This school was built in 1948, and according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), this campus currently has a population of 97.5% Hispanic students and 88.3% economically disadvantaged students. This school had large classrooms and several windows on one side of the wall that were covered with gray paint. I believe this was done to keep the heat out. I attended this campus from grades kindergarten through third grade. I then attended fourth grade and fifth grade at two different campuses for a total of three elementary schools. This was due to the constant change in bus routes that the district established. Being that the bus was my only method of transportation to and from school, I had no other choice than to leave my friends behind year after year. The setting for most of my study refers back to my kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade classroom. My current observations and journals were conducted in my small office, where I have one kidney shaped table that sits almost seven students. This is where I hold my small group literacy instruction. This campus was built in 1991, and TEA states that it currently has a population which consists of 78.2% Hispanic students 10.3% white students.

Participant

I have been in this subculture for 19 years as a teacher and a literacy interventionist. I am investigating my teaching practices and how my journey as an emergent bilingual has helped me become a more compassionate teacher towards the students in my literacy groups. I enjoy my position as an interventionist and watching the students grow in their literacy skills

is my primary goal. I am passionate about what I do and will take extra time to make sure my students are receiving the correct and appropriate instruction to advance their reading and comprehension.

Data Collection

I searched and collected the data about my childhood education from my parents' attic and closet. Although it was a challenge finding these documents, I am glad I did. My mother had saved several of my test scores and report cards in an old cardboard box that was now torn and barely held together with some strong tape. The documents were faded, and some were falling apart. I also found a few literacy certificates and pictures of my childhood. To gather further information, I collected data from three days of journaling that I completed after my 30-minute lessons. I wrote for about 15 to 20 minutes after my small group intervention lessons had been completed and the students were back in their homeroom. It was difficult to jot down long notes during my teaching sessions since the students required my undivided attention, so I wrote down a few words or statements to remind me of the situation. The time of day was before I headed out for lunch duty, which was between 10:30 to 11:00 a.m. It was easier for me to focus on my writing when there were minimal distractions and the lessons were completed.

Data Sources

After looking through my parents' attic, I realized I did not have much educational information from my kindergarten year. My mother mentioned kindergarten was optional and report cards were not issued back then. She said that, at the time, kindergarten was a fun place to socialize and learn a few letters and sounds. However, I was able to locate my California Achievement Test (CAT) scores for kindergarten. The results indicated that I was doing well and recognized upper and lowercase letters in English. I was also able to identify most letter sounds in English. Additionally, I reviewed my first-grade and second-grade report cards and CAT test information. After analyzing this information, I realized that I did well in Spanish Language Arts (SLA) and received A's and B's. However, I lacked English reading comprehension skills. My CAT test shows that I was below average in English and I had trouble reaching conclusions and analyzing characters. My second grade CAT scores also confirmed I was still below average in reading comprehension and language expression. My report cards showed a range of grades between 80-95 in Spanish as a Second Language (SSL). What surprised me the most was finding I was no longer receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) and SLA instruction in second-grade as I had in kindergarten and first-grade. I was now an SSL student who was struggling with essential parts of literacy.

Data Analysis

I used layered accounts as explained by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011). I focused on my "experiences alongside data, abstract analysis and relevant literature" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278). According to Rambo (2005), one's identity is found in our influences and situations. Introspections allows voices to be heard that would otherwise be ignored or shamed. I analyzed my data and my scores from one year to the next and noticed I continued to have the same difficulties until at least the fourth-grade. According to Ellis (1991), others' experiences are important because they allow for reflection and learning.

I clearly remember receiving Spanish instruction in kindergarten, and I was able to locate a chart that my mother kept that listed all of the Spanish letter names and sounds. I recall

reviewing this chart every night before bed with a little song. This chart is worn and tattered from so much use. I do not recall having an English list of letter names and sounds, and my mother does not recall either. My mother mentioned since I entered school knowing Spanish, it was the language that I was mostly instructed in. I also found a picture of my kindergarten graduation where we had performed to “Los diez perritos” (The Ten Puppies). I remember this day clearly and being excited that I would finally be performing on the big stage at the middle school across the street. I believe we were the only class that had a Spanish performance. I do remember wondering why we only performed a Spanish song while the other classes’ performance was in English. However, those questions were quickly overlooked by the joy of the day.

After reviewing my notes, I noted critical information that related to my learning literacy in Spanish. I looked at similarities and differences in my education experiences and analyzed artifacts that I found in my mother’s home. I noticed some key themes in my data and realized that biliteracy and Spanish instruction have played an important role in the connections I have formed with my students and throughout my educational career.

Additionally, I compared my childhood experiences to my teaching experiences. I found that biliteracy is essential to my teaching and the compassion I have found for my students. It is important to form a curriculum that allows for multimodal literacy practices for bilingual students. As educators become aware of how bilingual students adapt to language and literacy, they can reform their teaching to include students’ prior knowledge and experiences. Since learning is not linear, students’ learning experiences can help form lasting connections.

Although foreign language programs exist in the educational system, they are used to maintain language and are circularized. According to Valdés (2015), Latinos and Hispanics struggle with race and language. She also mentions the maintenance of language depends on various motives including economic opportunities and educational circumstances. Valenzuela (2009), mentions the following:

The state’s English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum is designed to impart to non-native English speakers’ sufficient verbal and written skills to effectuate their transition into an all-English curriculum within a three-year time period. Under these circumstances, maintaining and developing students’ bilingual and bicultural abilities is to swim against the current. (p. 339)

However, through the incorporation of multimodal texts, biliterate learners can become thinkers that are “flexible and able to deal with change” (Bull & Anstey, 2019, p. 7). Essentially, multiliteracies will allow for cultural diversity and enhance literacy practices.

Reflecting on my experiences as a child, I preferred to communicate in Spanish although I understood some English. As an educator, I value both languages and use them to communicate with my students. I would also like for my students to value both English and Spanish and have them as a resource.

Findings

Since Spanish was my first language, I can relate to my students’ experiences and emotions as they enter a school system with predominantly English speakers. My findings indicate that, as a teacher, I connect with my students in ways that are supportive and caring.

Story 1- *El zapato blanco* (The White Shoe)

Sunday afternoon, while my older daughter was at chess practice, my younger daughter and I took a little trip to my old elementary school. I hoped this would spark up some memories from my elementary years. As we sat in the car in the parking lot, I pointed to my old kindergarten room and told my daughter that the bus would drop me off in this parking lot, and I would run over to that room through the grass that had now been converted into a sidewalk. The school has been remodeled since, and many of the hallways are now enclosed. "It looks a bit different," I told my daughter. However, those kindergarten classrooms still had doors that led outdoors, and it was easy to spot the water fountains I drank from after physical education (P.E.) class. I wondered if they still worked. I remember sitting towards the back corner of the room at a large table that had the old-fashioned glue in the center. I am not sure what the name of that glue was, but I loved the smell. I also recall the day the white strap on my *chancla* (sandal) broke on picture day. The teacher asked me in Spanish what was wrong, and I responded in Spanish, "*Se me rompio el zapato*" (my shoe tore). My mother brought me a pair of my cousin's old shoes that were a size too large and did not match my outfit. I think my mother must have been in town because she arrived quickly. Our home was 15 minutes out of town which was usually a twenty-minute drive. Even as a child, I knew she did not have money to purchase new ones. I also recall singing the alphabet song in Spanish daily and reciting *los numeros hasta cien* (reciting my numbers to one hundred).

In my journal, I state "Since I have small groups, the students already know they have trouble reading, and they come into my groups with a low self-esteem." I can relate this to my childhood and elementary schooling. I had low self-esteem because I felt different from everyone else. I felt less important and possibly looked down upon because of my language. As an educator, I empathize with my students and feel privileged to be working with them. I know I can build them up to be the fantastic and smart students I know they are.

Story 2- *Las pruebas* (The Testing)

I do not recall learning very much English in kindergarten, but I must have because the California Achievement Test (CAT) was administered to me in English. The results state that I had "strengths in matching uppercase and lowercase letters." I also "recognized a letter named orally and matched long vowels sounds with letters."

Eventually, I was required to perform well on the CAT tests. However, I never felt that it was a big deal or as important as today's State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test. As a first-grade child who was still transitioning from Spanish to English, I remember getting pulled aside from my peers to receive Spanish instruction. As a dominant Spanish speaker who was raised by my grandmother, I remember receiving small group instruction from my first-grade classroom teacher daily. I, along with two other students, was pulled to the corner of the room while the rest of the class continuously stared at us as we read. I remember feeling embarrassed, humiliated, and ashamed for knowing Spanish. I would slouch down in my chair in hopes that the other students in the class would not see my face. I wrote in my journal, "Since I have small groups, the students already know they have trouble reading, and they come into my groups with low self-esteem. They already feel that they are low readers and low achievers. Giving them confidence in their reading is my primary goal. I want them to feel that it is all right to make mistakes."

The scores of my CAT (Please see Figure 1) began to show that I struggled a bit with reading comprehension. I also had a "weakness in reaching conclusions and analyzing characters." My language expression was barely average, but once I reach second grade, I fell into the below average category. After reviewing the data on my report cards and my CAT

tests, I realized I was no longer receiving SLA instruction. I was now considered an SSL student. Was I being transitioned into English too early? Why was I struggling in second-grade? As I researched further, I noticed I also received Spanish instruction in third-grade and only the first semester in fourth grade. Although I do not remember receiving any Spanish instruction at this level, I believe it was the last year I received Spanish support in elementary. However, I voluntarily signed up for Spanish III Honors/AP in high school.

Figure 1
First Grade CAT Test

STUDENT INTERPRETIVE REPORT

NAME: [Redacted] TEACHER: [Redacted] SCHOOL: [Redacted] CITY: [Redacted]

BOOK GRADE: 11C TEST DATE: 03/84 STATE: TX BATCH GROUP: 60707-AB71 RUN DATE: 016-003 04/19/84

TEST	SCORES				NATIONAL PERCENTILE SCORES				
	SS	NCE	GE	NP	WELL BELOW AVERAGE	BELOW AVERAGE	AVERAGE	ABOVE AVERAGE	WELL ABOVE AVERAGE
PHONIC ANALYSIS	343	62	X	71					
READING VOCABULARY	341	61	1.9	69					
TOTAL READING	320	49	1.9	48					
LANGUAGE EXPRESSION	375	70	1.9	68					
MATH COMPUTATION	296	60	2.2	59					
MATH CONCEPTS & APPL.	329	52	1.7	52					
TOTAL MATH	323	60	1.9	54					
TOTAL BATTERY	322	60	1.9	58					

SEE BACK OF THIS SHEET FOR DESCRIPTION OF TESTS

SUMMARY OF PUPIL'S SCORES
THIS STUDENT'S ACHIEVEMENT IN BASIC SKILLS MAY BEST BE SUMMARIZED BY LOOKING AT THE TOTAL SCORES. IT CAN BE SEEN THAT HER TOTAL SCORES ARE BETTER THAN APPROXIMATELY 66 PERCENT OF THE NATION'S 1ST GRADERS IN READING, 69 PERCENT IN LANGUAGE, 69 PERCENT IN MATHEMATICS, AND 68 PERCENT IN TOTAL BATTERY.

SHE HAS STRENGTHS IN RECOGNIZING SOUNDS OF SHORT VOWELS; ADDITION, SUBTRACTION, RECOGNIZING SOUNDS OF CONSONANT GROUPINGS; CATEGORIZING WORDS DEFINED ORALLY.

SHE HAS WEAKNESSES IN REACHING CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYZING CHARACTERS; REMEMBERING FACTS JUST READ.

SHE MAY NEED TO REVIEW RECOGNIZING LONG VOWEL SOUNDS, NUMBER THEORY, AND SET THEORY, SELECTING WORDS HAVING THE SAME MEANING.

COMMENTS:

I have reviewed this report and have made additional comments where necessary.

Signed: _____
teacher/guidance counselor/principal

DEAR PARENT:
This is a report of your child's test results in the basic skills. It shows you how well your child did on this year's tests. Your child is compared to other students in the same grade who took the tests throughout the nation.
The subjects tested are listed on the left side of the chart. The percentile scores are the percentages of students in the nation who scored below your child on each test. (See back of page for explanation of other scores.)
On the right side of the chart, the rows of Xs show how well your child did on the tests as compared to other students throughout the nation. Your child's national percentile scores are within the range indicated by the rows of Xs.
Also provided is further written explanation of your child's achievement as measured by these tests.
Please see your child's teacher, counselor, or principal for additional test scores and further information about this test.

Identifying my weaknesses and strengths in my early elementary years has helped me become more aware of how this data shaped me as a teacher. Although I struggled with languages and some comprehension, I was able to generate achievable outcomes. As an emergent bilingual student, I was eventually ready to embrace both languages. As an educator, I can integrate the evidence from this study to better understand my students. I continuously modify and design lessons that will help them become successful in both of their languages. Furthermore, I support my students by actively providing feedback to their classroom teachers. I include methods and interventions that will promote learning through the students' background, languages, and culture.

The Power of Languages

The findings of my study indicate I entered kindergarten with more knowledge in speaking Spanish. Although the majority of my instruction was in Spanish, I was also taught in English and understood it. However, I was unable to make connections between my reading

and had difficulty comprehending English literature. I believe this is partly also due to the feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment that I felt. At the time, I was unable to see how powerful learning two languages simultaneously was. Even though I was accepted into the Spanish National Honor Society in high school; I still did not realize what a huge impact Spanish was going to have in my life.

Street (2005) suggests as educators we should move away from a single model of teaching and learning. He suggests that literacy is not a one-size-fits-all set of skills, and literacy alone will not necessarily lead to changes in social practices. The New Literacy Studies framework mentions reading and writing should include diversity in a variety of settings. Additionally, literacy is a social practice that can be connected to individual communities.

As an educator and literacy interventionist, I now see how my struggling readers can become proficient in reading and writing in more than one language. "Language and literacy are not neutral; they relate to power, identities, and contexts" (Bussert-Webb et al., 2017, p.152). This has taught me to have patience and compassion for my students and ultimately not give up on them. In my journaling, I wrote "However, she has only been with me for three weeks and has been very quiet. Since she knows many other languages, I want to give her more time on trying new words and blending the sounds in words. She is also very shy. I tell her it is all right to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. We are all learning in the group, and we are learning together." This reminds me of myself as a child. I was afraid to be a risk-taker and a leader. I mentioned in my journaling that I thought she might be dyslexic; however, after analyzing and reflecting on my childhood education, I feel she may need more time to grow and become accustomed to the new environment and culture. I believe that because the student knows three languages, I should encourage her not to be ashamed of her gifts and instead, embrace them.

Bull and Anstey (2018) explain how Action Research (AR) includes developing, analyzing, reflecting, sharing, and identifying areas of potential improvement. This process can assist educators in making daily decisions on their teaching practices and become responsive to their students' learning. Through AR, I can identify problems that my students or campus are having and take the necessary actions to fix it. Moreover, supporting the needs of my students can include planning with other teachers and administrators to develop effective teaching. Therefore, collaborating with campus leaders can produce successful and powerful results for my students.

Moreover, Moje (2008) suggests students learn from multiple sources and disciplines. Although this can be challenging, the opportunities that are provided for the students can promote continuous development in literacy and overall achievement. Additionally, engaging the family and community can display a variety of approaches to literacy.

Impact of Spanish

My CAT scores indicated some overall weakness in my reading and comprehension. My report cards showed I was slowly transitioned out of Spanish at around mid-year in fourth-grade. Although I remember feeling embarrassed because not every student was receiving this type of instruction, I now appreciate the impact it has had in my life. Knowing Spanish, opened several doors for me while I was in college. I was also offered my first interventionist position with the Reading Recovery Literacy Program and *Descubriendo la Lectura* (Discovering Literacy) because of my ability to teach in Spanish. My current literacy position also requires that I provide students with Spanish literacy instruction through *El Sistema de la Intervención de Lectura* (SIL; Literacy Intervention System). Most importantly, I have made lasting friendships, and I can communicate with several parents who have even invited my family to

visit Spain with them. I now feel that it is a privilege to know more than one language and I would like to carry that over to my students. Moje (2008) stated:

Knowledge, identities, and critical literacy skill develop iteratively; this development requires scaffolding and mediation by teachers who know the content well and understand the role that language and literate practice play in producing knowledge within it. (p. 103)

Some students feel shame and discomfort in knowing a language other than English. Many students are now transitioned from Spanish to English too quickly and may even forget their native tongue, culture, and values. I believe this is mostly done to satisfy campus and state-mandated testing. Some students may also refuse to speak their native language at home or school because it is perceived as being ignorant or uneducated.

As a child, I recall feeling confused and thinking “Is Spanish wrong?” and “Why doesn’t everyone speak Spanish at school?” Ultimately, this language was a connection to my history and culture. The stories my grandparents told me about their days as fieldworkers were all in Spanish. This was the only way to communicate with them, yet I felt ashamed of it all the time. Now that they are gone, I am remorseful because I disconnected from them and from all of the wonderful experiences they had eagerly shared with me. In retrospect, I should have honored the language that connects me to my history. I have also learned being from the Rio Grande Valley is a blessing, and my language has taught me to embrace bilingualism. I am now able to relate to the students that I work with daily and can put myself in their situations and struggles.

Closing Reflections

As I reflect on the findings of this autoethnographic study, some implications are that not all teachers can relate to a learner’s struggle with languages and learning to read. It is often suggested that students who are below level should be automatically labeled with a special need and receive additional services. Many times, students have a limited amount of time to adjust to literacy in more than one language and are taught through the bottom-up theory of reading instruction. This theory believes learning the sounds of the letters and decoding is valued over comprehension and meaning. However, Anstey and Bull (2018) explain multiliterate students are constantly involved in a variety of activities and lessons that allow for critical thinking. The learners will ultimately gain multiliteracy in their educational experiences. Hence, students will be able to produce multimodal text for a variety of genres and situations.

I remember a professor in my master's courses telling my class that English is one of the hardest languages to learn, because it is built up of so many languages from all around the world. I often remind my students and my children that English is like a puzzle, and we are always learning and building on it. It may not always follow the rules, and that is why all languages should be accepted as viewed as valuable. Moreover, Cain (2017) affirms that languages should be valued and respected to encourage student growth. Further research can study the personal experiences of other professionals in a variety of careers that have struggled in literacy but have had successful and strong opportunities because of their language and culture.

A relevant curriculum is necessary to help build a future that empowers bilingual learners through their language and culture. As a teacher, I can participate in the district curriculum writing to ensure that a variety of multicultural activities are included in lessons within the elementary grade levels. I can also provide sample activities and additional training

for classroom teachers and administrators that will enhance their learning of transnational learners. Since knowledge is power, I can assist teachers in finding lessons that incorporate creativity. Moreover, as an educator and student, I can continue to research relevant transcultural materials for my literacy students. Focusing on the community and the culture that students bring into the learning environment can also help the educators in my district expand their lessons on diversity. Through an enhanced curriculum, educators can help form positive and lasting relationships with their students. Skerrett (2015) mentions that we, as educators, should "...recognize the imperative and possibilities for teaching in ways that expand our narrow learning objectives, materials, and processes of standardized curriculum to address the many goals and resources that our diverse students bring to the literacy classroom" (p. 41).

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Appendix

Observation #1 - 3/5/19

During my teaching today, I observed the students that were struggling with letter sounds, especially the middle vowel sounds. They seem to have trouble with this the most. I asked them to sound it out and check if the word makes sense in the sentence. Some students do go back and make corrections, but some do not. Since I have small groups, the students already know they have trouble reading, and they come into my groups with low self-esteem. They already feel that they are low readers and low achievers. Giving them confidence in their reading is my main goal. I want them to feel that it is all right to make mistakes. I know someday they feel frustrated and tired. Today, a first-grade child in my group threw a book across the room to another child that laughed at him when he did not know a word. I had to talk to the group. The past two days have been in the 40 degrees outside. It is cold and drizzly so the students haven't gone outside to play and they probably won't for the rest of the week. They are frustrated and exhausted from benchmark testing also. These tests are frustrating for all students but mostly for them because they can barely read and understand the test. The tests are long, and no one is allowed to read it to them or help them. Today is Open House, and the teachers are also running around decorating and cleaning their rooms. They are also overwhelmed and tired. I feel that is carried over to the students. The students are tired and distracted in their reading, and I am trying to be very patient with them because I understand that there are so many demands right now.

Observation #2 - 3/7/19

As I am teaching the writing lesson, the students seem to be engaged in our reading and writing activity. They seem to understand that this sentence begins with a capital letter and ends in a period or question mark. We are also reviewing that names begin with a capital letter. We are writing about Taco, the dog, and how he finds various places to hide from the storm. At the end of the story, he is hiding with the other dog. One student mentions her dog and how she enjoys playing "catch the ball" and "let's chase each other." I say that my dog does too. I ask her the dog's name, and she said, Lobo. I tell her that my dog is named Snowy and I show her a picture of my daughters with my dog with Santa Clause. I am constantly trying to make a personal connection with my students, and I want them to know that I am not there to judge them or their reading mistakes. They are excited about the dog series of the books in the Fountas and Pinnell system. Through these connections, they trust me and look forward to attending my lessons. We talk about how the veterinarian prescribed her dog "Dingos" for tartar. I ask her where I can get some for my dog. She tells me that Walmart and Target sell them. I ask them what else they would like to read or write about Taco. They want to write about dogs they know so let them write for about five more minutes. They begin by telling me what they want to say and in a complete sentence. Then they can then begin writing. I begin to feel rushed because they need to be back in their classroom before 9:45 for attendance. Otherwise, they will be marked absent by their classroom teacher even if she knows they are on campus and present. I know this is a dumb school rule. I feel bad because the kids are very engaged in their writing. I tell them to drop everything, and we will finish tomorrow. I walk them back to class at full walking speed. We will continue for a few more minutes tomorrow. Oh, wait! We have the talent show in the morning. I enjoy teaching with the Fountas and Pinnell Literacy Interventions System. However, I would not say I like that I have a time limit of 30 minutes per lesson. I sometimes feel that my students are doing so well and are very engaged with the lessons, but I need to cut it short because our time is up and I have another group coming in.

Observation #3 - 3/8/19

Aurora is a Japanese and African American child born in the United States. She speaks Japanese, Spanish, and English. The child also plays the piano. However, she struggles with reading and writing. She is a kind-spirited girl who loves life and often draws pictures of her and I playing in the park with balloons in our hands. She has much support from home and her mom is worried about her learning. Aurora loves coming to my class, and I treasure that. Today she helped another struggling reader in my group with a word he didn't know. I was surprised that Aurora knew it and was willing to connect with the other students. I believe she is beginning to feel comfortable. She has had difficulty with the middle vowel sound the most. My impression is that it might be dyslexia. However, she has only been with me for three weeks and has been very quiet. Since she knows many other languages, I want to give her more time on trying new words and blending the sounds in words. She is also very shy. I tell her it is all right to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. We are all learning in the group, and we are learning together. I tell her that it is also important for her to correct her mistakes as she is reading. Aurora has become more confident in my small groups but still struggles in the classroom. I am trying to build her self-confidence by telling her that I believe in her. She is also new to the school, and I feel that she is holding back.



Kindergarten CAT test



First Grade Report Card

Author Note

I am currently a reading interventionist and have also taught kindergarten and 2nd grade. I have been teaching for over 19 years and have loved every minute of it. I graduated with a Master's in Education with a specialization in Reading from the University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA/ UTRGV). My goal is to earn my doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction with a specialization in literacy. I also love reading and keeping up to date with current reading and literacy strategies. Please direct correspondence to cindycantu9@hotmail.com.

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