

Introduction

Appropriating and Creating Space for Difference in Literacy Research

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*Have you ever hurt
about baskets?
I have, seeing my grandmother weaving
for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about work?
I have, because my father works too hard
and tells how he works.
Have you ever hurt about cattle?
I have, because my grandfather has been
working on the cattle for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about school?
I have, because I have learned a lot of words
from my school,
And they are not my words.*

– Anonymous (cited in Cazden & Dickinson, 1981, p. 458).

This poem, written by an Apache child, captures several aspects of multicultural education. First, it reflects the unrecognized and uncelebrated labor of many parents and grandparents from diverse backgrounds. Second, it frames literacy to include consciousness and orality. Third, it questions whose voices are heard, celebrated, and acknowledged in school. Albert Cullen's (1978) cartoon, which shows a blond, Anglo teacher facing a small group of Latina/o children, depicts another aspect of multicultural education. In the caption, the teacher asks, "Many Mariás, a Jorge, a Ramón, an Eduardo, Jesus (two of them), Camillo and his sister Consuelo, Diego, Pedro, Luísa. What can I, Nancy Smith from Maple Road, teach them? What can they learn from

me?” Cullen’s cartoon underscores the responsibility of educators, who must recognize the diversity of their students, understand how educational practices are culturally bound, and learn to challenge, support, and extend the knowledge and learning of all students. The dates of the poem and cartoon suggest that multicultural issues are not particularly new. In fact, issues of diversity and education have long historical roots in the United States (Banks, 1988; Crawford, 1991).

What is relatively new is the literacy field’s focus on multicultural issues. For example, Willis and Harris (1997) situated their review of the First Grade Reading Studies (funded and implemented in the 1960s) in the social and political events of the time – the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, the Vietnam War, the Voting Rights Act, the Immigration Act, and the establishment of the National Organization of Women, to name but a few. Although issues of diversity clearly were part of the national agenda, they reported that proposals with a focus on diversity were not included in the Studies analysis. In a review of reading research (1977–1992) related to students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds in the United States, García, Pearson, and Jiménez (1994) concluded that research on the reading development, instruction, assessment, and motivation of low-income students from diverse backgrounds had been neglected. More was known about what did not work with these students than what did work. Willis’s (1995, in press) depiction of her African American sons’ dilemmas in finding space in literacy assignments for their experiences suggests that the neglect applies to middle-class as well as low-income students of color.

The trend of ignoring multicultural issues in literacy research appears to be changing, albeit slowly. We conducted a content analysis of the articles published in the *Journal of Reading Behavior* (JRB)/*Journal of Literacy Research* (JLR) over the past 5 years (1992–1996). We categorized articles as multicultural if aspects of diversity were included in their titles, abstracts, subject descriptions, and discussion of the findings. We excluded a few articles that included participants from diverse backgrounds, but which did not discuss the results in terms of their participants’ diversity. These articles reminded us of previous research efforts that tended to include students from diverse backgrounds only in random samples (García et al., 1994) or that subscribed to the “one size fits all” complaint of Reyes (1992).

Our content analysis revealed that 18 of the 116 articles published in JRB/JLR over the 5-year period dealt with multicultural issues. One-third of the articles were invited and published in the Critical Issues section. Half of the articles dealt with bilingual, ESL, or second-language readers. Another large number of articles dealt with class issues, such as Chapter 1 reading instruction for poor children or family literacy programs for low-income families. Although the number of articles devoted to multicultural issues increased from a low of 2 articles (out of 21) in 1992 to a high of 6 articles (out of 27) in 1995, these numbers still do not reflect the increased presence of students from diverse backgrounds in the United States (Smith, 1995).

Hernández (1989) talked about the process and content aspects of multicultural education. Process refers to the different ways in which educators interact with students, how we organize instruction, the types of behavior we value, and the messages we send to students about their views and participation. Content refers to the curricula, or what is read, written, studied, or assessed. Harris (1993) and Sims Bishop (1993) warned about the limitation of presenting multicultural literature without focusing on the very elements (racism, discrimination, linguistic diversity, class, etc.) that characterize the literature as multicultural. Similarly, literacy educators and researchers need to address the process aspects of instruction that affect students' motivation, development, and participation in literacy events (García, 1994). The articles in this themed issue deal with some of the process and content dimensions of multicultural literacy research and practice.

Overview of Articles in the Themed Issue

In our call for papers for this themed issue on multicultural issues in literacy research and practice, we solicited articles that emphasized the manner in which elements of difference – race or ethnicity, gender, class, language, sexual preference – create dynamic tensions that influence literacy access, acquisition, instruction, performance, and/or assessment. We welcomed articles that involved literary, historical, or content analyses of materials, or philosophical discussions, as well as articles that included the traditional focus on literacy pedagogy, acquisition or development, and assessment. We were amazed when we received 45 manuscript submissions. Because of the short length of time involved in the revise-and-resubmit process for the themed issue, and the limited amount of space available, we had to reject a number of articles that looked quite promising. We hope to see them in future issues of the *Journal of Literacy Research*.

The articles in this themed issue represent the range of difference we sought (race/ethnicity, gender, class, language, and sexual preference) as well as a variety of methodologies (ethnographic, quantitative, theoretical/conceptual, and qualitative). The studies also reflect research efforts in a variety of instructional settings (elementary, middle, and high schools) and among a wide range of diverse literacy learners in both the United States and Europe (e.g., African American, African Caribbean, Asian American, European American, Latina/o, Native American, and Pacific Islander in the United States; and Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish in the Netherlands). We believe that individually and collectively the articles make a significant contribution to the fields of literacy and multicultural education. The first three articles emphasize process dimensions of multicultural literacy; the next two emphasize content dimensions of multicultural literacy instruction; the last article examines both process and content dimensions of multicultural literacy research and instruction.

The opening essay by Colleen Fairbanks demonstrates how encouraging middle school and high school students' voices to emerge in their writing and conversations can help to promote greater democratic literacy praxis. Fairbanks presents findings from a cross-study analysis of two inquiry-based teacher-researcher projects in diverse urban settings. In both settings, the teachers focused on the process aspect of multicultural education by encouraging students to identify, discuss, and write about "real life issues." Fairbanks illustrates how the students' writings and conversations led to inquiry learning, student agency, and participation in "a mess called democracy."

Elizabeth Noll uses case studies to portray two American Indian (Sioux) middle school students' literacy attitudes, performance, and construction of meaning across multiple sites – home, community, and school. She shows how the students' participation in literacy activities appeared to be influenced by teacher style, instructional genre, peers, families, personal attitudes, and cultural behaviors that extended beyond the conventional definitions of literacy skills or abilities. Noll convincingly describes how the students constructed meaning through music and dance, forcing her to expand her definition of literacy. In addition, she poignantly relays the students' use of conventional literacy practices to explore their identity and to address personal issues of racism and discrimination.

Annette Henry frames her study by using a critical Black feminist perspective. She seeks to understand the literacy development of several middle school African Caribbean girls who demonstrated their growing understanding of school literacy through oral and written communication. Henry interprets the writings and discussions of these girls as confronting the uncertainties of adolescence and the ethnic/cultural, gender, linguistic, and economic tensions they faced in their daily lives. Henry's analysis points to the importance of allowing the girls' voices to be heard, not just in their writing and conversations, but also in their literacy instruction.

Mienke Droop and Ludo Verhoeven examine the role of cultural schemata and linguistic complexity in the reading fluency and comprehension of two groups of third-grade children in the Netherlands: monolingual Dutch children, and Turkish and Moroccan immigrant children who were learning Dutch as a second language. They use multivariate analysis to compare the performance of the two groups of children on noncontrived texts from the Netherlands reading curricula. Droop and Verhoeven's findings demonstrate the role of cultural bias in curricula materials. The authors call for an increase in culturally authentic and responsive materials in reading curricula and school texts.

Steven Z. Athanases focuses on the interpretation of and responses to multicultural literature of high school students from diverse linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. He reports the students' ongoing responses to multicultural literature, as well as their attitudes 2 years later about those texts that most influenced them. His findings suggest that literary encounters with multicultural literature helped students address difference in race, ethnicity, gender,

religion, and sexual orientation. Athanases adds to our knowledge about the role of multicultural literature in students' lives by analyzing the extent to which students respond to text that not only reflects their lives but also enriches them through the introduction of new contexts and insights.

Finally, in a conceptual piece written by Kathryn H. Au, we are brought full circle to the reconsideration of literacy and learning in school. Au describes why she believes that social constructivist theories of literacy need to be extended to explicitly include the language, knowledge, skills, and voices of underrepresented cultural groups. She compares and contrasts the prevailing mainstream constructivist orientation with her proposed diverse social-constructivist orientation. Au argues for greater acknowledgment by researchers and practitioners of the role of culture and language in the varied aspects of students' literacy learning.

The articles included in this themed issue represent the tensions as well as the promises and hopes for future research on multicultural issues in literacy research and practice. We look forward to a time when multicultural literacy research and instruction are considered the norm in the literacy field. Tensions created by difference would not just be described, but analyzed, with the aim of confronting inequities and building on strengths. We view this themed issue as just a beginning.

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