What's New in the English Language Arts: Challenging Policies and Practices, *¿y qué?*[1]

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564 *In this article, Gutiérrez examines "the ways in which we have not taken up social and cultural understandings of the teaching and learning of literacy."*

When reading and writing instruction began to make the "literacy turn," a surge of instructional activities that attempted to integrate more fully reading, writing, thinking, and speaking emerged in many elementary schools across the country. During this period in the late 1970s and 1980s, the dominant theories and pedagogies of traditional reading instruction were challenged by alternative approaches that sought to include a more holistic and integrated approach to literacy learning (Emig, 1971, 1982; Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Graves, 1982). In many cases, these new conceptualizations of the teaching and learning of language arts argued for social and cultural understandings of language and literacy learning (Bloome, 1987; Dyson, 1985; Heath, 1983). This focus on the role of the social in literacy development led to questions about the relationship between classroom processes, cultural processes, and social processes in the literacy and learning processes (Bloome, 1987).

While there was other significant work across disciplines that contributed to the shift, including the work of other psycholinguists, cognitive psychologists, sociolinguists, and linguistic anthropologists, for example, there was another prominent view of literacy learning that was emerging.[2] These scholars, drawing on socio-historical or cultural-historical understandings of learning and development, emphasized the centrality of culture and the social context in intellectual development (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Ochs, 1988; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Language, from this perspective, was considered a powerful mediational tool in learning activity.

Despite this acknowledgement of the social and cultural dimension in literacy learning and development, language arts classroom practices did not reflect these new understandings in substantive ways. Teaching the language arts was characterized primarily by its focus on developing the *English* language arts to English speaking children—more specifically, to children speaking standard, edited, American English. Nevertheless, children from working-class and immigrant families were expected to acquire the sociocultural knowledge required for literacy development with neither explicit instruction of when and how to use their acquired literacy skills nor ongoing opportunities to participate fully in robust literacy activities that modeled those literate practices that are valued in formal learning contexts. There was uneven emphasis on lit-

eracy, and very little attention to the development of biliteracy. These were not the learning goals of many classrooms with culturally and linguistically diverse children. Thus, many children from working-class families still experienced literacy instruction in more conventional ways.

Compensatory programs in the form of Bilingual Education and Title I programs were created to assist economically poor and linguistically and culturally diverse children's academic achievement. Notwithstanding the important gains made by many children and teachers in robust bilingual programs, the policies motivating these programs were geared predominantly toward the acquisition of or transition to basic reading and speaking skills in English. Clearly, creating programs that would provide instruction in the children's home language was one significant step toward educational equity. To date, however, many educators and much of the public do not know that the overwhelming majority of children in bilingual programs received most of their instruction in English, not in their primary language (August & Hakuta, 1997). And, despite the documented success of these programs, there is little public support for English-language learners to participate in dual or two-way immersion programs that build biliterate skills.

This focus of teaching the *English* language arts has become even more pronounced in this decade, as new reading programs characterized by reductive literacy practices are bolstered by English-only legislation. As we have argued elsewhere,[3] this "New Literacy" movement is simply a refurbishing of old practices and ideologies. Reductive literacy programs and practices are defined here by their narrow conceptions of the teaching and learning of literacy, their focus on teaching a narrow range of basic skills, and their preoccupation with making oral English language fluency the goal of instruction. School districts across the United States, and certainly in California, boast the implementation of a single, phonics-based reading program as the "solution" (read panacea) to dismal test scores, high student mobility, and the growing demographic of English language learners. One school district recently reported their district mandated reading program will end the practice "of allowing individual schools to implement different reading programs . . . an important first step to improv[ing] student achievement" (Gammon, 2000).

Poor schools . . . are the recipients of one-size-fits-all approaches.

Supporters of single-orientation approaches argue that such practices help ensure that all children receive the same instruction. In practice, though, many schools with high test scores are exempt from participating in district mandated programs. These same schools often also have the most experienced and credentialed teachers. In effect, poor schools, frequently those with the largest number of linguistically and culturally diverse children, are the recipients of one-size-fits-all approaches that attempt to neutralize the effects of poverty, racism, high numbers of uncredentialed teachers, teachers with little experience teaching English-language learners, and the presence of large numbers of linguistically diverse student populations. Of significance, these one-size-fits-all language arts policies and approaches deny the heterogeneity that exists among all children, especially English-language learners, and excludes the rich sociocultural and linguistic experiences that all children can bring to learning tasks.

Furthermore, the New Literacy ignores years of research on the benefits of using the primary language to learn. In their recent book on improving the education of English-language learners, August and Hakuta (1997) report the strong relationship between native language proficiency and English language development, as well as the importance of recognizing the significant differences in the processes and the rates of acquiring two languages across learners.

Moreover, the elimination of or reduction in the use of students' primary language blatantly ignores that bilingual education was a limited educational response designed to reverse the years of inequity students had experienced in English-only instructional programs—programs that had not worked for linguistically diverse student populations. In 1974, *Lau v. Nichols* provided the legal remedy that mandated that English-language learners receive the same instruction as English speaking children in their home language (*Lau v. Nichols,* 1974). Thus, the claims that these educational reforms are advances are both ahistorical and unsupported.

Whether intended or not, these narrow conceptualizations of literacy foster practices that further underscore the language ideology of English-only policies. English is the predominant medium of instruction and English language practices and materials constitute curriculum and instruction. However, these are rarely the materials and practices in which middle-class children participate. Language, the most powerful tool for mediating learning, in this case, the children's primary language, is excluded from the students' learning toolkit.

The prohibition of the primary language in instruction is perhaps the most salient component of the New Literacy, and it is this practice that places English-language learners and speakers of other language varieties in a double bind. First, language becomes the primary screening device for re-categorizing the student population by language fluency and coding them for various language arts programs (e.g., English immersion, structured English instruction, or special education); then the new policies require that schools ignore linguistic differences by mandating one-size-fits-all approaches to language and literacy learning. Of critical significance is the fact that this new pedagogy tries to impose a color-blind pedagogy that erases differences that cannot be ignored nor devalued in the learning process.

Racial and class differences have no valence in the educational equation of the New Literacy. Instead, "discrimination on linguistic grounds is now publicly acceptable where the corresponding ethnic or racial discrimination is not. For example, although penalizing a student for being African-American may be illegal, penalizing a student for speaking African-American Vernacular English is not" (Woolard, 1998, p. 19). In the current political climate, language, then, has become the new proxy for race in both public and educational policies. Refining the categories of difference makes it easier to identify and subsequently to "socialize" linguistically different students.[4]

> **Language choice is not solely an educational choice but is always a political issue.**

Nevertheless, the New Literacy movement implements reading programs (developed for English language speakers) in schools with vastly diverse student communities. Intimately connected to the New Literacy practices are high-stakes assessment programs that measure (in English) discrete skills as reading tasks, rather than measuring the kinds of skills and strategies that good readers utilize and skills that these children might already know. Even if we could accept the premise that such programs could be applicable to English language learners, our research suggests that such narrowly conceived literacy practices—an exclusive focus on the acquisition of phonemic awareness and phonemic skills—denies these students the opportunity to develop a larger repertoire of meaning-making skills essential to reading comprehension and interpretation.[5]

The reform in language arts is more than the question of which language or register to use in educational settings; it is about which identities students can take up in classrooms and which identity will be valued. Language choice is not solely an educational choice but is always a political issue linked to mechanisms of social control (Woolard, 1998). While the new language arts policies use language as a sorting device, they also influence individual constructions of self and identity.

Even when the use of the primary language is permitted, many classrooms are required to instantiate the reforms in practices that belie what we know about how children become literate; such practices organize learning in ways that equate oral English fluency with proficiency in academic English and define literacy learning primarily as an individual accomplishment where skills are taught in isolation of meaning-making literate practices. Of consequence is the fact that children—especially English-language learners—are socialized to unproductive notions of literacy and its practices. As Luis Moll (2000) explains:

> Concurrent biliteracy (not solely bilingualism) is not required or expected of any other children (other than Latino) in this country, with the possible exception of Cuban children in Florida (see Garcia & Otheguy, 1985). And when it occurs, it is constrained by the limiting characteristics of working-class schooling, which reduce to basic elementary functions what the children can do with literacy. Furthermore, Latino children in the United States are schooled within a neocolonial educational system that always seeks to fulfill other people's purposes and interest, not theirs. (p. 265)

What are the social, political, and educational outcomes for linguistically and culturally diverse children who only acquire the basic elementary literacy functions about which Moll (2000) writes? What do such instructional programs portend for teachers?

In our work, we have noted that the tightly scripted nature and highly regulated implementation of the New Literacy programs provide little opportunity for experienced teachers to utilize their rich knowledge base to mediate children's learning. In some school districts, even highly skilled and experienced teachers are not permitted to augment the packaged programs with materials and strategies they had used successfully with English language learners. Our classroom observations and teacher interviews also reveal that the New Literacy programs, as well as student preparation for high-stakes assessments, demand so much instructional time that they preclude the implementation of a full curriculum. Social studies and science instruction, for example, is absent from most of the classrooms required to adhere rigidly to new language arts programs. As one teacher recently wrote to his district administrator, "Teaching Open Court, because of the time demand, practically precludes instruction and social studies and makes even providing the ESL curriculum difficult" (internal teacher memo, January 14, 2001).

Not only does the New Literacy serve to de-skill knowledgeable teachers, it helps establish conditions that construct and sustain the underachievement of the most vulnerable student population.

The New Literacy, then, is much more than a set of methods or practices for teaching and learning. Clothed in the rhetoric of reform, this pedagogy becomes the judicial arbitrator of who gets "sound" educational practices and in what form. We have studied the effects of the slate of recent reforms and state and district curricular mandates, and we term the resulting pedagogy "Backlash Pedagogy." Backlash pedagogies are rooted in backlash politics, products of ideological and institutional structures that legitimize and maintain privilege, access, and control of the sociopolitical and economic terrain. Backlash politics are counterassaults against real or perceived shifts in power. In many ways, then, the new pedagogy is an institutionalized and political response to the demographic shifts that can no longer be ignored. The New Literacy is a backlash pedagogy—a political intrusion that makes it professionally and, in some cases legally, risky for educators to implement what they know about teaching in an effective and culturally responsible way.[6]

Consider this typical scenario in a California classroom. One child is English language dominant, a second is Spanish language dominant with little understanding of Academic English. Both are emergent literates in their primary language. Yet, academic reform in California assumes these two students participate on a level playing field and ostensibly treats them, in pedagogical terms, identically. However, this mandated pedagogy simultaneously limits the Spanish-speaking child from using her complete linguistic and sociocultural repertoire to learn and, once again, privileges the English dominant student in the learning environment.

In this context, only English language instruction and materials mediate learning. Such practices belie the vast knowledge base about the role of language in the learning process. We know that language is the primary tool we use to express and make sense of our experiences; a tool that can help transform our thinking and understanding. Indeed, language is considered *the tool of tools,* the most powerful sense-making instrument humans use (Cole & Engestrom, 1993). What, then, are the cognitive consequences for children who are not allowed to draw from their complete linguistic tool kit in learning activities?

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We address this question in our ongoing work about effective learning communities for diverse student populations.[7] This body of work helps us see the de facto inequality in current conceptualizations of the language arts curriculum. Such practices stand in stark contrast to the thriving learning communities we study. In these rich settings, no single language or register is privileged, and the larger linguistic repertoires of participants become tools for participating and making meaning in learning activity. Moreover, the participants regularly utilize hybrid language practices—that is, the strategic use of multiple codes and registers in the pursuit of learning. Such practices build local interpretive practices and communities which in turn necessarily draw on local knowledge, cultural practices (e.g., the funds of knowledge about which Moll, 2000, writes), personal experience, and different ways of demonstrating competence. Thus, instead of focusing on the children's language designation or fluency in either Spanish or English, the practices of these rich learning communities facilitate movement across languages and registers toward particular literacy learning goals.[8] These rich learning communities redefine the normalizing baseline of New Literacy communities and challenge an ideology that defines diversity and difference as problems to be eliminated or remediated. These productive classrooms present a new definition of the Language Arts.

RETHINKING LANGUAGE ARTS

In the first issue of *Language Arts* under the current editors, my colleagues and I (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997) argued for the importance of putting language back into language arts; that is, to place what we know about language and literacy learning at the center of language arts policies and practices. We argued for the recognition of the profound relationship between language, culture, and human development; and we highlighted the ways in which the social organization of learning influenced the nature and outcome of instruction. In that article, we problematized the notion of the balanced curriculum and, instead, called for a more strategic and situated curriculum, a radical middle, to use Pearson's (1996) notion. Finally, we hoped to bring attention to the idea that the language arts curriculum is neither neutral nor benign; that it has both social and cognitive consequences for children and their teachers (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997).

It was my hope in this article to highlight the ways in which we have not taken up social and cultural understandings of the teaching and learning of literacy. Moreover, it was my goal to point out that the language arts is still mostly about teaching reading and writing to English-speaking children. Given our nation's current demographics, we can no longer look away and pretend English-language learners are somebody else's children (Delpit, 1995). These children are the students of today, and certainly the students of tomorrow. This recognition should motivate us to examine the ways in which many current school practices are neither equitable nor productive. One important step would be to rethink the nature of professional development for both novice and experienced teachers. All language arts educators need to have substantive knowledge about English language acquisition, literacy development, content area learning, the social organization of learning contexts, and the role of the primary language in learning processes. Finally, the challenge for educators and policy makers is to make use of what is known about the cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural processes involved in the education of all children. ●

Notes

1. The term *¿y qué?* is a colloquial Spanish phrase used as a challenge, analogous to the English phrase "so what?"
2. Some of this research included the work of psycholinguists (Goodman, 1976; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982), cognitive psychologists (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Anderson, Spiro, & Montague, 1977; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Kinstch, 1977; Pearson, Barr, Kamil, & Mosenthall, 1984), sociolinguists (Gumperz, 1976, 1982; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Hymes, 1981, 1982), and linguistic anthropologists (Ochs, 1988; Scheffelin & Ochs, 1986). I cite these as examples of the interdisciplinary perspectives that have helped shape our understandings of literacy.

3. See Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato (2001) for a more elaborated discussion of the effects of Proposition 227, the anti-bilingual education law, and reductive literacy programs.

4. We attempt to discuss the process of normalization for linguistically diverse children in Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Alvarez (2000).

5. We present data of a large cohort of students in one school district to track students' performance on the state assessment in reading from Grades 1–3. These data show that students enrolled in an English-only, single-emphasis, highly regulated reading program increase their test scores in the first and second grade but drop dramatically by Grade 3. This dramatic decrease was observed across all student populations but was most pronounced in English language learner students (Spanish, Russian, and various Asian language-speaking children). See Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato (2001).

6. We discuss the emergence and consequences of Backlash Pedagogy in Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda (in press) and Gutiérrez, Baquedano- López, & Asato (2001).

7. See Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu (1999); Gutiérrez & Stone (1997); and Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Alvarez (2001) for a fuller discussion of these effective learning communities.

8. The use of hybrid language practices in formal and non-formal learning contexts is discussed in Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda (2000) and Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Alvarez (2001).

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