

SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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For the past few years we have been developing a longitudinal study of biliteracy development in children by following, all within the same dual-language school, a case study cohort of 20 students throughout their elementary school years. This cohort sample represents considerable diversity in terms of ethnicity, social class, and language proficiencies upon starting school, with just a few children fluent in both Spanish and English as early as kindergarten. The study reveals that all students, not only those in our study sample but in the entire school, and regardless of their sociocultural characteristics or initial language profile, became literate in both languages.

Our analysis identifies several characteristics that give the school its additive personality. For present purposes, we highlight only three such characteristics. One is that the school features, in contrast to most high-poverty schools, a highly qualified and diverse teaching corps, most of them (88%) female, as is the norm. All of the instructors are certified bilingual teachers—most hold a master's degree or higher—and have taken academic courses in both Spanish and English and have taught in a dual-language program for more than 9 years. This highly qualified staff not only help give the school its academic emphasis and direction, its academic identity we could say, but also facilitate a particular social setting, cultivating a supportive environment for the development of biliteracy in all students in which the teachers, among other things, protect the students (and themselves) against the often blatant attacks and insults by English-only advocates.

A second characteristic relates to the deliberate development of *confianza* (mutual trust), a term borrowed from our analysis of household funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, in press). In the original work, we used it to refer to the necessary trust households need to establish social relations of exchange; in fact, we referred to *confianza* as the glue that held the households' multiple (and sometimes fragile) social networks together. Here we extend this concept to refer to the nature of the social relationships among administrators, teachers, and students that help establish the particular "culture" of the school; a culture of caring, if you will, to borrow from Noddings (e.g., 1992), that came to characterize the school and helped define who these teachers are in relation to each other and to the children (see also, Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In particular, the administrators entrust the teachers to help make pedagogical and policy decisions for the school. This trust helps teachers define themselves as a particular type of professional, and as a particular type of person, with the necessary funds of knowledge to make curricular decisions that help define the nature of the educational relationships in the school.

A third characteristic is that of ideological clarity. The teachers became well aware of how much teaching is a political activity, especially after defending the children's language rights in their efforts to preserve the current dual-language arrangement. It would be accurate to state that the administrators and teachers are constantly vigilant of any attempts to either alter the dual-language agenda of the school or

impose an English-only curriculum and do not hesitate to activate the school's social network of parents and other allies to defend the school. In this setting, therefore, biliteracy is, without vacillation, a clear academic goal promoted through a dual-language pedagogy and sustained by an ideology that favors the development of both languages in all children.

The school, consequently, is not only successful in producing biliterate students, a rare achievement in U.S. schools, but also successful despite the heavy ideological and programmatic pressures of the state to dismantle bilingual education, a consequence of the state's English-only language policy, and the current emphasis on high-stakes testing, also conducted only in English. Our claim is that the school is able to create, in great part through the work of the teachers, what we refer to as educational sovereignty (Moll & Ruiz, 2002). We use the term *educational sovereignty* to capture the need to challenge the arbitrary authority of the dominant power structure to determine the essence of education, the educational relationships of schooling, especially for so-called minority students, in this case Latino children.

In particular, we emphasize the type of agency in which teachers seek to take pedagogical advantage of the social relationships and cultural resources found in local households and other community settings, including universities, and to respect and respond to the values of education possessed by Latino families who, along with African Americans, form part of the new majority in schools in many areas of the United States.¹ Hence, we do not mean sovereignty in the sense of creating strict boundaries of separation, the way it is understood in the marking of a territory of a nation/state. Instead, we mean the strength and power a social setting such as a school can garner by creating strategic social networks to enhance its autonomy, mediate restrictive ideological and programmatic constraints, and provide additive forms of schooling for all its students (see Morris, 2004).

The lack of such sovereignty produces absurd situations. For example, a recent survey of parents in Arizona with children enrolled in the school system revealed that approximately 70% of Latino parents favor bilingual instruction; in fact, 54% of non-Latino parents also favored the use of two languages (Molnar & Merrill, 2004). Nevertheless, language policies in Arizona are adamantly antibilingual, regardless of the desires of the majority of parents. Similar situations exist in other states. The point here is that if schools are deliberately not producing bilingual and biliterate students, as is the case, they may be serving the needs of other constituents but clearly not of Latino parents and their children, who are now, or soon will be, the majority school population throughout the southwestern states of the country. In the current context, then, there is growing accountability to arbitrary standards and tests but little accountability to diversity, as illustrated by the failure to accommodate, even minimally, the expressed language needs of the Latino parents of Arizona.

Such is the political context of teacher education. On one hand, there are the changing demographics that have produced a new and diverse sociocultural reality in schools to which teachers must be morally and pedagogically responsive. On the other hand, there are the federally mandated educational policies, featuring the mass testing of students, to which teachers must be legally responsive. A consequence of these tests, especially in working-class schools, is that for prolonged periods of time, teaching is reduced to preparing students for the test, usually by increasing rote instruction on a narrow (English-only) group of subjects (Popham, 2000). Another consequence is that the overwhelming emphasis on administering these tests leaves little or no room for more formative forms of assessment that may inform the professional development of teachers (Shepard, 2002), especially about the crucially important sociocultural dimensions of learning. That is, the professional development that teachers need to address equity issues or for that matter,

the needs of a multicultural student population, has no place in the contemporary reform agenda (Orfield, 2000).

Let us report one more finding from the parent survey in Arizona that is particularly relevant to these sociocultural aspects of teacher education. It turns out that the parents' main source of information about the schools is the institution itself in its formal representation, either through meetings at the school or school-generated communications, such as flyers. However, parental communications with teachers or administrators, that is, a more personalized social relation between parents and teachers as a conduit of knowledge and information, is hardly mentioned. Only 6% of Latino parents mentioned teachers or administrators as a source of information. This means that whatever social ties parents have with teachers or other school personnel, these relations are not an important source of information about schools; these social ties, when they exist, may fulfill other functions, but they do not seem to be related to schooling, nor do they facilitate parents' capacity to be informed about or intervene in school matters. Without these relations, there is no formation of social capital, understood as those social relations that allow us to garner resources, whether material, social, or intellectual, that we can then apply to a particular goal or to influence a particular action or outcome such as helping our children perform well in schools.

This point reminds us of the recent work of Lareau (2003) on parental social networks. In brief, she found that in contrast to middle-class parents, the social networks she studied of working-class and poor families did not include ties to school; thus, they lacked the leverage of middle-class parents in influencing the school's decisions and actions in relation to their children. Social ties become capital, especially in relation to schools, only to the extent that one can garner institution-related resources to influence actions. There is a strong class-based dynamic at work here, and it goes something like this. Most administrators and teachers are middle-class, White people (women mostly in

the case of teachers); their social relations with poor or working-class people are minimal. That is, their social relations are limited primarily to other middle-class people, following the general tendency of members of a social group to form networks with those of similar groups or socioeconomic characteristics (known as homophily; see Lin, 2000).

Yet these teachers teach primarily, given the changing demographics, "other people's children" (Delpit, 1988). There are few cross-class (or cultural) networks available to either teachers or parents; they do not occur very often, not even in schools. In fact, teaching has become a commuter profession; most teachers do not live in the communities in which they teach, especially in the case of schools serving low-income or working-class students. Teachers travel to a school, not in their neighborhoods, and at the end of the workday they return to their neighborhoods. Their opportunities to get to know parents or the school's community are minimal. Thus, it is not surprising that teachers, much less administrators, are not a source of school-related knowledge for parents, or parents a source of knowledge for teachers.

Teacher education, therefore, is a matter of developing not only technical competence and solid knowledge of subject matter but also sociocultural competence in working with the diversity of students that characterize contemporary schooling. Few places provide aspiring teachers, or veteran teachers for that matter, with such experiences, as critical as they may seem. There are promising developments, however. A couple of examples may make the point (borrowed, respectively, from Moll & González, 2004, and González et al., in press). Allen et al. (2002) reported on a project called PhOLKS (photographs of local knowledge sources). In this project, teachers provided students with cameras to photograph "things that were important to them in their homes or neighborhood" (Allen et al., 2002, p. 313). With the help of teachers, and the permission of families, the students generated the subjects of their photographs, including family members, particular events, or favorite activities. The students then

wrote or dictated a story about each picture, and a family member also wrote a narrative on another picture that provided an additional, personal perspective on everyday life. The goal of the study became to reenvision the students in contexts other than classrooms and in relation to other adults or children in their lives. In so doing, the centrality of social relationships in learning and in developing classroom communities became readily apparent.

In a related study, Allen and Labbo (2001) described a similar methodology—taking photographs and writing narratives—in helping 27 White, middle-class, undergraduate students in a teacher education program examine details of their lives. The goal was to produce reflections through the writing of “cultural memoirs” and study how such insights would shape the (preservice) teachers’ interactions and reflections of their work with elementary students of diverse backgrounds. It is interesting that most of the teachers felt that culture was a concept applicable to other people’s lives but not necessarily to them; similarly, most resisted examining their own privilege, as provided by their race, schooling, and social-class characteristics. Initially, as Allen and Labbo reported, most of the writing was superficial, not delving critically into the details of what experiences have shaped their lives and identities. Progressively, as they gained practice in making themselves objects of inquiry, the student teachers produced considerable insights, including analyzing both positive and negative influences in their development.

A related task was for these teachers to emulate the process with children in their classrooms during a 4-week field experience, where they asked students to take photographs and write analogous cultural memoirs. On the basis of what they learned, these teachers were then asked to plan instruction or approach the parents of the students to discuss what they had learned. They also had to discuss through letter writing what they had learned from the combined project experiences.

These reflective letters proved candid and revealing, reaffirming these teachers’ commit-

ment to teaching and providing an “understanding that their students too, come from valued and diverse cultural backgrounds, and if they are to reach each student they must connect with them” (Allen & Labbo, 2001, p. 50). In at least one case, however, a student decided to pursue other life experiences before entering the teaching profession and withdrew from the program. Allen and Labbo (2001) themselves were changed by the experience, gaining knowledge about these preservice teachers as people with life experiences and values that belie simple stereotypes and admiring “their remarkable strength in interrogating some of their tacit cultural influences” (p. 50).

Buck and Skilton Sylvester (in press) used local neighborhoods in Philadelphia as settings to help preservice teachers question their perceptions about inner-city urban communities and identify both the structural issues affecting community life and the resources available within those very same communities. They did so in the context of a course they teach that covers both the social foundations of education and social studies teaching methods. This course was developed in response to a perceived shortcoming of colleges of education, in which social foundations courses are taught in isolation of other areas of teacher education and do not have the hoped for transformative impact on teacher practice (see also, Mercado, in press). Students enrolled in this course, all preservice teachers in the University of Pennsylvania’s master’s program in elementary education, were assigned to complete a neighborhood study carried out in a community in which they would later teach and to develop a social studies curricula based on the community’s funds of knowledge.

Buck and Skilton Sylvester (in press) described the very challenging task of helping the students, middle- and upper-middle-class women venturing often for the first time into urban working-class communities of color, confront long-held perceptions and apprehensions about these neighborhoods without ignoring the difficult issues of living found within these locations. Both instructors and students con-

stantly work out the following contradiction. On one hand, their job is to present to the students an alternative perception of the neighborhoods based on a funds-of-knowledge approach, what they refer to as an asset orientation. On the other hand, it is important for both instructors and students to address the difficult structural issues found in these neighborhoods. Buck and Skilton Sylvester have explained it as follows:

Assuming that the ultimate goal is to position pre-service teachers to view urban communities as reservoirs of strength, possibility, and talent, how can a teacher education program guide students in the articulation between their lived, possessed, and claimed privilege and the relative poverty and disadvantage within which urban community members must be equally embedded?

The authors invited teachers and teacher educators alike to think through with them the deeper significance of these issues, in particular, the preservice teachers' apprehensions about entering these communities, in terms of the teachers' future ability to view their students' communities as sources of "ready-made, untapped educational resources."

The shifting demography in U.S. society and schools has provided fertile soil for the exercise of power, especially what Eric Wolf (2001, pp. 384-385) referred to as "structural power": the power not only to control the settings in which people may express their potentialities and interact with others but also to organize and orchestrate the settings themselves and control the nature and direction of actions. Consider that the dominant response to these radical demographic changes has been to develop educational policies that obviate diversity in favor of practices that seek to control the students, such as mandating highly restrictive and prescriptive early reading curricula while ignoring glaring issues of educational inequity or social justice (Gee, 1999). However, in teacher education, it does well to always remember that power never goes unchallenged, it always produces resistance and contestation; and schools are not fixed or immutable entities, they are built environments, socially produced and re-created through the actions of human beings,

especially teachers, who ultimately must find ways to participate in and mediate their realities for the benefit of the children they teach, even when those realities include significant constraints.

NOTE

1. The demographic breakdown in the 100 largest school districts in the United States includes Latinos at 31.7% and African Americans at 29.4%; furthermore, in the 500 largest school districts in the country, Latinos and African Americans account for 52% of the student population (Young, 2002).

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