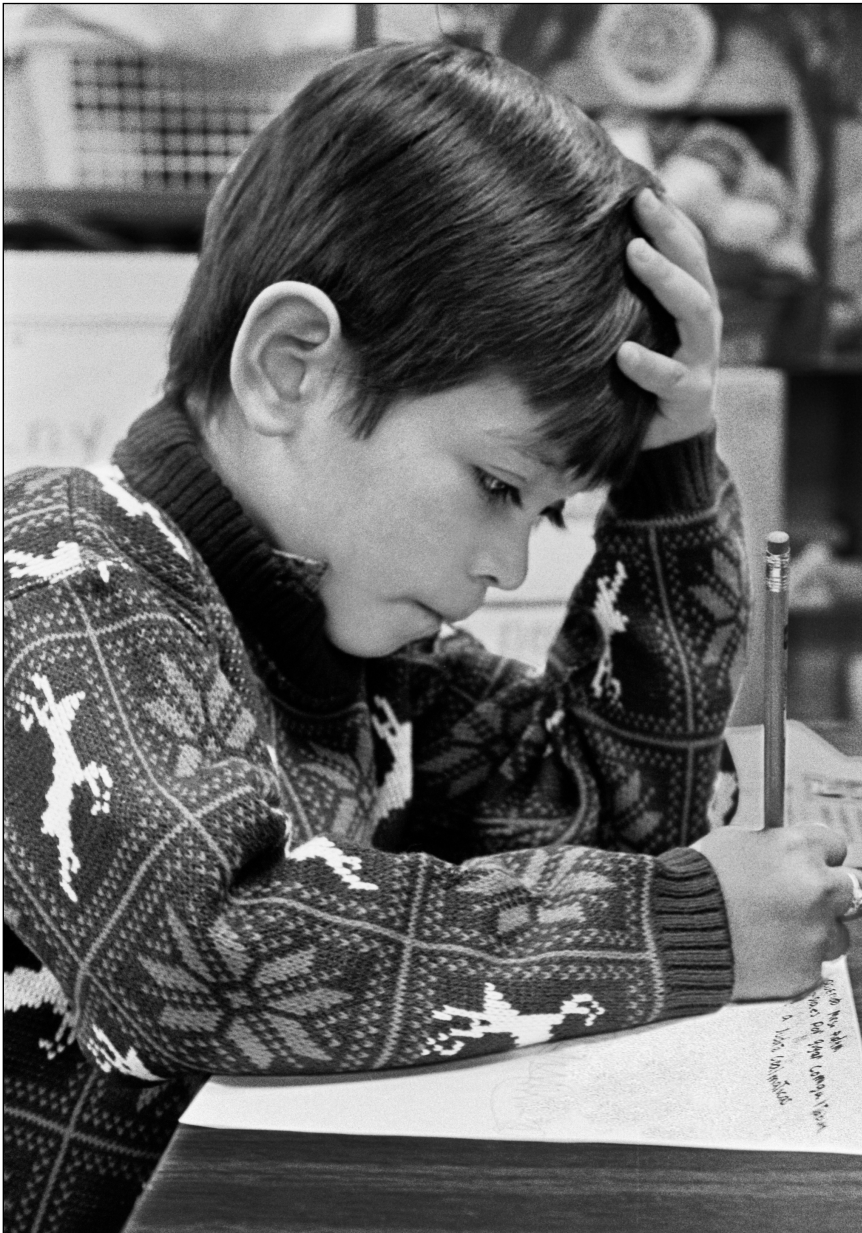


Becoming a Reader and Writer in a Bilingual Special Education Classroom

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Becoming a Reader and Writer



Diego's story provides insight into optimal learning environments for the growing number of Latino students entering general and special education classrooms.

Nadeen T. Ruiz
Eleanor Vargas
Angélica Beltrán

Diego's second-grade teacher was stumped. Diego, originally from Guatemala, had completed kindergarten and first grade in East Los Angeles, but continued to be very withdrawn at the end of second grade. When forced to speak in the classroom, Diego would utter only one or two barely audible words under his breath.

Diego's teacher assumed that the reason for his withdrawal was that

he had come from a remote jungle area in Guatemala and had been labeled as both a “non-English and non-Spanish speaker” upon entering school. Though Diego’s mother spoke to school personnel in Spanish, she communicated with her sister in an indigenous language from Guatemala, suggesting to Diego’s teacher that perhaps the label was correct and that Diego’s Spanish was very limited. Furthermore, Diego had received primarily English instruction beginning in kindergarten because he had tested so low on both English and Spanish language proficiency tests and because, from the teacher’s viewpoint, Diego produced almost no oral or written language in the classroom context. Diego’s second-grade teacher noted, however, that Diego appeared to participate comfortably in hands-on projects by carefully observing his classmates. The teacher suspected that Diego knew more than what he was producing academically, and so the teacher requested help from the school’s student study team.

Unfortunately, help was a long time in coming, as can happen in a large urban school. Diego’s case finally made its way through the student study team process and referral for special education assessment during his third-grade year. As Diego continued to struggle, the resource specialist, Eleanor, and instructional aide, Angélica, began to work with him “unofficially” in their classroom, that is, before testing was completed to determine eligibility for special education services. It was not until the beginning of his fourth-grade year that Eleanor assessed Diego’s language and literacy skills using a variety of tests in both Spanish and English. She, too, found that Diego was shy and quiet and would rarely look up to make eye contact. He knew only two let-

ters of the Spanish alphabet, did not recognize any sight words, and showed no evidence of understanding the alphabetic principle in spelling, leaving him unable to produce any intelligible writing. To Eleanor, it seemed that Diego did not understand or speak English. In math, however, Diego was able to add and subtract up to three digits with regrouping and could solve word problems when they were read to him in Spanish.

How do teachers help a child like Diego become a reader and writer? We have co-written this article—as a bilingual special education researcher (Nadeen), teacher

Diego produced almost no oral or written language in the classroom context.

(Eleanor), and instructional aide (Angélica)—based on our many years of experience in special education and bilingual classrooms. Furthermore, the three of us collaborate as part of a literacy staff development program for teachers called the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Project (Ruiz, García, & Figueroa, 1996). The OLE Project works with teachers of bilingual students to implement research-based literacy instruction for students with and without disabilities. After a brief discussion of the general context of special education services for bilingual students and the theoretical framework for our work in the OLE Project, we tell Diego’s language story and literacy lesson (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Diego’s story alerts readers to the available knowledge base on effective literacy instruction for bilingual students in special education classrooms. Further, it shows how

we use that knowledge to guide us in creating communities of readers and writers among intermediate-grade, English language learners who have been identified as having learning disabilities (Enguïdanos & Ruiz, 2000).

LATINO STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The U.S. Latino population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. Latinos are the majority group in California public schools, grades K-8, and an increasing number are eligible for special education services. These large numbers, in combination with the trend toward inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, mean that bilingual students with suspected disabilities will appear more frequently in classrooms.

There is an emerging body of literacy research with bilingual special education students, the majority carried out with Latino students. While the research base on effective literacy instruction for Latino students in general education remains relatively limited (García, 1999), acknowledging the classroom literacy studies from bilingual special education may help educators plan instruction for the growing numbers of Latino students in public schools (Ruiz, 2000).

Bilingual Special Education Classroom Research on Literacy

Over the years we have reviewed much of the currently available literacy research on Latino students in special education (Ruiz, 1999). The research reviews reveal two overarching trends.

The first trend is that Spanish-speaking students often find themselves in classrooms where the literacy instruction is reductionist

Intercultural Development Research Association Web Site: www.idra.org

This is an important website for everyone interested in bilingual education and equity in education. The Intercultural Development Research Association is a nonprofit organization in San Antonio, Texas, dedicated to providing research, information, and advocacy so that every child can have an equitable education.

Among the projects and research it advocates:

- accountability for equity
- bilingual education
- dropout prevention
- early childhood bilingual education

This Web site has excellent fact sheets to help with presenting the case for bilingual education as well as for locating research that shows how schools can support bilingual students at all levels. From this site you can link to the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education and the National Association for Bilingual Education.

Roxanne Henkin

(Poplin, 1988a). Characteristics of reductionist instruction include an overwhelming focus on fragments of texts such as letters and single words (in the hopes that conquering the subskills of literacy will add up to proficient reading and writing); on copying (in the hopes that incul-

cating “good habits” such as correct spelling will prevent “bad habits” such as incorrect spelling); and on comprehending specially constructed texts with little reference to students’ experiences (in the hopes that practicing with phonetically or lexically controlled texts will lead to comprehension of authentic texts). Studies show that these hopes were not realized: bilingual students achieved poorly or showed limited engagement in reductionist instructional contexts (López-Reyna, 1996; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Ruiz, 1995a, 1995b; Ruiz, Rueda, Figueroa, & Boothroyd, 1995; Trueba, 1987; Willig & Swedo, 1987).

Fortunately, the second trend produced good news for bilingual and special education teachers. This same corpus of studies found that Latino students showed marked improvement in their language and literacy performance or engagement when the contextual features of instruction markedly *differed* from those of reductionism. From a social constructivist framework (Au, 1998), the following contextual features of instruction can serve as guiding principles in designing language and literacy instruction for bilingual students labeled learning disabled:

- **Principle 1: Connect students’ background knowledge and personal experiences with literacy lessons.**

[Echevarría & McDonough, 1995; Figueroa, Ruiz, & García, 1994; Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986; Goldman & Rueda, 1988; Graves, Valles, & Rueda, 2000; López-Reyna, 1996; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Ruiz, 1995a, 1995b; Willig & Swedo, 1987]

- **Principle 2: Foster the use of students’ primary language in literacy lessons.**

[Echevarría & McDonough, 1995; Figueroa, Ruiz, & García, 1994;

Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986; Goldman & Rueda, 1988; Graves, Valles, & Rueda, 2000; Jiménez, 1997; López-Reyna, 1996; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Ruiz, 1995a, 1995b; Viera, 1986; Willig & Swedo, 1987]

- **Principle 3: Create opportunities for students to meaningfully and authentically apply their developing oral language and literacy skills.**

[Echevarría & McDonough, 1995; Figueroa, Ruiz, & García, 1994; Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986; Goldman & Rueda, 1988; Graves, Valles, & Rueda, 2000; Jiménez, 1997; López-Reyna, 1996; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Ruiz, 1995a, 1995b; Viera, 1986; Willig & Swedo, 1987]

- **Principle 4: Foster increased levels of interaction (oral language, reading, and writing) among students and teachers.**

[Echevarría & McDonough, 1995; Figueroa, Ruiz, & García, 1994; Flores, Rueda, & Porter, 1986; Goldman & Rueda, 1988; Graves, Valles, & Rueda, 2000; Gutiérrez & Stone, 1997; López-Reyna, 1996; Ruiz, 1995a, 1995b; Willig & Swedo, 1987]

In short, the consensus among these studies, conducted by different researchers, at different times and sites, is very impressive. An instructional program for bilingual students in special education that has explicitly based its work on these research-based principles is the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Project.

THE OLE PROJECT

The OLE Project was developed in direct response to the continuing underachievement of bilingual students like Diego who were receiving special education services (Figueroa, Ruiz, & Rueda, 1989). The project’s own research, and that of others

focusing on instructional issues within bilingual special education, revealed that the success and failure of bilingual special education students in literacy lessons could only be explained within a framework that closely examined the social organization of teaching and learning and the interaction of linguistic, cultural, and historical factors within that organization, that is, what Au (1998) has called a *diverse constructivist orientation*. The OLE Project's particular contribution to this line of work was to emphasize that there was a link between certain classroom contexts for learning and optimal performance by bilingual students carrying the disability label. The continuing charge in the OLE Project has been to identify contextual aspects of instruction that can help create *optimal learning environments* for accelerated language and literacy development among bilingual students.

To initially identify contextual features of optimal instruction, OLE Project personnel closely reviewed the research bases in bilingual special education, bilingual education, and second language education. The OLE Project expanded upon the previously cited four principles of effective instruction for bilingual students in special education and generated a list of 12 classroom conditions for optimal language and literacy learning (Ruiz, García, & Figueroa, 1996; Migrant/OLE Project, 2001). These conditions rely heavily on the work of Cambourne and Turbill (1987) with second language learners, Poplin (1988b) and Ruiz (1995b) with students labeled learning disabled, and García (1991) with bilingual students:

1. Student choice
2. Student-centered instruction
3. Whole-part-whole approach
4. Active participation

5. Emphasis on meaning, followed by form
6. Authentic purpose
7. Approximations
8. Immersion in language and print
9. Demonstrations
10. Response
11. Community of learners
12. High expectations

Eleanor and Angélica listed the OLE Project's twelve optimal conditions on a large chart in their classroom to remind them to incorporate the conditions as much as possible into

When Diego entered Eleanor's and Angélica's classroom, he was initially uncomfortable and unwilling to take the risk of showing his extremely low literacy skills to his peers.

their instruction. They had found, just as in the earlier bilingual special education studies, that when their lessons reflected the conditions, the resulting instructional context had a powerful effect on students' academic success.

DIEGO'S LITERACY STORY

In traditional special education contexts, test scores usually carry the most weight in making eligibility decisions related to special education (Mehan, Meihls, & Hertweck, 1986). Diego's grade-level scores on individually administered standardized tests depicted a child with a kindergarten/first-grade level in literacy when he was actually in the fourth grade: reading, K.3; written

language, 1.2; and math, 3.1. The school psychologist added his own cognitive tests and determined that Diego indeed had a learning disability and severe academic lag. He recommended the school's special day class, which targeted aphasic students, that is, students with severe communication disabilities. At Diego's individual education plan (IEP) meeting, however, the committee, composed of Eleanor as the resource specialist teacher and other special and general education personnel, negotiated placement in a less restricted setting, the special education resource classroom, on a trial basis.

What Happened to Diego in an OLE Resource Specialist Classroom

At the IEP meeting Eleanor strongly advocated for Diego to be assigned to the resource classroom. She pointed out that it was the best possible learning environment for Diego, due to its record of success in oral language with older bilingual children with emergent literacy skills (Ruiz & Figueroa, 1995).

In the resource room, Eleanor and Angélica offer a balanced language arts program whose core strategies are shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, interactive journals, literature study, and writers' workshop. Eleanor and Angélica teach the instructional strategies on a constructive (based on students' experiences, home languages, and current level of development), holistic (based on authentic, intact texts), and multicultural (incorporating a critical analysis of race, gender, disability, class, and language) basis. These strategies are supported by strong phonics and spelling components. Obviously, Eleanor and Angélica's OLE classroom is starkly different from a traditional special education

program with an emphasis on remediation and reductionism; it has much more in common with a program for gifted children (Figueroa & Ruiz, 1999).

When Diego entered Eleanor's and Angélica's classroom, he was initially uncomfortable and unwilling to take the risk of showing his extremely low literacy skills to his peers. His coping strategies consisted of having an adult sit next to him for constant reassurance and guidance. Nonetheless, Eleanor and Angélica began to immerse Diego in their classroom's highly interactive literacy events.

Interactive Journals. During interactive journal discussions where students draw and write and then receive an immediate response from teachers or peers (Flores & García, 1984; Reyes, 1991), Diego would rarely share personal experiences or interests. Eleanor and Angélica initially found it difficult to tap his background knowledge and personal experiences due to Diego's unwillingness to communicate. After much reassurance over time, Diego shared the only talent that he felt he had: drawing. This proved to be invaluable in Eleanor and Angélica's attempts to promote his development of written conventions. While responding in writing to his artwork in the journal, they were able to support him with demonstrations of writing conventions, emphasizing, at first, the message and not the mechanics of his writing. These demonstrations, along with sufficient time for Diego to observe his classmates' oral and written interactions around literacy, encouraged Diego to take more risks with his writing topics, content, and skills.

After communicating in the interactive journals with drawings, Diego soon attempted to spell words,

which later resulted in letter strings—letters grouped together like words, but with few sound-symbol relationships and little conventional spelling. Figure 1 shows a typical interactive journal entry.

Diego had drawn a picture of a ghost and written a letter string “mie-manoci.” Angélica, with great enthusiasm and praise for his attempt at writing, asked, “Diego, léeme lo que has escrito” (Diego, read me what you've written). At that point Diego

was able to whisper back to Angélica in Spanish that his brother had a book about Casper the Ghost. Angélica responded by voicing her message as she wrote, “¿Dónde consiguió tu hermano su libro de Casper?” (Where did your brother get the Casper book?) In her response, Angélica simultaneously modeled conventional spelling and other writing conventions for Diego and also sustained the oral and written language interaction with him. Diego

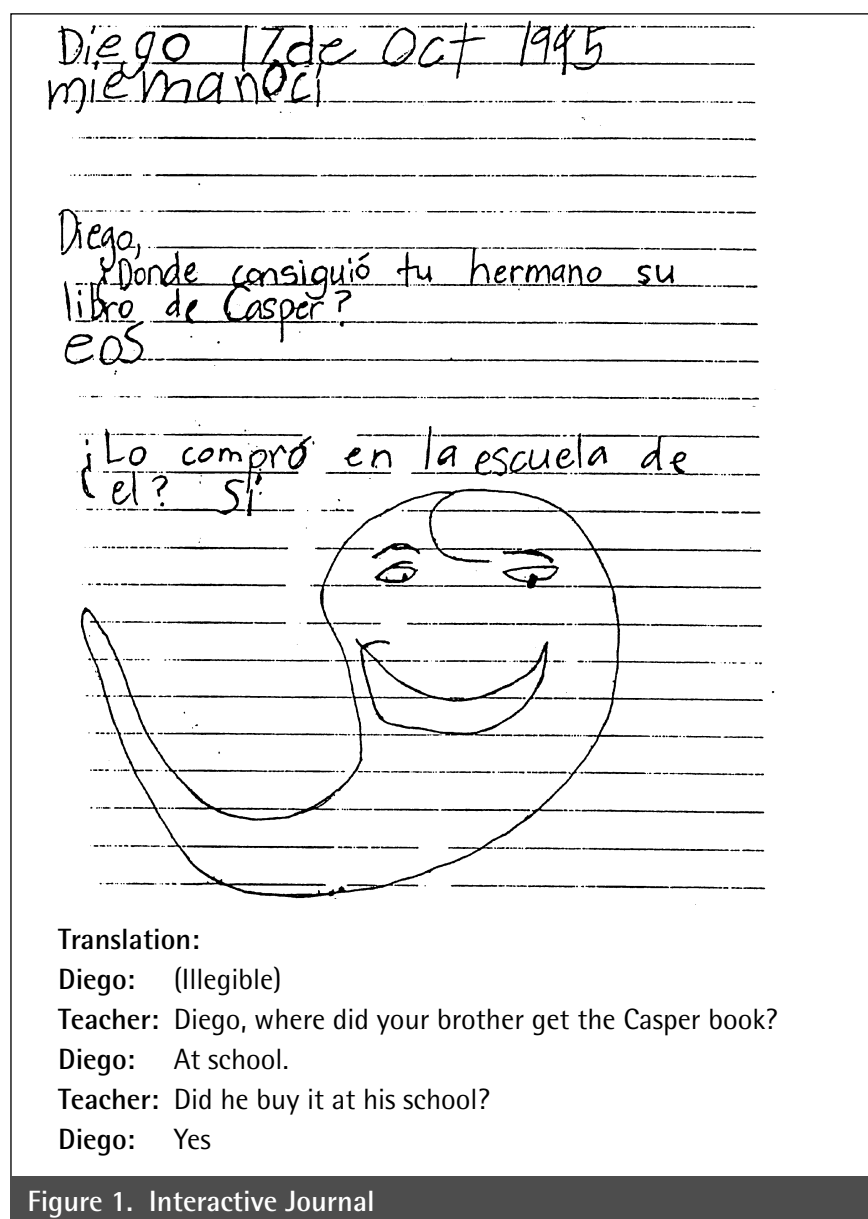


Figure 1. Interactive Journal

answered softly that his brother had obtained the book from the school and wrote three letters, "eos," two of which appear in the Spanish word for school, *escuela*. Once again Angélica demonstrated writing conventions for Diego by basically echoing in a question format Diego's whispered comment: "¿Lo compró en la escuela de él?" (He bought it in his school?) Diego closed this phase of the intense interaction by writing a word whose conventional spelling he had memorized, "Sí" (Yes).

Over the course of the next year in the resource room, Diego's writing developed into invented spelling with clear phoneme-grapheme connections, and eventually he built up the confidence and skills to communicate through alphabetic (one letter for each phoneme) and conventional (correct) spelling. Figure 2 shows another entry from Diego's interactive journal after one academic year of working with Eleanor and Angélica.

For those who speak Spanish, Diego's entry is easily readable; 44 out of the 65 words in the initial entry are correctly spelled (approximately 70 percent), and 100 percent are at the alphabetic level (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Such dramatic growth in writing development occurs regularly in OLE special education classrooms (Ruiz & Enguidanos, 1997).

Beyond developing his spelling, Diego became capable of initiating and steering the dialogue in his interactive journals, while at the same time posing questions that helped him deal with his personal experiences. For example, during one of the interactive journal sessions, Diego asked for help in finding the right term for the baby in his family who had just been baptized. Diego first referred to the baby as his cousin, but in the course of talking and writing with

Diego 10-15-97
Yo tengo miedo a los perros por que me coratean ami mean coratiado como unos 6 por eso les tengo miedo. Sra. San mi hermana mayor maneja un caro es de color negro y su nombre es Eva. Eya qui ere cambiarse de casa por que era qui ere tener un conejo y un perro pero la dueña no deja tenerlos por eso se quiere cambiarse de casa.

Diego yo conosco mucha gente que le tiene miedo a los perros pero yo no les tengo miedo. Yo les aviento pedradas ¿Por que te coratean tanto? ¿Cuántos años tiene tu hermana Eva? ¿Ella se quiere mover sola o con toda la familia? Yo creo que estan enojados por eso me coratean. Yo nose cuantos años tiene mi hermana. Eya se quiere mover con su familia. ¿De que creés que se enojaron? A lo mejor tu hermana encuentra una casa sin perros enojados. Yo creo que su dueño no le dava comida.
— — 1. OK!

Translation: I'm afraid of dogs because they chase me. Six at one time have chased me, and that's why I'm afraid of them. Mrs. Beltrán, my older sister drives a black car and her name is Eva. She wants to move because she'd like a rabbit and a dog, but the owner won't let her, so that's why she wants to move,

Teacher: I know lots of people who are afraid of dogs, but I'm not afraid of them. I throw rocks at them. Why do they chase you so much? How old is Eva? Does she want to move out alone or with all the family?

Diego: I think they're angry (dogs) and so that's why they chase me. I don't know how old my sister is. She wants to move with her family.

Teacher: What are they (the dogs) angry about? Maybe your sister will find a house that doesn't have angry dogs.

Diego: I think that the (dogs') owner didn't feed them.

Figure 2. Interactive Journal

Angélica, they both became aware that Diego was the baby's uncle: his father had children not only with his mother, but also with his maternal aunt. Diego had thought that the children living in his home

participating in literature study discussions. Literature study is an instructional strategy where, as a group, students choose from an array of books one that they would like to read (Peralta-Nash & Dutch,

discussions by sitting next to him and assisting him in finding the right vocabulary to articulate his ideas. They often repeated his responses out loud to the group. As Diego heard his ideas voiced and responded to, he became more actively engaged in the activity. He also saw that no one thought any less of him for needing help with his literacy skills. Further, Diego came to the realization that teachers and students worked as a group to construct their understandings of the book, taking into account a range of ideas with no one, not even the teachers, deemed as all-knowing. Diego began to reassure the newer students in the resource classroom that he was once like them, and that teachers and students were all there to help them learn, just as they had helped him. This advice, from the formerly shy, extremely withdrawn, and nonparticipatory student, received nods of agreement from his classmates.

After reading books as a group in literature study, students engage in a variety of written activities such as writing in literature response journals and a range of post-reading tasks that help them focus in on literary elements such as plot structure, setting, character analysis, and so on. In literature study Diego relished the fact that he could freely use his drawing ability to construct meaning in the post-reading activities. For example, Diego and his classmates read the picture book *La señora de la caja de cartón* (The Lady in the Box; McGovern, 1997), a story about young children who give gifts to an elderly woman living on the streets. Diego wrote a personal response relating the social problem of homelessness to his own experience of living in Guatemala during a period of violent conflict, completed a high-level reading comprehension activity

Diego began to reassure the newer students in the resource classroom that he was once like them, and that teachers and students were all there to help them learn, just as they had helped him.

were his cousins, but in reality they were his half-brothers and -sisters, and any children they had would be his nieces and nephews. As it dawned on Diego that the baby who had been baptized was his nephew, he vowed that he would care for and protect his newborn nephew, like all good uncles do. The fact that he now felt comfortable and safe to share such personal information with his teachers and peers, and especially the fact that he wanted to write about it in his interactive journal, showed Eleanor and Angélica that they were on the right track with Diego.

Interactive journals motivated Diego to develop his voice as an active speaker and writer. They also became vital, authentic documents of his writing development along multiple dimensions—development that Diego, too, could see. Furthermore, they served as an affirmation that Diego had much to share about his experiences—experiences that could be expanded upon in interactive journals and other instructional strategies within Eleanor and Angélica's optimal learning environment.

Literature Study. As Eleanor and Angélica intensely mediated Diego's classroom participation, Diego himself began to eliminate some of the barriers in the way of his learning, especially his reticence to interact with others. Diego started to enjoy

2000; Ruiz, García, & Figueroa, 1996; Samway & Whang, 1995). OLE teachers make sure that they use children's literature with high-interest themes on typical childhood problems such as bullies and getting along, but also on issues that are specific to the students and their community, such as immigration, discrimination, bilingualism, and stereotypes. Eleanor and Angélica have found high student motivation to read when they give a choice of books to students who are struggling with literacy development.

Eleanor and Angélica make it clear that they most value constructing meaning and comprehension in literature study. They aim to make sense of the literature in collaboration with the students. Often students like Diego had not understood either the reading texts or the discussions and exercises around them in their general education classrooms, and they had lost interest in (or hope for) learning how to read (Jiménez, 1997). Consequently, Eleanor and Angélica knew it was vital for them to engage Diego in literature study discussions—a core part of literature study where students and teachers come together to share their personal reactions to and understandings of what they have read or heard read to them.

Eleanor and Angélica initially drew Diego out during literature study

(plot analysis), participated in donating food to homeless people in his own community, and generated a written piece on what his gift would be to the world (see Figure 3).

Diego's classmates envied his keen eye for detail and the elaborate manner in which he drew. They sought him out for artistic advice, collaboration in art activities, and the coauthoring of books in writers' workshop. Diego gained high status as the classroom artist.

The literature study interactions provided Diego with an authentic opportunity to develop his oral language while learning to read and write. He learned to describe his personal connections, ask questions, negotiate, and justify his opinions.

As he helped others with their artwork, they, in turn, helped him with his oral language, reading, and writing. In this mutual exchange of resources and assistance, Diego became a full-fledged member of a community of learners (Gutiérrez & Stone, 1997).

Testing Results. Interactive journals and literature study, along with other instructional strategies such as writers' workshop, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, and the development of his phonemic awareness and phonics through meaningful activities, proved fruitful in Diego's development as a reader, writer, speaker, and classroom participant. After one and a half years of work in the resource

classroom, Eleanor re-administered the individual standardized achievement test to Diego. In reading, Diego made 3.4 years growth (from a grade equivalent score of K.3 to 3.7); in writing, 3.2 years growth (from 1.2 grade level to 4.4). He was in fifth grade at the time.

Although Diego's improvement on the tests was significant, Eleanor and Angélica identify his classroom behavior as the true success story. Diego became a highly motivated participant in all activities in his general education classroom, as well as in the resource room. His classmates sought him out to represent them at various school functions. He willingly spoke up in class to share his ideas and comments. He completed all of his assignments and was a responsible citizen. He became assertive, though non-insistent, and he would occasionally try to pull a joke or trick on Eleanor and Angélica. A true metamorphosis had taken place.

Here Eleanor and Angélica finish the story of Diego by recounting an incident just before Diego graduated from the fifth grade:

One day we happened to meet Diego's younger brother, who we found out was reading and writing at normal grade level. He dazzled us by reading a three-page, neatly printed story. The following day, we mentioned to Diego that we had met his younger brother, and he instantly proceeded to tell us why it was that he had not known how to read or write. He shared that he had not attended school in Guatemala, and all of his schooling had been in Los Angeles. His kindergarten teacher was an English-only teacher, whom Diego did not understand. His first-grade teacher, though of Hispanic descent, did not speak Spanish to him, and his second-grade teacher was under the impression that he spoke "some Indian language." Diego also shared

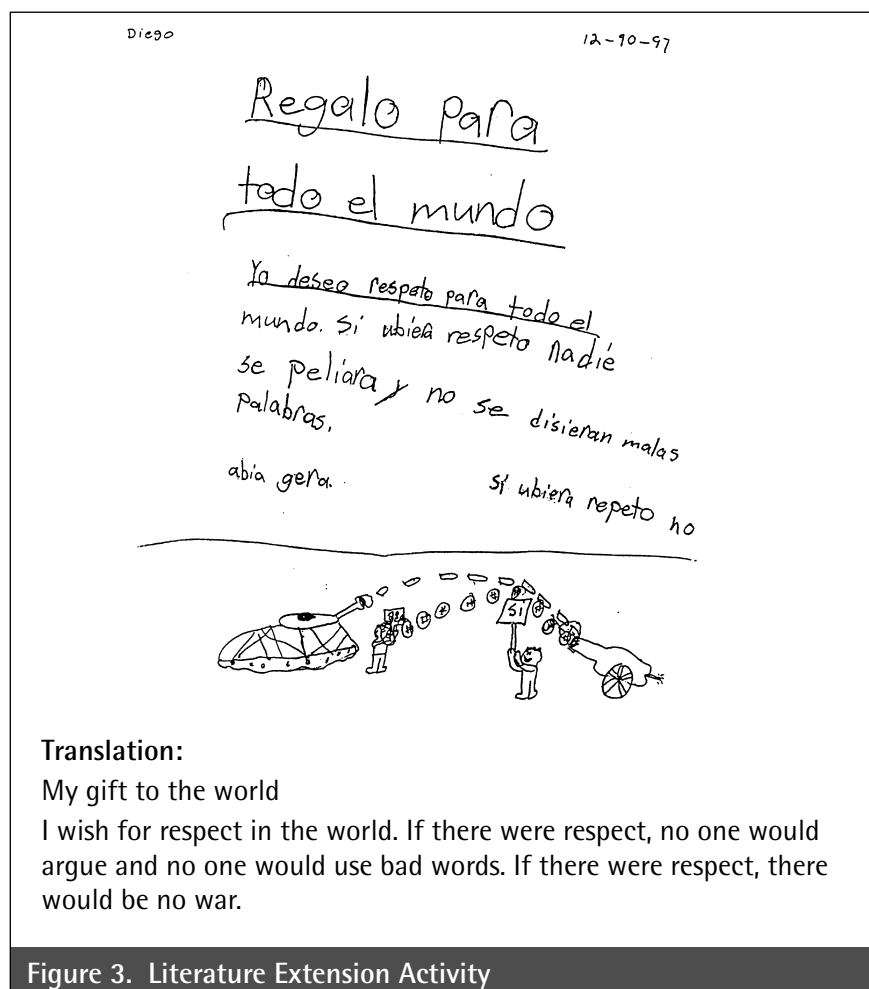


Figure 3. Literature Extension Activity

that he had never understood what was going on in these classrooms because no one had ever tried to demonstrate what was being said. At his previous school, people rarely talked to him. He told us all of this information in one breath, as he embraced us and reassured us that we had been doing an excellent job of helping him learn to read and write.

What Would Have Happened to Diego in a Traditional Special Day Class Setting

The research findings cited earlier and our many years of working in special education classrooms with high numbers of bilingual students allow us to sketch out a likely scenario for Diego had he been placed in the more restrictive special day class setting instead of the resource room.

First, Diego would have received the overwhelming majority of his instruction within a segregated setting, most likely “mainstreamed” for only physical education, lunch, and recess (Ruiz, 1995a). Second, Diego’s teachers would have used English as the language of instruction (Jiménez, 1997), based on their reasoning that “Diego has problems in both English and Spanish. He has a second strike against him because of a disability. The best course of action is to emphasize one language, English.” Third, Diego’s special day class teacher would have used specially designed oral language and reading/writing programs. The oral language program would have most likely consisted of either pictures or audiotapes that focus on discrete linguistic skills such as forming questions (Ruiz, 1995b). The reading program would have focused heavily on discrete phonics elements and artificially constructed texts, primarily worksheets, but also pseudo-books that are restricted phonologically or lexically to help students decode them (López-Reyna, 1996; Ruiz,

1995b; Ruiz & Figueroa, 1995; Trueba, 1987). The writing program would have largely focused on copying either words or sentences (López-Reyna, 1996; Ruiz, Rueda, Figueroa, & Boothroyd, 1995). Finally, most likely Diego would have followed the typical academic

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achievement pattern of ethnic minority students placed in special education classes and would have made very slow academic progress, remaining behind his general education peers and even behind his Anglo special education counterparts (Figueroa, 1992).

Though we sketched out this likely scenario for a special day class placement, our research and experiences have shown that a traditional resource room placement would have been substantially the same, except for additional mainstreaming in a general education class. In fact, a probable route for Diego had he been placed in a traditional resource classroom would have been eventual re-designation for the more intensive instructional option, a special day class.

REVISITING THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION FOR BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Eleanor and Angélica’s resource classroom operationalizes the four

principles of effective instruction through a range of instructional strategies. In this article we focus on two of them—interactive journals and literature study—to illustrate the principles.

Principle 1: Connect students’ background knowledge and personal experiences with literacy lessons.

The content of interactive journals is the students’ lived experiences. By choosing the topics in each journal entry, students are free to bring their interests and concerns to the forefront of literacy lessons. Literature study also offers choices to students. As teachers preview the books available for the current literature study, students have the opportunity to peruse the options, looking for the books with themes, actions, and characters that have personal meaning for them. After the initial reading of the chosen book, OLE teachers ask students to flag a passage with a self-adhesive note where they feel a personal connection to the story. Those individually placed notes become a scaffold for the first discussion about the book, though students’ personal identification continues to emerge in subsequent discussions. Students write personal reactions to books before the group focuses on a specific literary element to analyze. In short, students’ personal experiences take center stage in interactive journals and literature study.

Principle 2: Foster the use of students’ primary language in literacy lessons.

Across Eleanor and Angélica’s literacy program, students use the language with which they feel most comfortable. The result is faster development of literacy skills in the students’ first and second languages, consistent with the research on bilingual special education, and with primary

Internet Resources for Exploring Identity

Educators interested in engaging students in individual projects to explore and appreciate their personal and cultural identities will find many helpful resources on the Internet.

- **Invite students to learn the meaning of their names at <http://www.baby-names-meanings.com/> (retrieved November 1, 2001)**

This site includes an index with first and last names in alphabetical order and a briefly stated name meaning and can be used along with children's own research with their families on their name origins.

- **Guide children in conducting oral family interviews at <http://www.kbyu.org/capturingpast/> and <http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/columns/tips/66.asp> (retrieved November 1, 2001)**

These sites offer detailed suggestions and checklists for helping children conduct an oral history interview with an older family member.

- **Engage children in learning more about the cultural identity of a region through folktales at the Moonlit Road, <http://www.themoonlitroad.com/welcome001.html> (retrieved November 14, 2001)**

This site consists of an archive of ghost stories from the American South. Stories can be read by children or listened to as the stories are told by the region's most creative storytellers.

Linda D. Labbo

language instruction for bilingual students in general education (Krashen, 1997).

We have noticed an interesting by-product of allowing students to use the language of their choice—often, their primary language—in literacy lessons: students often choose to risk reading and writing in their second language, English. One reason behind this self-initiated transitioning (García & Colón, 1995) may be explained by recent studies of bilingual students' transition from Spanish to English. This research has specifically pointed out the effectiveness of instructional strategies such as literature study discussions and written response journals in promoting better acquisition of second language writing

and content knowledge (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999).

Principle 3: Create opportunities for students to meaningfully and authentically apply their developing oral language and literacy skills.

Diego's reading and writing activities all had real communicative intent. For example, only Diego knew what he wanted to express in his journals; the others—his teachers and peers—did not have prior knowledge of his message. Second language researchers would immediately identify this situation as ideal for authentic communication and, hence, for language development (Chaudron, 1988). The same communicative situation occurred repeatedly during literature study as Diego expressed his personal

connections with books, brought forth analytical points of the story that he had observed, and collaborated on jointly produced literature extensions that depended on accurate and detailed communication to complete.

Principle 4: Foster increased levels of interaction (oral language, reading and writing) among students and teachers. In interactive journals, Diego held the pen, literally and figuratively, actively initiating and responding to others' oral and written comments about his entries. In stark contrast to typical writing events in other classrooms, Diego interacted immediately and intensively with his teachers while passing his interactive journal between them.

Literature study ups the ante for active participation when compared to other types of reading instruction. Groups, not individuals, negotiate their choice of books, and students hold discussions and complete literature extension activities in collaboration with others.

As highly motivated co-directors of their interactive journals and much of the literature study, students in resource classrooms based on OLE show high levels of communicative interaction—interaction shown to co-vary with increased language and literacy development.

CONCLUSION

We think that Diego's language and literacy story is important in a number of ways. First, his story serves to illustrate that there *are* research-based methods of literacy instruction for students like Diego, who are eight or nine years old but at a very emergent reading and writing level. Although most people would refer to Diego as a nonreader, we prefer the term *emergent reader*, for time after time, students show us

that they can develop into readers and writers in an optimal learning environment.

Second, Diego's language and literacy story serves to point out that there is a body of classroom research that is inclusive of students like Diego. In the current literacy instruction debate, there is certainly much talk of research-based methods of teaching reading and writing. But the overwhelming majority of the studies brought forward as support for those methods would have never allowed Diego in as a subject: he is not a native English speaker, he is an immigrant, he has been labeled as a student with a learning disability, he comes from a family with very low socioeconomic status, and so on. We ask bilingual and bilingual special edu-

Could the "symptoms" he manifested on the tests—tests shown to be biased and incapable of separating a learning disability from complex cultural and social factors (Figueroa & García, 1994)—be "false positives" in identifying a learning disability?

Then there is the nature of special education instruction. What if Eleanor and Angélica's resource room had been traditional (reductionist) and not optimal? What if instruction had been conducted solely in English? Would Diego have learned to read and write? On the other hand, had Diego *not* been diagnosed as learning disabled, would he have received the enriched, research-based instruction in a small-group setting that he so desperately needed to become a

Are there times when special education placement is beneficial for a bilingual student seriously struggling with literacy skills? Is it worth labeling a student to receive those services?

cation teachers who listen to reading researchers excluding children like Diego to stop and ask themselves: What relevance does this research have for my students? We also recommend that teachers read some of the studies we have cited—studies that have closely examined the kinds of instruction linked to bilingual students' progress in reading and writing.

Finally, Diego's story serves to point out the complexity of students becoming skillfully literate when they are lagging far behind in reading and writing. General education did not seem to be successful in helping Diego become literate, so school personnel turned to their innovative special education program. But is it certain that Diego had a learning disability?

reader and writer? Are there times when special education placement is beneficial for a bilingual student seriously struggling with literacy skills? Is it worth labeling a student to receive those services?

Finally, there is the question of systemic change. Would it be possible to design school structures and classrooms that would meet Diego's language and literacy needs without the expensive special education referral, assessment, diagnosis, and placement procedures? In doing so, could we thereby help prevent labeling bilingual students as learning disabled and instead focus intensively on their instructional needs? We continue our work challenged by these crucial remaining questions. We are committed to changing the system to help teachers

create learning communities in which students fully develop their literacy skills without taking on the often socially constructed identity of a student with learning disabilities. In the meantime, we hope that the body of research cited in Diego's story will assist teachers in providing effective literacy instruction to the growing number of Latino students entering general and special education classrooms.

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Oral Histories as a Research Tool

Oral histories are a great way for teacher researchers to enlist students as co-researchers in completing oral histories with their families. In *History Comes Home*, Steven Zemelman, Patricia Bearden, Yolanda Simmons, and Pete Leki (Stenhouse, 1999) include techniques for oral histories useful to teacher researchers who want to learn more about the rich cultural backgrounds of their students and to integrate this knowledge into their research.

The authors recommend that the following questions be asked by students in family interviews:

1. Describe your ethnic background.
2. When did your people first come to this place where we live?
3. Who were the first family members to come here?
4. Where did they come from? (state, city and/or country)
5. Why did they leave their former home?
6. Why did they come to this place?
7. What types of jobs did they get when they arrived?
8. What jobs did they have before?
9. In which wars or struggles did any of your relatives play a role?
10. Ask follow-up questions on topics about which your parent or guardian shows the most interest.

Zemelman and his co-authors recommend that these oral histories be long-term projects, including mini-lessons on strategies for effective interviewing:

1. Using techniques to help the interviewed person and interviewer relax.
2. Using follow-up questions for clarification.
3. Avoiding yes/no questions (“fat” vs. “skinny” questions).
4. Recognizing topics that require consulting someone else in the family.
5. Dealing with sensitive issues that require tact or may need to be dropped.

Teacher researchers gain a rich database from students about their lives that can be analyzed and referred to in many ways, depending upon the focus of the research. Students can be involved in the process of analyzing and charting the information in ways that build respect for the diversity among classmates and for their own skills as co-researchers trying to understand their learning community.

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