Developing Voices: Transformative Education in a First- Grade Two-way Spanish Immersion Classroom, A Participatory Study

Josephine Arce
San Francisco State University

Abstract

This study drew a portrait of an actual classroom striving to initiate a transformative educational experience in an urban elementary school among students of different socioeconomic status, cultures, and languages. This participatory research design (Ada, Beutel, & Gottesman, 1991; Kieffer, 1981; Park, 1989) described the transformative process that a first-grade two-way Spanish immersion classroom underwent to build a community of learners. The researcher analyzed how, within the process of a transformative classroom, the teacher provided daily opportunities to engage young students in dialogue to develop their voices, created a literacy rich environment that serves multiple purposes including becoming literate, and fostered a strong sense of community.

The following research questions were posed: How is critical pedagogy applied to a lower primary-grade classroom? Through the teacher's own reconceptualization of voice, how can opportunities be provided for young children to develop voice? How does literacy function as a means of empowerment for first-grade students?

Research Problem

In this study a transformative classroom environment is characterized by a teacher who is grounded in a socially conscious philosophy, which guides her perception of the teaching/learning process. Instructional practices promote critical thinking processes and recognize that student voice is central to social and learning interactions. High social and academic expectations create a caring and challenging classroom community for all its members.

Statement of the Problem

Some cultural structures within a school are easily identified (e.g., parents' organizations, school councils, student study teams) while others remain unacknowledged, such as the philosophical beliefs teachers use to guide their practice. Identifying the philosophical foundations present within a school's structure is critical to understanding the role of these belief systems in the teaching/learning process. Without this analysis, educators cannot

easily determine if their practice is actually having the intended effect upon students.

Students are not oblivious to philosophical structures. They often appear to accept the structures within their school community; however, their resistance takes various forms. Six-year-old children question the many rules in a school and can actually feel frustrated because school is so restrictive. Children realize they are told to be creative, but few opportunities exist for them to develop creativity.

Teacher behavior is the most proximate structure to the children. Teachers can give or deprive children opportunities for gaining intellectual and social skills that can be applied to many situations in and out of the classroom. When curriculum and instruction do not match the needs of students, learning becomes a series of disparate exercises. Walsh (1991) provides an excellent analysis of the importance of an inclusive pedagogy, i.e., one that includes students in decision-making:

> Whenever power and knowledge come together, politics not only functions to position people differently with respect to the access of wealth and power, it also provides the conditions for the production and acquisition of learning. (p. xv)

This condition should impel educators to look for alternative philosophies.

Learning is deeply connected to the realities of the students' lives, their families, and their communities. Individuals can only begin to determine their future if they are in learning environments that address the social issues they face, while at the same time prepare them with academic skills. As an example, the illusory success of suburban, middle, and upper-class schools is at least partly attributable to the accuracy with which their pedagogical structure mirrors their communities.

Acknowledging, then identifying, the links between a student's social reality and the classroom can be an educator's most challenging task. However, until students' voices are heard, and the lessons educators learn about students' lives are integrated into the classroom, there will be discord between students and the school. Education without the students' contribution is education for the passive and powerless. Freire (1990) defines transmission education as a means to keep students in a submissive role, eventually disabling them to make decisions about their lives. The curriculum in a transmission model is never neutral, because it reveals how a teacher determines what is important to learn and transmits it to students.

Background and Need for the Study

Previous research studies describing progressive classroom practices have focused on only one or two conditions, such as: prosocial education, which emphasizes cooperative learning and building a caring community

(Development Studies Center, 1994); whole language theory and classroom practices (Freeman & Freeman, 1997; Goodman, Goodman, & Flores, 1979); learning conditions (Cambourne, 1988); and bilingualism and language acquisition (Collier & Ovando, 1985; Krashen & Iber, 1988). Although these and other scholars have contributed to our understanding of the potential for dynamic holistic learning environments, there is a need for more research on critical pedagogy and elementary school practices. Few studies are available (Hudelson, 1994; Moll, 1990; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1996; Whitmore & Crowell, 1994) that demonstrate the application of critical pedagogy as it relates to elementary school bilingual students. These studies address questions of student learning, whole language instruction, and relationships between schooling and the sociocultural processes.

Research Questions

This study examines how a first-grade teacher in a two-way Spanish immersion classroom created a transformative environment through reflection on critical philosophy guiding her practice. The research questions were:

1. How is critical pedagogy applied to a lower primary-grade classroom?
2. Through the teacher's own reconceptualization of voice, how can opportunities be provided for young children to develop voice?
3. How does literacy function as a means of empowerment for first-grade students?

Methodology

Research Design

This participatory research used dialogic retrospection (Keiffer, 1981) and an ethnographic method of observation (Wolcott, 1988) to describe existing classroom conditions. The intent of participatory research differs from ethnography. Participatory research seeks to transform social conditions, while the latter documents the way things exist (Ada, Beutel, & Gottesman, 1991; Kieffer, 1981; Park, 1989).

Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, and Jackson (1993) define participatory research as a self-conscious way of empowering people to take effective actions toward improving conditions in their lives. These organized rational efforts have an explicitly libratory goal to effect social changes (p. 1). The functions of this research design are both cognitive and transformative, producing knowledge that is linked simultaneously with, and intimately to social action (Park et al., 1993, p. 3). This differs from traditional research methods where the researcher, as the expert, controls the knowledge. In a participatory setting, the researcher presents the research problem and initially provides guiding questions to the participants. However, through the interactive process the

researcher gradually becomes a facilitator while the community of participants becomes expert. In this study, the researcher guided and collaborated with a classroom teacher who previously did not have a background in critical theory or progressive educational philosophies. However, the teacher had a desire to learn about participatory research because she knew there were problems with her teaching and the students' academic success. She was also frustrated with the structure of the school in general. The researcher initially had conversations with the teacher on elements of critical pedagogy, such as the analysis of the transmission teaching model and its impact upon students' learning. These conversations were the basis for the researcher's model of interactive teaching and learning lessons that inspired the teacher to participate in the research study. Both the researcher and the participating teacher were clear that their focus was to apply critical pedagogy to the instruction and the classroom environment.

Through this interactive process the researcher gradually became a facilitator, while the teacher, as a participant in the study, became a partner in learning. In this alternative design there is a partnership in sharing knowledge and educational beliefs, and in collectively taking responsibility for action.

Central to participatory methodology is the use of dialogue as a way to facilitate the emergence of voice and the construction of new knowledge. Dialogue ultimately leads to gaining a critical perspective that becomes emancipatory for the researcher and the participants (Freire, 1990, p. 75).

Another major element of participatory research is the concept of voice, which is an avenue for the dominated or subordinated to articulate personal perspective. Participatory research is fundamentally about the right to speak (Hall, 1993, p. xvii).

Recent studies explain how participatory research can contribute to a transformative process in contexts other than those characterized by conflict or struggle (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Park, et al., 1993). In an attempt to develop a transformative education classroom, both the teacher and the researcher embraced the concept that the relationship between transformative education and participatory research is a mutual one with each implying the other.

Collection of the Data

The data included the following: the researcher's observational notes of the classroom, portfolios of students' academic work and assessments, observation of the teachers' instructional delivery, direct instructional support provided by the researcher, several dialogue transcriptions, collaborative meetings with the teacher, and analyses of the students' literacy activities.

Profile of the Students as Participants

The participants were twentyfive 6- and 7-year-old students. Fifteen of the 25 were Latinos born in the United States, but their parents were immigrants. All the Latino children except one lived in a Latino community in northern

California where Spanish is the predominant language. Most of the students' parents worked in service jobs, and several of the mothers worked at home during the day.

The other five Latino children were third and fourth generation, native born in the United States. Three of the five students had parents who earned college degrees; the other two had parents who had some college education. Their parents chose to enroll their children in a two-way Spanish immersion program. Only one of the students was fully bilingual; the others knew some Spanish phrases.

The remaining five students were European American boys whose parents were all college educated. These families lived in the surrounding neighborhoods and had chosen a two-way Spanish immersion program.

Findings and Discussion[2]

Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom

The teacher became deeply committed to becoming a transformative educator, evolving from being a good teacher to becoming a critical educator. Prior to this study her teaching methods were based on a transmission model. Students were never part of the process of constructing collective knowledge. Her literacy program focused on reading aloud, using children's literature, non-authentic journals (children copying from the board), and basic comprehension questions, and teaching Spanish vocabulary through the syllabic method. She did not know how to use children's literature as a means to critically analyze social conditions. In addition, she did not have a theoretical framework from which to guide her practice. Darder (1991) asserts that if teachers are to fully evaluate their practices they must explore the fundamental theoretical dimensions of critical education (p. 75). This participatory study provided the teacher with opportunities to examine her beliefs and practices and move toward a critical theory of education.

Although the teacher claimed to value her students' home culture, she did not know how to integrate it effectively into the curriculum beyond honoring home festivities and sharing some family stories. In the process of applying critical pedagogy, one of the early steps taken by the teacher was to reevaluate the role of the students' home culture and to integrate it into the social studies curriculum. She selected a theme on home shelters as a way to recognize the diversity of the children's home life. She wanted the children to critically reflect on the kindness, love, and responsibility that most families give each other within their home environments. The classroom community spent many days studying shelters and how these met their physical and emotional needs. After much discussion, brainstorming, researching, and writing, they began to chart a comparison of shelters, highlighting similarities and differences.

The children started with their own experiences in their homes. They extended their knowledge to examine shelters around the world. This global study included research on factors influencing architectural styles of shelters, such as weather, geography, topography, economy, and other available resources. To gain a fuller understanding of the buildings in a community, the students built their own shelters in the classroom. They designed shelters through collaborative activities, decided how to identify rooms in their buildings, and brought items from their homes to furnish the shelters. These shelters became living experiences. The teacher described how the unit evolved from guiding the students to completely letting the students decide how they would develop their community. She stated:

> The children decided what to put in each room, where to place the furnishings. If a stranger walked into the classroom it would appear that the children were simply playing [to be interpreted as wasting time]. [sic] they pretended watching television, pretended they were sleeping in the little doll beds, cooking, eating together, or combing each other's hair. The children sat and read bedtime stories to each other, dressed up, and had great conversations. This unit was really about caring for each other. . . . We took care of our needs, and cared for each other just like we would in our own families.

The students demonstrated what they had experienced in their own homes and communities and transferred this knowledge to a new learning situation. They resolved problems through negotiations and added new perspectives to the dynamics of communal living. One of the most significant characteristics was the constant emphasis on creating meaning through their interactions. This classroom reflects Moll's (1990, p. 13) description of classrooms that teach to children's zone of proximal development as places where teaching and learning do not emphasize learning skills, but focus on the emphasis of creating meaning.

The thematic cycle on home shelters was a significant curriculum decision by the teacher based on understanding how critical pedagogy is manifested in a classroom. In this social studies unit she relinquished some control of the learning process, and by doing so allowed students to take over the interpretation of the home shelters. For practical purposes this activity could have been a two-week unit, but it turned into a two-month, thoroughly engaging learning experience. The teacher's reflection on how the unit evolved from her direction to students' ownership displayed her growing confidence as a teacher who was comfortable enough to follow the interests of her students. She watched as they role-played as responsible and caring citizens in their classroom-situated "homes."

This classroom was a busy community where one heard a constant buzzing of voices. Students worked independently in small groups of two, three, or four, while the adults (researcher, teacher, Spanish- and English-speaking parents who volunteered during different language blocks) worked with groups

or individuals. My teaching focus as the researcher was to guide children in acquiring early literacy strategies. Several native Spanish-speaking parents assisted during the language arts time block. Throughout the day children were allowed to talk. Sometimes they needed to be reminded to talk about the task at hand, but they were rarely asked to stop talking. The teacher shared that this type of learning environment required scaffolding community discussions in order to learn social skills needed to participate in a democratic classroom. She pointed out that this required a major shift in her philosophical beliefs since the creation of such a community required relinquishing some control of all aspects in the classroom events.

Developing Voices

Analysis of the development of voice occurred at two levels: the teacher's reconceptualization of voice and its relation to power, and the development of student voice in the classroom community.

The teacher's reconceptualization of voice and its relationship to power

In the beginning of the research study, the teacher and researcher discussed voice as a form of self-identity. The teacher was intrigued by this concept. Initially she did not quite understand how voice was a form of empowerment. She was aware that her own voice was silenced in the school community but did not know how it affected her self-identity. Walsh (1991b) describes the multi-dimensional role of voice and how its empowerment depends on the social and political context. Voice can be silenced in different environments where power relationships exist beyond the control of the individual. This teacher felt that her colleagues were silenced due to these power relationships. For example, they did not feel recognized by the administrator. Staff decisions were eventually changed by the principal or at a higher level of administration. She thought teachers were unhappy in their jobs, and some who she knew well were also dissatisfied in their personal lives. In her perception, teachers received little recognition at the district level and felt disrespected by society at large. These teachers constantly had to adapt to changes in current educational trends without being given the opportunity to understand the rationale for those changes.

Development of students' voices

During the course of her own reconceptualization of voice, the teacher was committed to creating opportunities for students to develop voice. She began to create an atmosphere of emotional safety where children would be encouraged to speak out.

In her view, the school curriculum was so fragmented that learning activities often resulted in giving children bits and pieces of information. This fragmentation hampered the interaction between teachers and their students. She was unsure how she would resolve the problem of fragmentation, but she

was unwilling to compromise some activities she used which supported interpersonal relationships (i.e., interactive group writing, reflective writing, community building).

The teacher's reflections stated unequivocally that children develop voice when given opportunities to discuss their feelings and their opinions of situations in the classroom, their homes, and communities. The teacher created an ongoing dialogue about universal issues such as friendship, empathy, kindness, and helpfulness. The topics of discussion extended beyond the lower comprehension level that identifies characters, time, and place. She raised questions to provoke curiosity, empathy, and social consciousness.

An example of a higher level question was presented to the children after they heard *El Camino de Amelia (Amelia's Road)*. In this story the protagonist, Amelia, is an 8- or 9-year-old child who migrates with the agricultural harvests in California. Amelia longed to establish roots. The character places special mementos in a small box that she buries, and she hopes that one day she can return to find some roots. The teacher asked the children to describe how they would feel if they were moving every few weeks. She also asked students to explain why some families have to move and how it might feel not to have choices about where to live and attend school. She asked them to describe how they would feel if they were in Amelia's place, and what they would put in their treasure boxes. The oral and written responses of the students showed how deeply affected they were and the breadth of emotions conjured by their empathy for a character in literature.

They wrote stories about Amelia's situation. They used critical thinking to channel their inherent empathy into creative activity. They understood that some children have less control of their lives and realized the benefit resulting from a sense of being rooted. The culminating reflection came in analyzing why Amelia buried a personal treasure box filled with mementos. The students decided that all people need a home. In their innocence, they hoped Amelia would some day return to dig up her treasure box.

This exercise in empathy and concern for others evolved into an empowering act of raised social consciousness. Critical theorists urge teachers to create opportunities for themselves and their students to gain an understanding of power in all its manifestations (Darder, 1991; McLaren, 1989; Nieto, 1992). It is through this analysis of power that children can develop into critical thinkers and active citizens. For example, these first-grade students understood on a very personal level that not all families have the same economic opportunities and that it is a great misfortune when people cannot establish roots.

Conclusion

By entering into a dialogic process and critical reflection, this teacher took steps to change her pedagogy. Critical consciousness emerged from this

teacher's desire to become a transformative educator. The teacher demonstrated in her choice of theoretically grounded instructional practices that a classroom could undergo an emancipatory process approaching, if not achieving, critical consciousness.

Shor (1993) defined four qualities that contribute to critical consciousness. First, the awareness that people make up and sometimes seek change in their communities. This evolution of community life was evident in the unit on home environments where students replicated a micro community. Through role-playing, students saw themselves empowered to decide how to establish norms and negotiate change. This role-playing set in motion a process through which students began seeing themselves shaping their realities.

Second, the role that critical literacy can have in a transformative classroom goes beyond the function of becoming literate, becoming instead a profoundly social phenomena affording people access to power and resource knowledge. Literacy, as viewed by the teacher and the researcher, acts as a path toward empowerment and self-actualization (Freire, 1973, p. 48; Walsh, 1991a, p. 6). Literacy became an avenue to emancipation rather than an end in itself.

Third, the teacher's choice of demanding instructional activities and collaborative social structures within the classroom challenged the myths harbored by the dominant culture, which views minority and lower socioeconomic students as underachievers (Nieto, 1992, pp. 24–25, Darder, 1991, pp. 111–112). The participating teacher consciously selected instructional activities that supported acceptance of diversity, because even young children can have biases about others who are different from them. A major challenge for this group was acceptance of language diversity. In particular, the English-speaking children went through a period of academic and social adjustments. They learned to seek help from their Spanish-speaking classmates, and this placed Spanish-speaking children in the role of experts, thus empowering themselves.

An added element for this study was the role of acquiring a second language for language minority and majority students. Learning a language is a long-term process, but along with linguistic development there exists an extensive social dimension. The perception of a language being acquired must be considered an additive attribute. In this classroom, both Spanish and English had equal status. In fact, Spanish was the language of instruction for 90% of the day. Spanish-speaking parents observed that their children were treated with respect and had equal access to a rigorous academic program. English-speaking parents witnessed their children gaining as much from this immersion program as the Spanish-speaking students. Initial apprehensions dissolved as parents observed the classroom dynamics and their children's rapid development.

Fourth, Shor (1993) identifies self-organization and self-education as a quality for critical consciousness. The teacher took the initiative to challenge the unfounded school perception that Latino students from lower economic

backgrounds were underachievers (perceptions derived from staff biases and low test scores). Realizing that she could not wait for the entire school to embrace a vision of transformative education, she devoted her energy to forming a vision for her classroom community. The classroom was a microcosm of the entire school, but it was hers and the researcher's dream to create an emancipatory environment where children and adults could be empowered.

Through a qualitative analysis of the pedagogy used by a teacher that directly affected students' engagement and academic achievement, the researcher examined an unfolding transformative process that offered a rigorous curriculum and allowed students to discover their learning potential.

As bilingual educators, it is incumbent upon us to reevaluate the pedagogy guiding instruction. It is not enough to be bilingual teachers with extensive knowledge of bilingual theory or language instruction. If we are to assist students in becoming socially responsible critical thinkers, we must engage in continual dialogue with our colleagues to critically reflect and actively address issues about educational change in the United States. In addition to the many available models for educational restructuring, the dialogic method can serve as a vehicle to redefine education as a social, cultural, and intellectual institution. The fundamental value of that redefined institution could then become the cultivation of students who view themselves as agents of change and advocates of a more equitable society.

This study contributes significantly to the implementation of a transformative educational theory. It specifically has implications for bilingual education as two-way immersion programs are replicated. While the nature of bilingual education programs is to advocate for access to equitable educational experiences for language-minority students, most programs are not grounded in critical pedagogy. In their research study, Ramirez, Yuen, and Ramey (1991) examined three bilingual program models, each containing instructional strategies that perpetuate docile learning styles not likely to address the needs of language minority students. In contrast, the transformative model incorporates constructivist learning theory (discovery, interaction, and problem solving) to guide instructional strategies, and a socially constructed critical theory that uses voice to develop self-identity. The transformative model has the goal of building humane and democratic classroom and school communities. It is not an add-on program. It is an alternative view of how to achieve a democratic education for children. As two-way language immersion programs expand, the challenge will be to draw from a liberatory philosophy of education to guide our instructional practices, rather than continue to be satisfied with the lesser accomplishments of superficial change.

References

Ada, A. F., Beutel, C., & Gottesman, L. (1991). *Teaching participatory research as a collective and reflective experience for educational transformation.* Unpublished manuscript. CA: University of San Francisco, Graduate School of Education.

Cambourne, B. (1988). *The whole story: Natural learning and the acqusition of literacy in the classroom.* Gosford, Australia: Ashton Scholastic.

Child Development Center. (1994). *At home in our schools: A guide to schoolwide activities that build community.* Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center

Collier, V. P., & Ovando, C. (1985). *Bilingual and ESL classrooms: Teaching in multicultural contexts.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom.* Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Freeman, Y., & Freeman, D. (1997). *Teaching reading and writing in Spanish in the bilingual classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness.* New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Ed. and Trans.). New York: Continuum.

Goodman, K., Goodman, Y., & Flores, B. (1979). *Reading in the bilingual classroom: Literacy and biliteracy.* Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Hall, B. (1993). Introduction. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, & T. Jackson, (Eds.), *Voices of change.* Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Hudelson, S. (1994). Literacy development of second language children. In F. Genesee (Ed.), *Educating second language children* (pp. 129–158). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kieffer, C. H. (1981, April). *Doing "Dialogic Retrospection": Approaching empowerment through participatory research.* Paper presented at the International Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland.

McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools.* New York: Longman.

Moll, L. C. (Ed.). (1990). *Vygotsky and education.* New York: Cambridge Press.

Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity.* New York: Longman.

Park, P. (1989). *What is participatory research? A theoretical and methodological perspective.* Unpublished manuscript, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Park, P., Brydon-Miller, M., Hall, B., & Jackson, T. (Eds.). (1993). *Voices of change*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Pérez, B., & Torres-Guzmán, M. E. (1992*). Learning in two worlds: An integrated Spanish/English biliteracy approach.* New York: Longman.

Ramirez, J. D., Yuen, S. D., & Ramey, D. R. (1991). *Executive summary, final report: Longitudinal study of structured English immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit transitional bilingual education programs for language-minority children.* Submitted to the United States Department of Education (Contract No. 300-87-0156). San Mateo: Aguirre International.

Shor, I. (1993). Education is politics: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter.* London: Routledge.

Walsh, C. (Ed.). (1991a). *Literacy as praxis.* Norword, New Jersey: Ablex.

Walsh, C. (1991b). *Pedagogy and the struggle for voice.* New York: Bergin & Garvey.

Whitmore, C., & Crowell, K. (1994). *Inventing a classroom: Life in a bilingual whole language classroom.* York, ME: Stenhouse.

Wolcott, H. F. (1988). Ethnographic research in education. In R. M. Jaeger (Ed.), *Complementary methods for research in education* (pp. 185–221). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Endnote

[1]The review of the literature addressed two research fields: critical pedagogy and early literacy. The interdependence between critical pedagogy and early literacy development was significant to this study. However, for the purpose of this article the author did not include the sections on literacy theories and early literacy instructional practices, nor the students' Spanish writing samples from both first- and second-language learners. For a more complete discussion of early literacy, refer to the dissertation.

[2] The findings reflect the process of change that occurred in one academic year (1995–1996).