

Exploring the voices of immigrant latino children through collaborative talk

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Sinopsis

El propósito de este estudio es explorar y analizar las interacciones lingüísticas y cognitivas de los niños inmigrantes mexicanos en el contexto social de la conversación colaborativa en el aula de clases. Los intercambios lingüísticos que se documentan en este proyecto proveen una ventana hacia lo que sucede cuando los maestros y alumnos colaboran para transformar el pensamiento y el aprendizaje mediante prácticas discursivas en su idioma nativo. En este artículo se examina como los niños utilizan su conocimiento previo para negociar el significado y desarrollar una comprensión compartida.

Este estudio provee ejemplos precisos que desafían la noción de que ciertos grupos minoritarios carecen de una base cultural, lingüística o intelectual para tener éxito en la escuela.

Términos clave: <Investigación> <investigación educativa> <lingüísticas> <niño> <éxito>

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyse the linguistic and cognitive interactions between immigrant Mexican children in the social context of collaborative conversation in the classroom. The linguistic exchanges documented in this project provide a window on what happens when teachers and students collaborate to transform thought and learning through discursive practice in their native language. This paper examines the way children use their previous knowledge to negotiate meaning and to develop shared understanding.

This paper provides compelling examples that challenge the notion that certain minority groups lack the cultural, linguistic or intellectual background to be successful at school.

Key terms: <Research> <educational research> <linguistics> <children> <success>

The Inquiry

Numerous studies involving cultural and linguistic diverse children in the context of discursive practices have been conducted (Cazden 1988; Wells, 1986). However, few have explored, documented and analyzed young Mexican immigrant children's collaborative talk in Spanish, within the context of an urban U.S. classroom, and through the eyes of a teacher-researcher. This study provides a window into how young recently immigrated children, who are typically considered disadvantaged by the mainstream U.S. society, engage in sophisticated co-construction of knowledge with the teacher.

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the linguistic and cognitive interactions of young Mexican immigrant children in the social context of classroom collaborative talk. The linguistic interchanges documented in this research project provide windows into what happens when students and teachers collaborate to transform thinking and learning through discursive practices in their native language. Thus, the foundation of the inquiry rests on children's positive linguistic and cognitive outcomes as they use their first language to explore new meanings and construct shared understandings in collaboration with the teacher. The research question addressed in this article examines how children use prior knowledge to negotiate meaning and develop shared understandings.

The Politics Of Bilingual Education In The U.S.

This study deliberately frames the research questions within the context of cultural and linguistic diverse students' educational and socio-political struggles in the U.S. The analyses of the linguistic and cognitive exchanges in the students' native language, provide compelling examples that challenge the notion that certain minority groups lack an adequate cultural, linguistic or intellectual foundation to succeed in school. Thus, the collaborative talk transactions examined in this study consider the students' discourse exclusively in their first language, Spanish.

Bilingual education in the U.S. has been typically implemented as a corrective and subtractive

program that aims to produce individuals who are monolingual in the second language (English). Crawford (1989) asserts that although bilingual education models in the U.S. originated as enrichment programs intended at developing fluency in two languages, the focus has shifted to "...a remedial effort designed to help 'disadvantaged' children overcome the 'handicap' of not speaking English." (p. 29). The most detrimental element of this type of transitional bilingual education is not only the loss of the first language, but the resulting alienation from the home culture. Ada (1995) suggests that "when students are encouraged to forget the language of their families and communities, they may lose access to their heritage" (p. 238). Bartolomé (1994) further explains that "...this subtractive view of bilingualism mirrors our deeply rooted deficit and assimilative orientation that often devalues students' native language." (p.207).

Disputing Deficit Theories

For many years the predominant and accepted means of explaining the educational failure of certain ethnic and linguistic minorities in the U.S. has been in the context of *deficit theories*, based on the notions of *cultural deprivation* and *genetic inferiority*. Minority children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and who speak English as a second language have been systematically identified, categorized and labeled as *at risk*. The label offers an expedient rationale to explain away the difficulties cultural and linguistic diverse children experience in school. However, Flores, Cousin & Diaz (1991) argue that this term is seldom viewed from the social, political and economic context in which it was created. They add that when the inequities of class, race and ethnicity are not considered, deficit theories and terms such as *at risk* become misleading "...ideological diversions." (p. 370). The authors affirm that the educational outcomes of cultural and linguistic diverse students are meaningful and successful only when the assumptions behind deficit theories are challenged and replaced.

Toward Culturally Responsive Education

Some minority students' failure to attain higher levels of educational achievement has also been attributed to a mismatch between their home/community and the discourse and socio-cultural patterns of interaction in the classroom (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). More recently, researchers have pointed out that while the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of ethnic minority students differ from that of the mainstream society, these students have available to them rich linguistic, cultural and intellectual resources that fully support their literacy development (Moll, 1992).

Previous studies examining the social context of literacy in various cultures indicate that literacy practices are embedded in the lives of individuals, families, and communities (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Whitmore & Crowell, 1994). Literacy learning, therefore, is inherently rooted in socially constructed cultural practices. Our current knowledge of literacy has generally focused on mainstream children rather than on groups of children who have not experienced the same success in becoming literate. Further research is needed on diverse and culturally specific types of social interactions around classroom discourse and literacy events because they reveal how children learn cognitive strategies that they will later use independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

Theoretical Considerations

This research project is informed by an interdisciplinary perspective that moves across linguistic, anthropological, sociological, psychological and educational approaches. Each of these fields has influenced the process of conceptualizing the questions to be addressed, as well as the orientation of the design of analyses to be used.

Discourse analysis, within a linguistic framework, reveals the structures and properties of speech, allowing us to make sense of what is said and to understand the basis on which such sense is made (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). However, interpreting and

understanding discourse involves more than isolated patterns of language. Making sense of language is viewed in terms of shared understandings in the context of social interaction (Wells, 1986). Language and learning are seen as socially constructed processes that are enacted in social spaces, such as classrooms. Developmental psychology, largely shaped by the work of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky have advanced the interactional analysis of the process of teaching and learning within the realm of language. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that cognitive processes can develop independently of language, and that language and thought have separate mental roots. However, he suggests that language and thought are combined to create a "cognitive tool" for intellectual development which takes place within the medium of social interactions. Vygotsky argues that the social context in which children's reasoning develops is marked by cultural practices and symbols, like language and discourse. Within one such social context is education and schooling.

The principles Vygotskian theory have advanced the notion that learning does not take place solely within the individuals but in transactions between them. Vygotsky defines the developmental level of a child by what that child can accomplish alone, and defines the *zone of proximal development* by what the child can do with the assistance of more capable peers or adults. Thus, it is in this proximal zone that teaching and learning may be explained.

A Critical and Transformative Pedagogy Framework

Pedagogical practices, such as collaborative talk, have become more critical in the current efforts to promote literacy for low income, language minority students in the U.S. Prominent researchers have theorized that the persistent low educational outcomes of these students may be attributed to inferior and low level remedial instruction, often in the form of transmission oriented curriculum (Cummins, 1995; Diaz, Moll & Mehan, 1986; Nieto, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Tharp and Gallimore (1988) characterize such instructional practices as highly routinized or scripted interactions where the discourse

is teacher-dominated and the focus is on decontextualized, discrete skills.

Recent research points to teaching practices that are framed within a constructivist and transformative pedagogical philosophy that has the potential to break the cycle of inequity in the education of minority children. Pedagogical practices, such as collaborative talk, provide a forum in the classroom for minority students to initiate, contribute and explore knowledge in collaboration with the teacher.

Underlying the changes in my literacy practices in the classroom were fundamental beliefs about how children construct meaning and learn language, and how teachers can create spaces for collaborative interaction and redefine the teaching-learning process. Extensive research suggests that in transmission oriented classrooms the types of teacher interventions typically interrupt and suppress students' discourse initiations to control the conversational interactions and the classroom environment (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992).

Considerations of how meanings are generated, and in turn, how linguistic communication works, challenge the still popular notion that conceptual knowledge can be transferred from teacher to student by means of words. Rather, we must see learning as a constructive activity in which the students themselves are engaged. This viewpoint emphasizes the teachers' need to build a framework of the experiences, the ideas and the conceptual relations the students' possess and bring to the classroom (Fosnot, 1996).

Tharp & Gallimore (1991) build on Vygotsky's assumption that teaching consists of assisted performance through a child's zone of proximal development by proposing that conversation is the most important practice in assisting learners. The authors state that "...for the development of thinking skills —the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in speech and writing— the critical form of assisting learners is dialogue, the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happen in conversation." (p. 3).

Darder 1997) proposes that

Language is essential to the process of dialogue, to the development of meaning, and to the production of knowledge. From the context of its emancipatory potential, language must be understood as a dialectical phenomenon that links its very existence and meaning to the lived experiences of the language community and constitutes a major cornerstone for the development of voice. (p. 333)

The notion of collaborative talk is characterized by equality and responsiveness. That is, the teacher and the students equally engage in meaningful and extended discussions on topics that are relevant and interesting to all participants. When collaborative talk is seen as an organized and intentional form of assisted performance, opportunities for co-participation and co-construction of new knowledge are magnified.

A Dialogic Analysis

This case study draws upon the data collected during a year-long inquiry I conducted in my own bilingual kindergarten classroom and is a secondary analysis of data collected in a larger university-school collaborative action research project.

Practitioner Research

Decisions in the selection of a methodology should be based on the relationship between the theory guiding the questions to be studied and the assumptions of the methodology. Because the questions of this inquiry were generated out of my own teaching practices and classroom experiences, practitioner research, framed within a naturalistic methodology most aptly captures the essence of my observations and hypotheses. Thus, a dialogic analysis using ethnographic techniques is particularly well suited in exploring and analyzing the linguistic and cognitive transactions of young immigrant children in the social context of classroom collaborative talk.

Studies such as this one, that grow out of the reflections and experiences of practitioners, examine teaching and learning from the inside, as experienced and understood by teachers and their students. Case studies and classroom-based research conducted by teacher-researchers directly inform teaching practices and teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). More importantly practitioner research gives a voice to teachers who constantly reevaluate and transform their practices.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) propose a working definition for teacher-researcher as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 7) based on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1985) who defines research in general as "systematic, self-critical inquiry." In their concise historical profile of teacher research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle expound on Stenhouse's belief that through their own research, teachers can strengthen their judgments and improve their own classroom practices. Furthermore, he claimed that research was the vehicle for teacher autonomy and independence and that "researchers [should] justify themselves to practitioners, not practitioners to researchers" (Stenhouse in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 19). This type of research is a deliberate and systematic reflective process that requires some form of evidence to support assertions. Most practitioner research is directed to some action or sequence of actions that the practitioner wishes to explore.

The Community, the School and the Students

The school is in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. All the students attending this school come from low income families. Approximately 800 students attend grades pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Non-English speaking students, about one third, participate in the transitional bilingual Spanish/English program. Transitional bilingual education is a subtractive bilingual program that requires non-English speaking students to transition to monolingual English classrooms after three or four years of participation in the program. During the first years in the bilingual

program the majority of the literacy and content instruction takes place in the home language, in our case, Spanish. English as a second language instruction is provided in increasing increments of time depending on the length each student has been in the program. The majority of the instruction in my kindergarten classroom is conducted in the students' first language, Spanish. English as a Second Language instruction is integrated with the content areas during part of the day.

All twenty-seven children in this study are in all day kindergarten program. The students are all Latino, 90% Mexican, 8% Puerto Rican and 2% Colombian and all are recent arrivals from their country or commonwealth state of origin. All the parents were born outside the U.S. mainland, according to the school registration forms. The parents come from varied educational backgrounds but most have not finished secondary schooling in their country of origin. Either through my own first hand observations or my students' accounts of their parents literacy levels, I discovered that about one fifth of the parents do not read or write. In my day to day contact with the parents, I also observed that approximately one third has a second grade level ability in reading and writing in Spanish, but another third of the parents demonstrated high levels of literacy abilities in Spanish. Three fourths of the parents do not speak English and the other fourth have a functional command of English.

Data Collection Procedures and Techniques

This study is based on a qualitative framework that follows a naturalistic approach. The formulation of questions, the documentation of data and the analysis of the material collected overlap and interact. The design of the study, then, served as a guide for the collection and analysis of data and allowed for changes based on the emergence of patterns. That is, the research questions were continually transformed and reshaped during the course of the inquiry as new discursive patterns unfolded within our collaborative talk transactions.

Through participant observation I used several ethnographic techniques to collect conversational interactions. Videotapes were systematically taken during one and a half hour periods twice a week for the ten months of the study. Video tapes were used for collecting the most comprehensive and accurate account of the transactions and interactions between teacher-student, student-student and student-curriculum genre.

The videotaped sessions, in conjunction with the classroom field notes, were initially viewed to establish patterns for analysis. All the videotaped sessions were transcribed in detail and translated into English.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data is framed within an interpretive and descriptive approach, and based on a multidisciplinary perspective of literacy research. The bulk of the analyses is on the transcriptions of the videotaped classroom interactions.

I examine, describe and interpret one specific aspect of language and learning in the context of classroom collaborative talk. Although four themes of analysis emerged as I examined and interpreted the discursive transactions, I focus on one theme for this article. Although the themes were not directly formulated from Halliday's (1975) theories of language development, they nonetheless closely subscribe to his premises. The conception of this theme is grounded in Halliday's theories of language development. He proposes that children create a social system in learning culture and reality and that "...the child's construction of reality is achieved largely through the medium of language." (p. 120). Halliday adds that although the learning of language and the learning of the world are different, they are closely interconnected.

The theme of analysis, learning, language and prior knowledge, addresses the first research question on how children use prior knowledge to negotiate meaning and develop shared understandings. To answer this question, I examine classroom discourse examples that show children reformulating meaning

by forming schematic connections, sharing personal perception and value judgments, making personal associations, and articulating knowledge sources.

The theme, learning, language and prior knowledge, relates to the experiences and knowledge that all the participants, including myself, bring to the linguistic interchanges. Language again becomes a vehicle to create new experiences and knowledge, but in this instance, in relation to what we already know. Seven dimensions of schematic connections will be examined: personal associations; personal perceptions; value judgments; learners as informants; activation of schemas; articulation of knowledge source; continuity and discontinuity.

The learning, language and prior knowledge theme is based on a cultural stance that focuses on the participants' values, assumptions and cultural attitudes, and shapes the tensions and negotiations in collaborative talk.

Sequence 1 denotes the continuity and cohesiveness that emerges in collaborative talk when the topic of discussion is embedded in the experiences of its participants. This exchange embodies all seven characteristics of the learning, language and prior knowledge theme of analysis: personal association, personal perception, value judgment, learner as informant, activation of schemas, articulating knowledge source, and continuity.

The exchange takes place during the first week of our thematic unit on travel. Half the students in the class and I are sitting around a table. Near one edge of the table is a globe of the earth. In front of the table is a bulletin board, which is covered with a map of the world and a map of North America.

Sequence 1: The Land Stolen from México and Wetbacks English Translation

Teacher:... here it says México. This is the United States, this is México. [pointing to the map]

Esteban:But anyway México is not.. it's not small.. when they stole.. the land.. México is still big.

Teacher: México was big before, and who stole the land?

Esteban: The ones from here.

Teacher: Ooooooh, and who told you?

Esteban: My dad.

Teacher: Your dad! And do you know what part was México's, but no longer is?

.... [Cs do not respond]

Teacher: What part could it be? This is México [pointing at the map] What part was México's before?

Esteban: This.. was.. was, from here to there. [pointing at the map south of México]

Teacher: Going down?

Arturo: That one was not, teacher. [pointing to the map]

Teacher: But the United States is up here. Those are other countries. [pointing to the countries south of México on the map]

C2: That one, teacher, that one..

Teacher: I think it is up, here. This is the part that your dad told you was from México..

Esteban: Maybe.. maybe.. th.. th.. this is a famous place because.. because there, Mexicans can't .. can't cross the.. the.. the line.

Teacher: They can't cross the line?

Esteban: No.

Teacher: Where?

Esteban: The.. the line is from the Uni-- is part of the United States.

Teacher: Here in the.. in the border? Right here, on this line?

Esteban: Aha.

Teacher: They don't let them in?

Esteban: And they caught my uncle last year.

Teacher: Who knew that?

Esteban: My daddy told me and also..

Teacher: What did he tell you?

.... [Cs do not respond]

Teacher: Who knew that-- Oops let's wait for Vicente and Mariela because they are playing.

Esteban's dad told him that there are parts here in.. in the border with México and the United States where Mexicans are not

allowed in. Why do you think that would be? Why don't they let them come in?

Mariela: Because..

Teacher: Why would that be?

Arturo: Because..

Mariela: Because they are not from this country.

Teacher: Because Mexicans are from México, and they are not from the United States?

Erica: Teacher..

Teacher: But you are here, and you are from México..

Erica: Teacher.. teacher.. my dad came to the United States.

Arturo: I am allowed to come, and I am from Chicago.

Teacher: Because you were born in Chicago. And that is why they let you come in? Hmmmm. Who else was born in Chicago? Who was born in México?

.... [Cs raise their hands and begin to talk all at once]

Cs: #I was born in Chicago#

#I was born here#

#Me too#

....

Teacher: And your mom and dad, where were they born?

Erica: In México, my mo-- mom and my dad were born in México.

Oscar: My dad is a wetback.

Teacher: In Wetback? [since they had been talking about being born in México, and somewhat surprised that the children would know the word "wetback", the teacher initially responded as if they were talking about the name of a place in México]

.... [Cs laugh loudly]

Erica: Walking.. he went walking because a friend of my mom told him.

Teacher: What?

Erica: Tha..a..a.. that wetback means that they came walking, from over there.

Teacher:Hmmmmmm, and they came walking? And why are they called wetbacks?

.... [Cs do not respond]

Teacher:Because they got wet?

Cs: No.

Esteban:But my dad says that-- he came, I think..

.... [The teacher asks the children to stop touching the microphone and to sit down in their chairs, and deliberately calls some names to participate as Esteban tries to keep talking]

Esteban: I think.. I think that-- I think that he came in a taxi from México.

Teacher:In a taxi from México? [with emphasis, as if to say "is that possible?"]

Esteban:Maybe..

Teacher:In a taxi from México? Here is Chicago, up here, they had to cross aaaall this way to come from México? [pointing to the map] Could he have come in a taxi?

Cs: (***) (***)

Esteban:(***) instead of a taxi, maybe he went by airplane.

Teacher:Hmmmmmm. OK, we are talking about.. Esteban was telling us that someone told him that people who cross and come in are called wetbacks. Does anybody know why?

Cs: [Cs do not respond]

Teacher:What does wetback mean?

Vicente: That it is wet.

Teacher:That it got wet. Because many people that live in México cross a river and get wet. That is why they are called wetbacks. But this is not a nice thing to say. When someone says wetback it is not.. it is not something nice, it is something that..

Elisa: That should not be repeated.

Teacher:It is an insult. Do you know what an insult means?

Ramon: Teacher!

Teacher:What is an insult?

Ramon: Teacher!

Teacher:When I say to someone "You are dumb", that is an insult.

.... [Cs laugh loudly]

Teacher:If someone says to you "You are a wetback", What is that?

Cs: An insult.

Elisa: It is a rude comment.

Teacher:It is a rude comment, uhummm. OK, here we have the globe, the Earth globe it is called.

Nieto (1994), in her study of high school students' perceptions of school policies and practices, found that the curriculum that is covered often excludes the very topics that are most relevant to students' lives. She argues that subjects such as discrimination and racism are viewed as either dangerous, too difficult for students to understand, or too awkward and unpleasant for teachers to discuss. Similarly, Freire contends that students can never acquire real ownership of their learning until they are invited to ask their own questions on subjects that are important to them (Watson, 1993).

In sequence 1, Esteban brings forth a politically charged topic of discussion that sets the course for further exploration of very complex issues: the unlawfulness of land appropriation, the status of legal and illegal immigrants, the relationship between México and the United States, the negative connotation of labels. Esteban is an eager informant of anything that pertains to México and has taken on the role of classroom expert on historical, political and social issues relating to this country. The rest of the students and myself have accepted him in this role largely due to his impassioned interest in this topic and his poignant opinions.

From the onset of this exchange Esteban defines the direction of the conversation and establishes himself as a critical informant. He develops an interesting line of reasoning when he states that México is still a big country even though some of its land has been stolen by the people "from here", meaning from the United States. Esteban's understanding of the change in geographical

boundaries of the land between México and the United States is clearly vocalized by his choice of term; the land was “stolen” not taken or bought. The use of this word reflects his personal perceptions and views about the complicated relationship between México and the United States. He also articulates his knowledge source: his interpretations of historical facts are directly shaped by his father.

Esteban extends the historical and political tone of the dialogue further by referring to “a famous place” which he does not identify but nevertheless is able to elaborate on its importance, “because there, Mexican can't .. can't cross the.. the.. the line”. Although these initiations come about as a result of our discussions on travel and maps, it is important to note that they are not explicitly solicited by me, the teacher. It is clear that Esteban comes to the collaborative talk experience with already formulated hypotheses and theories about the world. Furthermore, he knows that in this classroom community he is allowed and encouraged to express his opinions, to make connections, and to negotiate meanings. Therein lies the potential of what Cummins (1994) calls the “collaborative relations of power” which recognizes and legitimizes those sources of knowledge that minority students possess but are outside the dominant discourse of schools.

Esteban expresses his personal association with México-United States border issues by sharing that his uncle was “caught last year”. This remark awakens the interest of the other children and elicits various hypotheses about the possible reasons why Mexicans are not allowed to cross “the line.” Mariela speculates that it must be because Mexicans are not from this country, Erica shares that her father came to the United States, and Arturo informs us that he himself is allowed in the United States since he was born in Chicago. Both Mariela's and Arturo's remarks illustrate the type of critical thinking and inference making that cultural and linguistic diverse students can exercise and articulate, even at this young age, given the opportunity and motivation.

For a moment the conversation takes a new direction about where the children and their parents

were born, but Oscar unexpectedly backtracks to the immigration issue by announcing that his father is a wetback. Dismayed at the nature of his comment and surprised that he would know the word wetback, I incorrectly presume that he is talking about a geographical location in México by the name of “Mojado” (word for “wet” in Spanish that is also used to refer to wetbacks) and ask him “In Wetback?”. Erica assumes the teacher role without hesitation to clarify and provide her interpretation of Oscar's meaning. Erica explains “that wetback means that they came walking, from over there” and that she knew this because of a friend of her mother's.

The dialogue about the border and the meaning of wetbacks prompts Esteban to share how his father traveled to the United States. It is evident, by his pauses and false starts, that he is unsure about this. However, he takes his chances and makes his statement that his father came in a taxi. I negotiate with Esteban the plausibility that his father could have traveled from México to Chicago by taxi, without directly imposing my opinion that this is unlikely. I rely on my own prior knowledge that in Latin America taxis are sometimes hired for long distance trips, to probe Esteban into providing more information. Finally, Esteban rethinks his statement and hypothesizes that “instead of a taxi, maybe he went by airplane”. This short exchange with Esteban demonstrates how teachers can provide spaces for students to work through their own meaning making.

I return to the topic of wetbacks not only to maintain the continuity and coherence of the dialogue but also to clarify the children's understanding of the negative overtones of the word. At this point in the conversation there seems to be a consensus among the children that wetbacks are people from México who come to the United States and who are not welcomed here. Because I do not yet get a clear impression that the students have grasped the derogatory nature of this expression, I clarify that “It is an insult”. Elisa has a definite understanding that this word “should not be repeated” and elaborates that an insult is “a rude comment”.

Having full awareness of my position of influence over the students, I am careful not to impose value judgments on their contributions or to promote my own views. Nevertheless, my role as teacher is not of neutral bystander but of an active participant in the learning process. In this instance, I felt compelled to make sure that the students understood the hidden political and racist meaning behind this term because it directly affects their lives.

Sequence 2 evolved from a larger discussion on the differences of currency from various countries. The weeks prior to this collaborative talk we had been involved in the study of money, one of the components of the math curriculum that is to be covered in kindergarten. The study of money is a subject that is easily integrated in our thematic unit on travel. In this interchange the whole class is gathered on the rug. Several children have brought coins or bills, mostly from México. Cristal brought a coin from Canada, and the university collaborator brought several bills and a few postcards from Argentina.

Sequence 2: Who Copied Who?
English Translation

Esteban: [Esteban stands up very excited and gets his bills from México that he brought and which are behind the teacher] Which one is bigger? Mine..? We should measure them. Which one is bigger than mine?

Teacher: Ok, let's measure.. [putting the bill from Argentina next to the bill from México] Which one is bigger? The bigger one is from..

Juan: From Argentina.

Lida: [smiling] Teacher, Argentin rhymes with gelatin [in Spanish these two words do rhyme]

Teacher: Yes.. and do you know that in Argentina these bills are called pesos..

Esteban: They copied México.

Teacher: They copied México?! Or the other way around? México copied Argentina! [smiling]

Esteban: [laughing] Nooo, they copied that from México.. because México-- México copied-- Argentina copied that from México.

Teacher: How do you know?

Esteban: Because they started saying that name-- they knew that name first.

Teacher: Mmmm.. Esteban says that Argentina copied the name of pesos from México, but I say that México copied it from Argentina, what do you think? [smiling]

Cs: [laughing] #No#

#It's the other way around#

....

Teacher: .. and here we have some postcards that Ms. Liliana brought from..

Cs: #From Argentina#

Teacher: Yes, and it is of the capital of Argentina, the name is Buenos Aires.

Esteban: The capital of México-- they also copied that from México because it also has a capital.

Teacher: Yes, but Esteban all countries have a capital.

Mariela: What is a capital?

Teacher: The city of..

Esteban: México City.

Teacher: Yes, México City is the capital of México. The capital of Argentina is Buenos Aires.. it's bigger than Chicago, but is smaller than México City.

Sequence 2 illustrates how personal associations and perceptions can become a vehicle for the negotiation of new learning. Esteban initiates a fitting learning opportunity by suggesting we measure the bills from México and Argentina to find out which one is bigger. Esteban's interest in this type of exploration is typical of children his age in wanting to see if their property or product is bigger and/or better than anyone else's. What is interesting about his statement is that he not only inquires about the size of each bill, but he also operationalizes his inquiry by suggesting a concrete method of analysis; to "measure" the bills.

After the two bills are placed together, Juan observes that the bill from Argentina is larger than the bill from México. Juan's comment prompts Lida to contribute her own line of comparison, not about the sizes of the bills, but about the lexical similarities of the words "Argentin" and "gelatin." Although Lida again does not conform to the rational progression of the conversation, she makes an imaginative linguistic connection between these two words. While Lida's role as the classroom comedian has been well established by this time, I attempt to move her toward a status of more serious contributor without suppressing her quick wit. O'Connor & Michaels (1993) assert that teachers are responsible for creating a shared classroom culture in which "...students learn to take themselves seriously as learners and to see other students as fellow learners, while fully engaging with relevant academic content" (p. 318). In the teachers' never ending pursuit of maintaining a stable and coherent classroom atmosphere that is conducive to optimum learning, children like Lida have to sometimes be steered away from leading the class into divergent or chaotic conditions. In this instance, it is accomplished by my acknowledgment of her observation and my attempt to advance the dialogue in referring to the label for currency used in Argentina: pesos.

My comment about pesos incites a provocative exchange of opinions between Esteban and me. His straightforward statement that Argentina copied the term "pesos" from México shows his uninhibited approach to our collaborative talk. Esteban indeed considers himself a valuable informant of the curriculum. Even when I challenge him and argue that maybe it is México who copied Argentina, Esteban is not persuaded and maintains his position by explaining that México used this term first. The collaborative tone of the linguistic and cognitive interchanges is reflected in our bartering and negotiations.

Although we do not come to a resolution as to what country copied the term "pesos" from what country, Esteban persists in his line of thought regarding comparisons, which he initiated at the beginning of the oral text event, by stating that

Argentina also copied the term "capital" from México. His reasoning is that since México has a capital then the term must have also originated in México. At this point I clarify for Esteban the fact that all countries have capitals, which prompts Mariela to ask the meaning of the word. Esteban continues to verbalize his cognitive connections and extensions by providing an example of what a capital is: "México City".

The above sequence exemplifies what Moll, Tapia & Whitmore (1993) characterize as the teacher in the role of mediator who provides guidance, assistance and strategic support to help children assume charge of their own learning. This mediated process of teaching and learning is dependent on how teachers and children interact to use social and cultural resources for developing thinking.

Given that the ethnic and cultural makeup of Chicago is so abundant and varied, the children who live in this city are exposed to a myriad of experiences outside their own immediate cultural and social realities. However, as sequence 3 shows, the children are constantly interpreting and reformulating these resources based on their own frames of reference. The preliminary dialogue centers around the cover of the book; on it is México's national emblem. The students immediately recognize the emblem, which is found on the Mexican flag, and begin to talk about flags.

Sequence 3: Flags and Parades
English Translation

Raul: I. I have the flag from México [stands up and goes to the wall to point to the flag from México, on the wall also are the U.S. and the Puerto Rican flags]

Teacher: And that one on the bottom where is it from?

Cs: #Puerto Rico#

Teacher: Oooh.

Cs: (***) (***)

Teacher: Have you at anytime seen the Puerto Rican flag on the street?

Vicente: I have one.. teacher.. it's that one day I found the Puerto Rican flag thrown away.

Teacher: On the floor? And what did you do with it?

Vicente: I picked it up.. and cleaned it.. and I glued it with tape because it was braked.

Teacher: It was broken?

Lida: Teacher.. I..

Teacher: Haven't you seen sometimes in the summer that there are people that have Puerto Rican flags and.. they are in cars..

Cs: #No#

#Not me#

#Aha#

#I saw it#

Vicente: I have seen that.

Arturo: And also at night.

Teacher: And what do they do? Why do they do that?

Cs: (***)

Vicente: And they sound their horns.. piip.. pip.. piiip..

Teacher: And they sound their horns.. and why would they do that?

Lida: I know, teacher.

Cs: (***) [Arturo raises his hand]

Teacher: Arturo wants to talk.

Arturo: Me and my sister, one day we were outside and we saw all the flags.

Teacher: And which flags did you see?

Arturo: From México.

Cs: (***) [Eddie raises his hand]

Eddie: It's just that, one day.. (***) at McDonald (***) that they were bringing a Santa Claus.

Teacher: A Santa Claus? Mmmm.

Lida: I know, teacher.. because.. sometimes it comes out on the television-- in the game..

Teacher: The game of what?

Jesus: Soccer.. and they go crazy.

Teacher: Mmmm.. and they go crazy? Why?

Lida: I know teacher.. I know.. because also sometimes when the game is here my

mommy buys me a flag from here to celebrate.

Cs: (***) (***)

Teacher: Let's see, Jesus? [pauses].. nothing, ok, Mariela? Who wanted to talk? Eddie?

Vicente: No, make it go like this [signaling with his hand in a circle to the left, to take turns] make it go like that.

Teacher: Make it go like that? Ok, Mariela.

Mariela: Me?

Teacher: Yes.

Mariela: Over there I.. from Chicago.. where we came from..

Teacher: You came from Chicago?

Mariela: Yes.

Teacher: And here what is it called?

Mariela: United States.

Teacher: Yes, but what city do we live in?

Mariela: I came from over there.. from a house.. I came from México.. from México.. I came from another house.. that here is called (***) and we saw a parade in the street.

Teacher: Aaaahh! Oh, yes? And what where they celebrating in the parade?

Mariela: Nothing. They were just passing by and honking the horn.

Teacher: Uuuh, and the flags, where were they from?

Arturo: From Puerto Rico.

Mariela: There was just one.

Teacher: Where was it from?

Mariela: I don't remember.

This oral text event exemplifies three aspects of the learning, language and prior knowledge theme: personal associations, activation of schemas and continuity. Raul's contribution that he owns a flag of México leads other students to share their own familiarity with flags. By prompting the children to extend and articulate their knowledge of flags, I elicit from them connections to their personal experiences.

Although all the children involved in this particular collaborative talk sequence are from Mexican origin, it is clear that other cultures and

traditions are part of their knowledge base. For example, Vicente, whose family is from México, recounts how he came to own a flag of Puerto Rico by finding it on the street and later, in reference to parades, adds that “they sound their horns... piip.. pip.. piiip..”. Being a city of demarcated ethnic boundaries and strong cultural pride, Chicago is the year-round host of a multitude of parades for many immigrant groups. During these events, flags of the celebrated country are displayed in cars and driven around the city while their occupants honk their car horns and shout the name of their country.

Invariably, Chicago is also the setting for ethnic and cultural clashes and turmoil. A predominant conflict that affects the members of our school is the friction between the Puerto Rican and the Mexican communities which often arises in classrooms and school halls. Having a superficial understanding about the discord between these two groups, I deliberately set out to probe Vicente's attitudes and beliefs by asking him what he did with the flag after he found it on the street. His response, that he picked it up, cleaned and taped it together indicates that he valued his find and that he is either not aware or not swayed by any conflict between these two groups.

Although my intent is to invite students to share more of their views about the Puerto Rico-México relationship, the children themselves reestablish continuity by returning to the topic of flags, when Arturo informs us that one day when he and his sister were outside they saw all the flags. While Eddie's apparently disconnected and confusing comments about a Santa Claus and McDonalds briefly distracts us from the topic at hand, Lida quickly redirects us back by stating that “it comes out on television-- the game“ and that her mother sometimes buys her a flag to celebrate at sports games. This is a clear example of how young children can develop understandings about sequence and continuity, and how they appropriate strategies to maintain cohesion; a critical literacy component of the processes involved in reading and writing. In advancing the participants' understanding through collaborative talk, differences in perspective can be interrelated and discontinuities

used to create new and more comprehensive understanding (Barnes & Todd, 1995).

Similarly, despite my interruptions, Mariela is successful in both answering my questions and weaving through her own thought process to arrive at the interconnected and relevant discourse about seeing a parade and concluding that they were “just passing by and honking their horns”. Although she admits she does not remember where the flag she saw was from, Arturo does not hesitate in providing his opinion that it must have been from Puerto Rico.

The last oral text event, sequence 4, follows a discussion on maps and islands. The whole class is sitting on the rug and I am sitting in a rocking chair about to start reading the book “Azulín Visita a México” (Azulín Visits México) by Virginia Poulet (1990). In this oral text event Esteban makes an interesting comparison between México and Chicago and provides a provocative argument for his stern statement that is based on his prior experiences.

Sequence 4: Graffiti and The Question of Who Works Harder
English Translation

Juan: There is the Mexican flag.

Arturo: He is from México [pointing to Azulín, the main character of the book]

Teacher: IN MÉXICO AZULIN SAW TOYS AND HANDCRAFTS... what might handcrafts be?

Mariela: Things that you paint.

Teacher: Ahaa.. and have you seen these types of handcrafts in México?

Cs: #No#

Teacher: Do you have handcrafts at home?

Lida: Teacher.. I-- I-- (***)

Esteban: The people work harder than the ones from here because they have the sidewalks really clean.

Teacher: Oh yes?! They have the streets really clean! And why do you say that, that they work more than the people from here?

Esteban: Because here they leave everything dirty.

Teacher: They leave everything dirty? Who leaves everything dirty?

Cs: #Gang members#

Esteban: The drunks.

Vicente: They paint on the walls.

Lida: I-- I-- saw--(***) and the boy was--(***) and they hit him like this-- (***) I saw (***)

Teacher: And what does that have to do with the book?.. Does it have something to do with it?

Lida: No, it's that..

Teacher: Ok, then you tell me later because the people want me to finish reading the book, Ok?

Esteban: And in my house they also wanted to write on the wall.

Teacher: When they write on the wall.. that is called graffiti. [continues to read] ... FRUIT... Mmmm.

The pictures of Mexican crafts and painted toys depicted in the book, and Mariela's remark that handcrafts are things that are painted, seem to trigger Esteban's remark that people from México work harder than people from Chicago. He goes on to hypothesize that this is so because the sidewalks are kept very clean in México but "here, they leave everything dirty". Without exception, such emphatic and bold opinions from a young immigrant child impress me greatly. These types of remarks also reaffirm my belief that given the opportunity and motivation, low income minority school-age children can articulate their own ideas and generate convincing arguments to support them. This example directly challenges the notion that certain immigrant groups, in particular those from México, tend to be submissive and passive learners (Nieto, 1992).

In addition, sequence 4 reveals how children are able to make connections that both preserve or break down the cohesiveness of classroom collaborative talk. For example, Esteban's remarks

induce other students to contribute their own perceptions about who is responsible for the dirty streets in Chicago; gang members and drunks who paint on the walls, which maintains continuity. Lida, perhaps prompted by the mention of gang members and drunks, however takes the opportunity to depart from the topic, in her somewhat undecipherable statement about a boy who was hit. Although Lida's comment appears to be related to the previous statement, it deviates too far from our conversation, and leads me to question her on its relevance.

It is important to note that my familiarity with my students' dispositions and personalities, in most cases, allows me to determine the direction in which their contributions may take us. For instance, during the course of our school year together and for the most part, Esteban, Mariela and Vicente have contributed intriguing and perceptive viewpoints, Lida and Marisol tend to enjoy deviating from the focus of conversation, and Fernando and Oscar are inclined to share unrelated information to our discussions. This explains my acceptance of Esteban's initial deviation when he moves from a discussion of handcrafts to one of work intensity, but my skeptical inquiry into the relevance of Lida's initiation about a boy being hit.

Conclusions

The preceding exchanges characterize the role of schematic connections in the socially constructed meaning making process that embody the learning, language and prior knowledge theme of analysis. These collaborative talk excerpts are examined within a cultural stance that rests on the values, assumptions, cultural attitudes and histories that collectively, we bring to the classroom discursive practices. Our personal recollections and experiences come together to shape the tensions and negotiations in our collaborative talk. As Young (1992) aptly summarizes "...the foundation of educative experiences are found in the everyday world of children and teachers, because it is only there that really meaningful involvement is found." (p. 28).

The conversational sequences included in this article share fundamental commonalities that illustrate

how language is used as a social mode of thinking for the development of understanding. The excerpts depict how we engage in the joint pursuit of learning and the formation of shared understandings. These undertakings are all situated within our own prior cultural and social experiences. Our interactions and contributions, both as teachers and learners, can best be understood when we examine the social and cultural relationships within classroom discursive transactions.

Bartolomé (1994) argues that the first step in developing more effective instructional methods for cultural and linguistic diverse students, calls for a shift in perspective. She asserts that this paradigm shift must be from "...a narrow and mechanistic view of

instruction to one that is broader in scope and takes into consideration the sociohistorical and political dimensions of education." (p. 176), and adds that "...by conducting a critical analysis of the sociocultural realities in which subordinated students find themselves at school, the implicit and explicit antagonistic relations between students and teachers... take on a focal point" (p. 176). Culturally responsive education and transformative modes of teaching and learning enables students and teachers to break away from these adverse relationships and negative beliefs and allows for the creation of learning environments that are informed by both participatory action and critical reflection.

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