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Bilingual students' responses to multicultural children's literature on discrimination

Yo creo que las pláticas literarias son muy suaves porque me gusta decir mis ideas con los demás compañeros. Muchas ideas que yo pienso cuando las comparto. Y cuando leo un libro a veces me recuerda a mi familia. También me ayuda a leer, y los otros compañeros también tienen ideas.

[I think literature circles are cool (very good) because I like to share my ideas with other partners. Lots of ideas that I think when I share them. And when I read a book, sometimes it reminds me of my family. It also helps me to read, and the other classmates have ideas too.] (Mario, age seven, 2/21/99).

Mario's opinion about the literature circles in his second grade bilingual classroom summarizes the most important purposes of literature discussions in small groups: to give students an opportunity to share their understandings about books with each other, and to negotiate and create new meanings or "ideas." Julia López-Robertson, teacher-researcher, and I decided to engage in a collaborative research in her classroom initiating and examining the use of children's literature in small group discussions. We consider this type of literature discussion to be a component of the Language Arts curriculum aimed at offering students not only a literary experience, but a challenging intellectual learning experience.

Small group literature discussions or literature circles are small groups of students who read or are read the same book (or several books related to a single theme or broad issue) and then

meet to discuss their understandings with one another (Short, 1995, 1997). When this curricular engagement is informed by a transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt 1938, 1978, literature circles may encourage meaningful discussions and critical dialogue about books. By meaningful discussions I mean the ability to talk about books with others and to go beyond "like-or-dislike" responses to statements and interpretations that reveal children's insights and evaluative comments about the stories. Critical dialogue implies the ability to co-produce meaning with others, taking into account different interpretations and perspectives.

Julia and I initiated small group literature discussions in her first grade classroom (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999/2000) and continued these literature circles as the class moved on together to second grade. Through our research we wanted to explore the nature of the talk engaged in by twenty-one second grade bilingual students as they discuss children's literature in small groups. The students were mostly Mexican Americans with three American Indian students from the Yaqui and Pima Nations, all of them from working-class families. Ten students were English dominant and eleven were Spanish dominant.

Each week the second graders were presented with four books available in both languages to choose from for each literature discussion. We chose the books taking into account their literary quality, the characteristics of quality multicultural

The discussions described in this article are part of a larger qualitative research I conducted for my doctoral dissertation during 1998-1999 in a bilingual elementary school in Southern Arizona entitled, "The Power of Children's Dialogue: The Discourse of Latino Students in Small Group Literature Discussions." It was partially sponsored by The Spencer Foundation.

children's literature (Yokota, 1993), and their availability in both Spanish and English. The books were all related to broad social issues such as family, racial and language discrimination, and gender equity. Each student was allowed to take his[her] chosen books home for three days. Julia also included a letter asking the parents or a relative to read the book to the child several times before the literature discussions. Discussions were usually bilingual, with English and Spanish dominant children in the same groups of four to five students. All of the literature circles were audiotaped and transcribed.

In this article I will describe some of the responses that two small groups of children had in February to the books **Baseball Saved Us** [*El béisbol nos salvó*] (Mochizuki, 1993/1996), which is about the decision of the United States to confine Japanese Americans in internment camps at the time of World War II, and to **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.** [*Un libro ilustrado sobre Martin Luther King, hijo*] (Adler, 1989/1992), a fictionalized biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. These two literature circles were part of class discussions around books related to issues of discrimination and racism, a theme about which the children had been raising interesting questions in relation to the two groups they called "black people" (African Americans) and "white people" (European Americans).

We wondered whether the students could see the theme of racial discrimination beyond the black-white issue, an issue they had been discussing in class since first grade when they read **The Story of Ruby Bridges** (Cole, 1995). We had also used many picture books portraying Mexican Americans and Latinos during Fall and wanted to extend the discussions to books about other cultures. The decision was influenced by our belief that through the use of multicultural literature all students can learn about the diversity and the complexity of American society, and all students can explore issues of social justice (Au, 1993). Books representing issues of discrimination across cultures in the United States can just do that.

After the students chose the books they each wanted to discuss, four different literature circles were organized around the following picturebooks: **The Adventures of Connie and Diego** [*Las aventuras de Connie y Diego*] (García, 1987), **La Mariposa** [*The Butterfly*] (Jiménez, 1998), **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr** [*Un libro ilustrado sobre Martin Luther King, hijo*] (Adler, 1989/1992), and **Baseball**

Saved Us [*El béisbol nos salvó*] (Mochizuki, 1993/1996).

This paper will focus on the 33-minute literature circle on **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.**, facilitated by Julia, and the 40-minute literature circle on **Baseball Saved Us** that I facilitated. Although this article is organized around the students' emergent notions of discrimination, I will first summarize the types of literary responses given by the students to both books because they illustrate the kind of literary talk the children engaged in. The students' names are pseudonyms. The excerpts will be presented in the language the students used. Translations to English will be in brackets [].

LITERARY RESPONSES

All students who participated in the literature circles provided a variety of literary responses to the books. The analysis of the two discussions shows that 76% of the students' comments (405 out of 536) were literary responses and the rest, 24%, were comments related to procedures (such as turn taking, language to use, preparation for the discussions), facilitating talk, active listening, attempts to take the floor, and social talk. The literary responses had three major categories: a) analytical talk (Sipe, 1996) that included talking about the book as a cultural product, making narrative meaning, reading from the text, and analysis of illustrations; b) intertextual connections; and c) personal responses where the students connected the stories to their own lives and identified themselves with the characters.

The variety of literary responses demonstrates the students ability to control their discourse by using texts as resources for thinking. It seems that the literature discussion groups where these bilingual students discussed quality multicultural literature helped them to analyze texts and to engage in discussions about what they read or what had been read to them.

CHILDREN'S EMERGENT NOTIONS ON DISCRIMINATION

From institutional racism to the internalization of stereotypes

Throughout the two discussions, the students moved back and forth reflecting certain degrees of awareness about both institutional and individual racism, and the violence that comes with both types of discrimination. Nieto (1996) states: "The major difference between individual discrimination

and institutional discrimination is the wielding of power, because it is primarily through the power of the people who control institutions ... that oppressive policies and practices are reinforced and legitimized" (p. 37). Institutional discrimination, i.e. the use of the police or soldiers to reinforce the obedience of unfair laws against African Americans and Japanese Americans, is present in both picturebooks.

In both discussions students made reference in their own words to this type of institutional discrimination. Pointing to an illustration in **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.**, Gisela commented: "I didn't like this part because the white police were hitting the black people, and the dogs were biting the people." Diana posed the following question in response to **El béisbol nos salvó [Baseball Saved Us]**: "*Aquí algo no me gustó, ¿por qué se lo iban a llevar (el niño al campamento)?* [There is something I didn't like here. Why were they (the police) going to take him (the child to the internment camp)?]. The children asked if the events in the story had really happened and wondered about the reasons why the author, Ken Mochizuki, wrote the book. Luis concluded that the reason was: "*Pa' que todo se sepa*" [So everything gets to be known], and Ana suggested: "*Yo creo que a sus papás los echaron ahí*" [I think that his parents (the author's parents) were taken over there (into the camp).]

The second grade bilingual students were able to talk about critical issues in a safe environment and to express how they felt about the police participating in a process of discriminating against others.

Our examination of children's comments about discrimination reveals three subcategories that reflect the students' major ideas and concerns about subject.

Individual discrimination: "Because they were different," "Porque son diferentes"

The children focused on what can be called individual discrimination. Through their discussions some students' own stereotyped images of others emerged. Derman-Sparks, Tanaka Higa, & Sparks (1980) state that a considerable body of research demonstrates that children in the United States are aware, at a very early age, of physical and cultural differences among people, and that "They learn the prevailing social attitudes toward these differences" (p. 3). The two discussions offer evidence of this

awareness of differences on the part of the children and of prevailing social attitudes toward these differences. While discussing **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.** with Julia, the students were trying hard to make sense of why the black boys could not play with white boys, and why white people did not like black people in the story. In the following excerpt, the students offered three major reasons as an explanation to black and white relationships: "Black people were different," "White people thought black people were lazy," and because black people "were not white like them".

- Amaury: I have a question. How come they wouldn't listen to him [to Martin Luther King]?
- Gisela: Because they're different.
- Sandy: Because they don't like those people, because they think they're always like, they're always lazy. Like they're always lazy and all that.
- Julia: They think that they're always lazy? Why do you think that the white people didn't get along with the black people?
- Sandy: 'Cause the white people didn't like the black people and the black people didn't like the white people.
- Julia: Ok, but why do you think? Why do you think that they didn't like each other?
- Nadine: 'Cause they were different.
- Julia: 'Cause they were different?
- Sandy: They were not white like them.

It is interesting that the book makes no reference to black people being lazy which may reflect students' learned stereotypes of black people. Sandy tries to make sense of this situation by seeing the problem as a reciprocal "disliking," therefore she proposes that it is not just that white people do not like black people, but also that black people do not like white people either. After Julia asked them to think beyond their first explanation, Sandy concludes that white people didn't like black people because "They were not white like them," which reflects her awareness of racism and discrimination against black people based on color.

In discussing **El béisbol nos salvó [Baseball Saved Us]**, Héctor, an English speaker who decided to speak in Spanish during literature discussions, wondered why the people said bad things to the boy in the story. Luis offered two reasons for such name calling:

Héctor: *Tengo algo para (sobre) esto. . . ¿Por qué las personas dicen mucho (muchas) cosas malas (al niño)?* [I have something to say about that. . . Why the people say a lot of bad things (to the boy)]?

[I restated the question and some students offered their responses as follows.]

Luis: *Porque era más chiquito.* [Because he was smaller].

Diana: *Porque era japonés.* [Because he was Japanese.]

[The conversation continued and I came back to the child's question.]

Carmen: *¿Pero, porqué se van a reír de una persona porque es japonés? ¿Por qué le van a decir cosas?* [Why will someone laugh at another because he or she is Japanese? Why will they say things?]

Luis: *Porque es diferente, pienso yo.* [Because he is different, I think.]

Diana: *Porque son diferentes.* [Because they are different.]

Luis: *Estaban impuestos.* [They (white people) were used to do that (to laugh at others)].

The main response that both groups gave to discrimination, "because they were different," reminds me of Nathan Haymes' (1995) discussion on white culture and the politics of racial difference. He exhorts critical educators to be attentive to how popular culture shapes the categories of racial meaning the students construct. He believes that "White wealth and power control the electronic media. . . . This power exerts much influence over the productions of popular culture and how we interpret racial differences" (p. 105).

It is clear in the students' emergent notions of racism and discrimination that what was being defined as different were non-white people. It seems that the students have internalized the notion that African Americans as well as Japanese Americans are different as measured against the "norm" of white people. Unfortunately, in our society, *differences* and *deficiencias* have been often seen as the same thing (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). I do not know to what extent this deficit view of differences has already been internalized by these seven-year-old children, but data from other discussions reveal that in fact some children believed that Martin Luther King wanted to be with white people, go to their schools and be a friend with them because he wanted to be like them, which may suggest a deficit view of differences, in this

case, a sense of inferiority of being black. This interpretation was challenged later in a whole class discussion by Julia and it was made clear that Martin Luther King was happy to be black, and so he was "fighting" for justice.

There were other misconceptions and stereotypes that arouse in their discussions and that needed to be challenged. When discussing **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.**, Sandy makes reference to other cultures as an example of her notion of difference: "I think it's good to be different for them and the other people. The Chinese people are yellower and then the Mex ... the Indians are red people." The depiction Sandy is making about the Chinese and American Indians as she develops her notions of difference seems to illustrate the influence of the dominant ideology in the children's emergent constructs of race, what Minh-ha (1987) calls having an essentialist view of identity. By calling Chinese "yellower" and Indians "red people" Sandy made transparent a stereotyped image of other groups that she has learned. The children's discourse in the two discussions also reflects a perspective that encourages people to celebrate the differences. Although I believe that we should celebrate the differences among people, through these discussions we tried to bring a critical perspective that allowed students to make connections between issues of discrimination associated to ethnic and racial differences.

Positioning themselves: "They should stop and listen to their heart."

There were many comments in which the students adopted a stance toward those issues on discrimination, what I am calling "positioning themselves." The students made evaluative comments on the characters' actions, identified themselves with the characters suffering discrimination, shared how they felt about those issues and connected to other books and personal experiences. There was a general rejection of discrimination and violence among the students. They usually expressed their feelings and beliefs about discrimination using the words "I like this" or "I don't like this," as when Diana said: "*A mí no me gustó aquí porque todos le estaban llamando nombres*" [I did not like this (pointing to an illustration), because everybody was calling him (the boy) names], or when Nadine expressed: "I like this part because it makes me feel happy because they're taking all the signs that the white people put."

As the discussion of *El béisbol nos salvó*

[**Baseball Saved Us**] unfolded, Diana showed an awareness about discrimination against immigrants from different places, as the people in the story who came from Japan. She realized that her own parents, as well as other classmates were also not born in the United States, but in Mexico. She talked a lot about her family history and how they moved to Arizona. She also connected the book to her personal experiences in this second grade classroom where some students were not born in Arizona and she argued that discriminatory practices against immigrants need to be rejected:

- Carmen: *¿Pero, por qué se van a reír de una persona porque es japonés, por qué le van a decir cosas?* [But, why will someone laugh at a person because he or she is Japanese, why will they say things to him?]
- Luis: *Porque es diferente, pienso yo.* [Because he is different, I think.]
- Diana: *Porque son diferentes.* [Because they are different.]
- Luis: *Estaban impuestos.* [They (white people) were used to do that.]
- Diana: *Como nosotros somos ... ¿tú de dónde eres?* [It is like if us ... you, where are you come from?]
- Luis: California, Los Angeles.
- Diana: *El es de allá, y yo soy de aquí, pero no se tienen (no nos tenemos) que tratar mal.* [He is from there, and I am from here, but that doesn't mean that [we] have to mistreat each other.]
- Luis: *Diana, a lo mejor estaban impuestos.* [Diana, maybe they were used to do that.]

Diana believes that the fact that she and her classmate were born in different places, like the Japanese-American boy whose parents or grandparents were born in Japan, is not an acceptable reason for discriminating against others. On the other hand, Luis' explanation of discrimination as if it were natural that white people could not change made me think of Derman-Spark, et al.'s (1980) advice that children should be made aware that racism is not inevitable and that it is not an integral part of human nature, an issue that we tried to address in whole class discussions.

The detailed illustrations in both books supported the students in the process of making meaning and taking a stance toward such complex issues. While observing two illustrations in **A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.** where

black and white children were playing in separate places and a bathroom with a "WHITES ONLY" sign, the children had the following conversation:

- Sandy: I don't like this part because the black people, the white people didn't like them playing over here.
- Julia: You don't like that part?
- Sandy: And then they can't use the restroom.
- Nadine: I have a question.
- Julia: Do you have a question for her?
- Nadine: Yeah. How come you don't like that part?
- Sandy: Because when the white people are mean to them and then when they say it to all the black people. And I like black people and white people because they have to be nice to each other and now they are. And it's good to be nice to black people because sometimes God makes you be different from the other people. 'Cause boys are different than girls because they like to play like hockey and all that and stuff, and then, some girls like playing hockey and all that stuff. And baseball, like my mom used to play baseball.
- Julia: So you like being different?
- Amaury: I like being different.

Amaury, whose father is Mexican and whose mother is Yaqui, states that he likes to be different. In an interview with his mother, she said that she does not think Amaury is aware of his Native American background. Whatever awareness Amaury has about his Yaqui background, he did express an awareness of being different from others, and he expressed feeling good about being different. He also consistently stated his rejection of discrimination.

Sandy also rejected discrimination. When she states that "Sometimes God makes you different," she may be suggesting that being different is not the norm but something that happens "sometimes." She continues trying to make meaning as she talks and makes an interesting connection to the issue of gender. After her first attempts to explain gender differences on the basis of the things boys like to play, she seems to self-correct and immediately adds that girls also play these same things--even her mom plays baseball. Sandy also tries to articulate her mixed feelings about white people who discriminate against others by adding:

- Sandy: And I don't like them, mean people that they always try to hit people, like say bad words to other nice

people. It's just that I don't, it doesn't mean that I don't like them, it's just that, that's bad for them to do. Because they should stop and listen to their heart.

Sandy dislikes white people's behavior when they show discriminatory practices, not whites as people. She does not like violence, and she thinks that those people should stop and listen to their hearts. It seems that religion is providing Sandy with arguments for her stance against violence and discrimination. She insists: "I wanted to tell them to stop and listen to your heart and listen to God what He says."

"¿Ahora qué van a hacer?" [What will happen now?]

The students wanted to know what happened after Martin Luther King's death: "¿Ahora qué van a hacer?" [What will happen now?] (Gisela). Sandy seems to believe that racism and discrimination against black people were problems of the past. Now white and black people are nice to each other, she says. In the following excerpt, the children are positive about the change of white people:

Amaury: 'Cause I think it was there whatever in the book, it said not all the white people were mean to the blacks.

Julia: Right. There were some people that understood and accepted the differences and they believed what Martin Luther King said and they helped spread what he was saying.

[One student made a connection to a movie about blacks, and Nadine came back to their previous concern.]

Nadine: I think the white people that understand that, I think they're going to tell the other white people to stop, because that's not a good thing to do.

Sandy: Yeah. That's what I'm trying to say. And you could tell that girl is nice to the black people. She's listening to Martin Luther King, Jr. because she's thinking that we should be all friends to the black people.

Julia supported the students as they talked about white people changing. This was an important point to make, so the students did not get a different stereotype based on the idea that all white people are against black people. We did not want the students to believe that discrimination occurs only in one direction. We were aware, as Nieto

(1996) explains, that "There is no monopoly on prejudice and individual discrimination; they happen in all directions, and even within groups" (p. 37).

Amaury answered Gisela's questions of what was going to happen after Martin Luther King's death: "Like it stayed the same for a little while and then they became friends." Although Amaury seems to accept that now white and black people are friends, he made an interesting connection between what happened to Martin Luther King, Jr. and what happened to the boy in **Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado** (Anzaldúa, 1993), a story they discussed in first grade. The character is an illegal Mexican boy who is teased and called "mojado" (wet-back) when he gets to the United States until finally he gets a new friend:

Amaury: It reminded me of **Friends from the Other Side**.

Julia: **Friends from the Other Side?** And how does this book remind you of that one?

Amaury: Because those kids didn't like that kid that came from Mexico. Was it Mexico?

Julia: Uh hm.

Amaury: They didn't like him.

Sandy: It was at Nogales.

Amaury: Yeah.

Julia: And in this book what?

Amaury: And in this book the white people didn't like the black people.

The situation of the boy in **Friends from the Other Side** is closer to the children than what happened to Martin Luther King. In first grade, they had shared stories of knowing people who were taken back to Mexico by the border patrol, and some of the students even shared how they had been called "mojados" (wet-backs). Therefore, all the stories, the ones told by the students and the ones read in literature discussion are presenting people, even the students themselves, who have been the victims of discrimination, and who are still victimized even if they want to believe that racial discrimination does not occur any more. Maybe these contradictions are one of the reasons why the students again asked Julia later that afternoon if racial discrimination against African Americans still exists. Although she answered that it does, but not as much as before, the students kept asking. The challenge for us and for teachers, I think, is to address the issue as something that still

exists in many different ways, and to support students as they make connections to their own lives without leaving them feeling hopeless, but thinking of alternatives to deal with these issues.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The analysis of these discussions presents evidence that challenges the belief that young children need to learn to decode and read first before having worthwhile discussions about books in small groups. Students will benefit from this kind of curricular engagement because in small group literature discussions they are valued as thinkers who can make meaning and talk about texts even if many of them are not ready to read by themselves. Julia and I had high expectations for these students. We are convinced that primary students and working-class bilingual children are able to think and talk about critical issues impacting society. These second graders did have meaningful discussions that went beyond stating their likes and dislikes. They were not expected to give the correct answer or to wait for the teacher to pose questions. With the support of the two adults in the classroom and with the mediation of quality multicultural children's literature, the students had an opportunity to talk and make sense of critical issues, showing that reading the word should not be divorced from reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The safe environment created in these literature circles allowed students to express their ideas, sometimes shaped by the discourse of a dominant ideology that privileges one cultural group over others, thus creating and promoting stereotyped images of others. These conversations guided our planning as we reflected on the discussions and thought about how to challenge some of those stereotypes. In this sense, small group discussions followed by whole class discussions to some degree contributed to students' conscientization (Freire, 1970/1993) of the reality and complexities of discrimination, an indispensable aspect of moving toward transformation of injustice and discrimination. I believe these two literature discussions, the first of a cycle on literature discussions on discrimination, represented small but firm steps toward a genuinely emancipatory education. Through this type of curricular engagement schools have an opportunity to get away from a banking model of education and create room for a liberatory and transformative dialogue conducive to overcoming different kinds of oppression, beginning with the oppression of not being allowed to think and speak.

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