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Profiles and Perspectives: Learning through Descriptive Inquiry at the Cypress Hills Community School

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Profiles and Perspectives

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Learning through Descriptive Inquiry at the Cypress Hills Community School

“**R**ED! [Spanish word for “net.”] What the ‘freak’ is a RED!?” Manny, a fourth-grader at the Cypress Hills Community School, huffs out his question as he works on a Spanish spelling assessment at the beginning of the year. He then looks around, slaps his hand down onto the desk, and gets ready for the next word. After each word the teacher dictates, Manny talks out loud—really loud—voicing comments to himself and making noises against the desk and floor with his hands and feet.

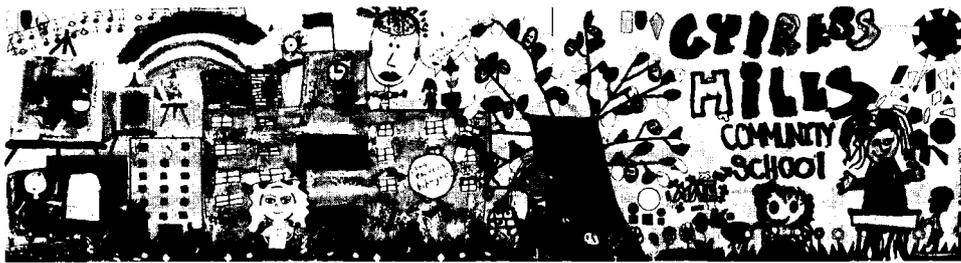
Through our sustained observations, we have noticed the ways that Manny (names of students and teachers other than the authors are pseudonyms) often moves through his days snapping his fingers, tapping on desks, moving his feet to a beat, and making sounds with his mouth. He makes his presence known as he journeys through the learning experiences that teachers have crafted for students at our K–8 dual language school in East New York, Brooklyn—a public school created in 1997 by parents and community members. The vision of the school has been to offer child-centered education in English and Spanish in a low-income urban neighborhood. Cypress Hills Community School’s dual language program

goal is for each student—both English- and Spanish-dominant—to achieve biliteracy. All content areas—reading, writing, math, science, and social studies—are taught both in English and Spanish. The program is devised so that children learn all subjects in one language for a week and then switch to instruction in the other.

For our inquiry group, an exploration of Manny’s robust expression of his identity through movement and sound was also an entry into making the links between building on his strengths and supporting his language learning in school. By focusing on children and asking questions about their lives as learners of language, our thinking deepened around what constitutes literacy and how we could enact these new understandings of literacy in order to welcome into our school a rich diversity of students.

A team of teachers from the school, Berky, Laura, Michael, and Sarah, met monthly with two professors, Cecilia E. and Cecelia T., over the span of two years in order to study the literacy learning of our students. Our inquiry group was funded through a National Council of Teachers of English Creating Communities of Inquiry Grant (2004–2006). We structured our meetings around the Prospect Center’s Descrip-

tive Inquiry Processes, which were developed at the Prospect School by Patricia Carini and her colleagues (Carini, 2000). These processes were created with the belief that “a school could itself generate knowledge of children, of curriculum, of learning and teaching” (Carini, 2000, p. 9). This particular way of engaging in inquiry is important to us because these processes are aligned with the school’s values and mission of growth through participation of its members. We also engaged in descriptions and discussions of our teaching practices, shared our memories and stories of learning, and read Anne Haas Dyson’s (2003) *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*, Guadalupe Valdés’s (1996) *Con Respeto*, and Karen Gallas’s (1994) *The Languages of Learning*. These experiences nurtured our growing understanding of the diverse pathways of literacy learning among all students. Through these endeavors, our inquiry group began to look at the relation of language to the person, and we started to ask ourselves what roles language plays in a child’s life. The experience of asking these questions in a collaborative inquiry group enriched our teaching. From this starting point, we placed our observations and knowledge alongside the practice of teaching and learning



in our dual language program in order to attune our teaching to the needs of our children.

MOVING CLOSER TO CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS

"Teachers need to open up what children bring by way of participation and interest in the unofficial culture and find parts of the unofficial world we share with children."

—Sarah Ferholt, August 2005

During one of our August meetings in Cecelia's living room, we discussed Dyson's *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*. Just as in Dyson's stories about children forming their unique identities by "remixing" official and unofficial worlds, we too witnessed how the children in our school played with and repackaged influences from within and outside of school, especially their language knowledge. These "remixes" became evident to us both in the literacy work we examined and the close descriptions we created of particular children within school. In the following sections, we present several of our descriptive studies focused on the children Graciela, Carla, and Manny, and their teachers, Berky, Sarah, Laura, and Lina.

Our assumptions about literacy learning can be understood, in part, through our changing perceptions of Manny. His work filled our afternoon sessions at school with pictures of cars, Dominican flags, poems replete

with the "eee, eee, eee" of the grinding brakes he heard on his Brooklyn block, and descriptions of his powerful ways of inhabiting the classroom. Manny's liveliness invited us to expand our definitions of literacy education as we struggled to understand how his experiences inside and outside the classroom permeated his daily language use and learning.

Manny's work demonstrated that literacy is a complex landscape of competing influences, both "official"—school-based literacies—and "unofficial"—influenced by family, national culture, and media. As such, we believe that learning language is both embedded in and transforms culture (Zentella, 2005; Mercado, 2005). As an inquiry group, we developed the stance that for children's literacy learning, these influences enter on a level playing field with school-mandated curricular goals, so that, as The New London Group offers, "differences of culture, language, and gender are not barriers to educational success" (2000).

Our work is firmly grounded in an understanding of the child as a person, a thinker, and a creative, active "maker" of materials and meanings (Carini, 2000). This means moving away from an adult-centric model, where the teacher brings, unchanged, her world view and knowledge to the classroom. Teachers' cultural and economic life histories fully color the educational prac-

tices and interpretation of children's acts in their classrooms. Given the reality that most children bring different cultural traditions and economic backgrounds to their school lives, misinterpretations abound, and opportunities to engage with children on their own terms are missed. Furthermore, teachers often harbor fixed ideas about how children should act and what they should know even before they come to school (Lareau, 2003). For these reasons, aligning ourselves with children can be a powerful way to illuminate the multiple spheres of influence that direct the child's learning (Dyson, 2003; Gonzalez, 2005; Gallas, 1994).

We believe that children bring to school a richness of experience, unique strengths, particular preferences, and ways of engaging with the world that, if acknowledged, can allow teachers to truly see children "in action and in motion" (Carini, 1986, 2000). The stories that follow are testaments to our commitment to meet children close to their strengths. As teachers, we needed to find a negotiated space where both teachers and students can build from their experiences and "weave together their resources and engage in complex, collective and critical literacy learning" (Van Sluys, 2006).

Our inquiry group was one place where we could stop to consider what our children bring to school, closely examine our

practice, and change what we do through reflection. It has been a place to merge our experiences and theory and translate dialogue into practice (Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, & Mueller, 2001; Smith and Hudelson, 2001; Donnelly et al., 2005). Developing a dynamic relationship with children by the very process of looking closely at them and their work has been key to generating knowledge about children in our dual language program.

Over the two years of our meetings, one of the major themes that developed through our talk was change. We asked, for example: What does it mean to change the narratives that exist about others in people's minds? We were especially concerned about the ways narratives shaped our understanding of the children at the Cypress Hills Community School. What narratives were the children constructing of themselves? What narratives were we constructing of the children?

By change, we also mean the process of translating into practice what otherwise remains intellectual or at the level of ideas and talk. We often wondered how this work helped us understand change. Did we effect change in our students? In what ways did we change as teachers, as people, as a group? In what ways did this work affect the school context? What are the barriers to change? Our talk together during inquiry meetings was certainly about ideas and values, but we also asked ourselves how our intellectual work translated into practice. We pondered how we were translating, or *could* translate, our ideas into action.

We begin our stories of change with Berky's descriptions of being Graciela's teacher. Next we present Sarah's narrative of growth in her

exploration of student engagement and assessment in her music class. Then Laura describes her exploration of supporting Lina, a new teacher, as she strives to construct a positive learning relationship with her student, Manny. Our last piece is Michael's reflection about the value of collaborative study. These four perspectives weave together a narrative "in stereo" of how our process of group descriptive inquiry created multiple opportunities for growth and learning.

DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY: OPENING UP POSSIBILITIES

Descriptive Inquiry has its roots in phenomenology, the study of something or someone as it is in lived life (Van Manen, 1997). There are some important qualities inherent in this way of looking:

- These inquiry practices are *collaborative*. They are about working in a group and building community.
- There is a *focus on what is at the center*, i.e., the thing as it is. The focus could be the child, a child's work, a teacher's work, or a teaching issue. Part of the discipline of the inquiry is to stay focused.
- There is a focus on finding the *teacher's own question*. The stories people tell in this article illustrate this aspect of the process. It is important to note that our sessions do not center around the questions the university professors bring to the group.
- A core aspect of the discipline of this inquiry process is *description*. We work to focus on what is visible and available for sensory description for as long as we can before we interpret. The key value of this stance is that through descrip-

tion, you open up possibilities. The more possibilities you have, the more interpretations you can consider, and the more options for action are available.

Overall, the aim is to see the child as a thinker and a learner. This is a very large idea, one hard to hold onto in the effort to improve children's test scores. However, understanding children and teachers as thinkers and learners is what this inquiry process is all about.

TRANSLATING DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW INTO PRACTICE: BERKY AND GRACIELA'S STORY OF GROWTH

By the time Graciela entered my class, I had been a bilingual teacher for six years and had taught in this dual language program for four. Graciela was a child I knew well because she had been in second grade the previous year and been brought up for study through descriptive reviews in our group's first year. Graciela, however, presented a particular problem for which there was no generic answer. From the descriptive review work, we knew that she was a strong meaning maker when reading and being read to. In second grade, she remained an emergent reader, even though this was her second time in second grade. When hearing stories read aloud, she was able to listen closely and create meaning. Not only was she a reader who attended to meaning, but she was also able to read people's feelings, postures, expressions, and thoughts. However, I continued to think, "*How could she make meaning of this caliber during literacy and not retain words, letter/sound relationships, or thoughts*

long enough to write them on paper? How can I, as a dual language teacher, support her development in both languages?"

This was my struggle as Graciela's teacher. I hoped the collaborative inquiry process would help me come up with new questions and perhaps generate ideas for how I could work with her.

In November of the second year of our study, we gathered a large sample of Graciela's work, laid it out on a table, and collected our first impressions of it. From our general impressions, we noticed that Graciela was writing a lot, although it was hardly legible. We noticed that her drawings showed remarkable continuities. For example, the way that she drew animals demonstrated set patterns of shaping the animal's body and body parts. She almost always placed a cap on her drawings of dogs! However, her writing showed a lack of consistency. Even the spelling of her name showed variation. We noticed that "b's and d's" showed up often in her writing. We wondered whether this had to do with how Graciela spoke; for example, she would say "da" for the word "the."

Selecting one piece of Graciela's work for closer description, we continued to notice that many of the words were spelled phonetically, and in several cases were not separated from each other. For example, the words "need them" were written as "net-hem," perhaps again reflecting how the phrase sounded when she spoke. The words that she most frequently used, such as "family, happy, sad, love, and me," although not always spelled the same within one piece, were recognizable.

All of these observations and descriptions had implications for

teaching Graciela, particularly in how they refocused me on understanding who Graciela was as a learner. I could have chosen to look at all the things that she could *not* do, but instead I realized that Graciela's work had intention, purpose, and was part of a system.

From this Descriptive Review of work and over two years of studying her, we came up with this process for supporting her as a thinker and a learner:

1. As soon as students were sent off to write independently, I would sit with Graciela and *talk*. Talk was my way to help her organize her thinking and then transfer it to paper. This talk would also result in a word bank that she could reference when doing independent work.
2. More often than not, I asked her to draw before writing anything, so that she had that visual image to refer to if she had trouble deciding what to write next.
3. Once we determined what she was going to write, I would have her articulate it as I drew a line for every word she planned to write. The length of the lines corresponded to the length of the words, giving her visual cues. I also included spacing between words, which Graciela often omitted. Once the lines were written out on her paper, together we would re-state what she was going to write, tapping on each line as we said the words. (Her writing was usually only a sentence long.)
4. She would write the first two words with my scaffolding, which included aiding her in listening for beginning and ending sounds.

5. I also used a film-strip-like paper template that had rectangular boxes cut into it. We laid the template atop her clean sheet of paper, and she wrote sequentially—one word of her sentence in each box. When she finished, she would lift off the template to reveal her writing with individual well-spaced words.
6. At times, I asked her to read her work back to me. I took notes as she read so that she could see the standard way of spelling some of her misspelled words.
7. Finally, we would sit together and Graciela would tell me the story and do more partner writing.

These were things I had never tried before, but they represented a modification of my teaching that allowed me to meet Graciela close to her strengths. However, despite the changes in my teaching, when I would come back to her, she had once again produced strings of words with no spacing, letters that did not correspond to what she wanted to say, and very few comprehensible words to cue me in to her meaning so that I could help her remember what she had meant to write. Although at times I felt discouraged and inadequate, I continued to use these strategies to help Graciela develop a repertoire of ways to express her thoughts and language in writing.

In April, our study group returned to Graciela's work. We immediately noted that her work was more legible. From her writing, we could figure out what sounds she was hearing and how she was hearing them. It seemed that Spanish sounds as opposed to English sounds were more easily

accessible to her when she wrote, as they were more frequent.

We also noted how Graciela's personality shone through in much of the writing. Her gifts as a storyteller with a very personal connection to things infused even her nonfiction writing. For example, in her writing about the planet Venus, she wrote, "When it rains on Venus, you can turn into a statue." Her drawing shows a girl on Venus with bubbles on her head and hands, wherever there is any exposed skin. This work has her stamp of, "This is me."

This second Descriptive Review of Graciela's work inspired me to keep looking at students through close study of the work they create.

TEACHERS TEACHING ONE ANOTHER: SARAH'S REFLECTIONS ON A CASE OF MUSIC AND INQUIRY

In my fifth and last year as the music teacher at Cypress Hills, I took the opportunity to conduct a review of my practice with our study group. Our collaborative descriptive inquiry created a space for me to legitimize my own intent as a music teacher, and for my colleagues to help me develop practical teaching tools with which to realize that intent in my classroom. My inquiry was inspired by understanding how other teachers in the inquiry group viewed language learning. In our dual language program, language was not just the acquisition of language competencies, but also the development of fluency and use. I wanted to understand how my teaching of music could foster fluency.

I have always found a deep sense of freedom and accomplishment in musical performance. I

played because it fed an authentic need inside myself. The awareness of this need and ability to feed it was what I wanted to give my students. I gave some of them good grades and consistent positive feedback. These were, I have come to realize, largely students who were good at doing things they were instructed to do, who were careful, who prioritized pleasing the teacher over the content of their work, who didn't have a strong emotional attachment to the work, and who were not particularly innovative. To other students, I gave less positive feedback and lower grades. Ironically, these were largely the students I was most excited about—they were budding musicians. They tended to be students who couldn't contain their energy, who made noise constantly, who came up with their own crazy melodies at home and were bored and disruptive during the more didactic parts of class, who were so excited to play that they got stage fright when performing for others and made mistakes. Where—and why—was there such a disconnect between my intentions and my assessments?

I met with our study group, describing my concerns. I didn't want order in class and the success of a few students to come at the expense of really teaching kids to be musicians, with all of the attendant experimentation, high energy, mistake-making, and innovation that musicianship requires.

Each member of the group visited my classroom to observe my teaching, took notes about what they saw me doing, and what they saw my students doing. They reported back about my tone, my words, my timing, my attention and its breadth. They told me many things about my students

that I hadn't noticed—what they were saying and doing, how they reacted to me, when they seemed rushed and confused and when they were strong and engaged.

Listening to the descriptions of my work in the classroom, noting what I liked and what I didn't like about what I heard, I realized that what I wanted from my students was commitment, not success. I wanted them to be fluent and literate in music, not simply decoders and imitators. I wanted them to experience music internally, not just to put on a good show. I wanted them to engage.

At the suggestion of our facilitators, Cecilia E. and Cecelia T., I did some careful reviews of students I was particularly curious about. I observed them in music class, in band practice, and in other classes. I took copious notes, looking for ways that these students showed their commitment. For example:

Carla is eager. She is head over heels trying to play on her trumpet the songs she hears in her head. She often stumbles through a series of false notes and then looks up as if to say, "Didn't I do great?" She doesn't hear what she plays; she hears the sounds she is imagining inside her head. She doesn't slow down. She plays faster every time she repeats to correct a mistake, and she makes new mistakes each time. Then, she shakes her head hard back and forth, smiling and frustrated and makes little squeaks and says how she must stop and cannot listen or hear anything from the outside. She is committed to what she has inside her mind. She wants to play when others are eating or on break. She wants to play, play, play, loud, loud, loud and cannot listen.

I brought my observations back to the inquiry group for a follow-up discussion. How could I encourage my students to work towards commitment and fluency in my music classes, and unseat the conventional hierarchy in which performance and decoding skills are the most highly valued? I wanted my students to play music the way they play a make-believe game: with whole-self commitment and improvisational aptitude and concern for their character development, wanting to have fun and feel emotion and communicate with other players, serving their own inner needs for certain emotions to be expressed through their play.

Concerning my classroom practice, my colleagues suggested

- that I use various techniques for focusing children's attention and centering the group at the beginning of the class, opening each work period with an experiential reminder about being "tuned in";
- that I reward commitment by giving positive verbal feedback to students when they are engaged and enthusiastic about playing, prior to any evaluation of success;
- that I talk less, give less direction, leave more time in class for students to create, make mistakes, and experiment;
- that I reward students who experiment with courage and abandon, even when that experimentation might not be particularly successful as performance;
- that I ask students to think about how they learn best, and credit them for their awareness of their own learning style and for their attending to their own learning needs;

- that when teachers are given the opportunity to provide small-group enrichment classes during "extended day," I select groups of students who have demonstrated high levels of commitment and engagement instead of students who are either particularly successful or particularly unsuccessful.

Through the last few months of my teaching year, I dedicated myself to this project of encouraging student commitment. I started classes with focusing exercises. I bombarded disruptive and over-eager students with positive feedback for their enthusiasm and gave out performance opportunities left and right. I told students over and over that mistakes are not important; it is the whole experience of playing music that matters. I tried to let students make noise (if they were on task) and waited for them to be done trying to play something, rather than chastising them for playing out of turn. I created small extended-day groups of two to eight children, based on commitment and enthusiasm rather than success. Incredibly, I saw results in a few short months. With my new approach to teaching, some students, who for years had been unsuccessful performers and often discouraged by my negative feedback, suddenly blossomed into the most committed and successful musicians in the school.

I had been teaching for years with the uncomfortable awareness that my teaching was not always commensurate with my deeper beliefs and experience as a teacher and a musician. I had never addressed this disconnect in a formal setting. The only way I was able to explore this problem was with a group of peers who believed

in my work, were dedicated to my improvement as a teacher, and were willing to support my inquiry. This kind of shared inquiry would be difficult to accomplish in a context where an administrator's sole focus was to evaluate whether or not I was "doing a good job" or "meeting standards."

MOVING OUR TEACHING FORWARD: LAURA COACHES LINA'S WORK WITH MANNY

Last year, Manny was in a classroom led by a new teacher, Lina. As a literacy coach in our building, my role was to offer support to Lina as she undertook her first year of teaching. For Lina, Manny's behavior posed questions about ways to continue to engage him in learning. She noted that Manny was participating in the social world of the classroom and was very popular within it. However, Manny's interest in the social workings of school seemed to place him at odds with school work. Lina wondered how this would impact his learning. She also wondered how Manny's preference for movement and performance would impact his ability to get his work done in fourth grade. Our work together as teacher and coach was informed by the spirit and processes of the inquiry group and therefore started from our questions, not from a set of predetermined benchmarks.

One way that our collaborative work took form was through observations and descriptive reviews. Manny was a child whom we had studied through descriptive reviews at the start of our inquiry group when he was in second grade. We returned to him through a descriptive review

of his fourth-grade work with Lina. The patterns that we noted through earlier reviews continued to mark his work. For example, presentation—visual detail and design—remained important to him across all of his drawings and writing. His deep-rooted preferences for and interest in movement, performance, and rhythm remained a cornerstone of his identity as a learner. I observed, for instance, that as he worked on estimating (math strategy), he wrote with one hand and tapped the table with the other, announcing to all within earshot, “I am *estimando!* [*estimating!*]”

During the review, Lina shared her confusion about Manny. It seemed to Lina that Manny put forth minimal effort in his class work, and she worried that he retained very little of the curricular content. Yet in addressing a different grade as part of a school project, Manny was an expert, confidently speaking to other students at length about Native American longhouses using precise vocabulary. When thinking about how to continue to support Manny in his school work and build on his strengths, it became clear that one way to support him was through his love of performance.

As we continued to observe him, it became increasingly evident to me that Manny was consistently engaged in class activities, although his engagement was surrounded by a “theater” that was usually louder than what was called for given the setting. Using his strengths and preferences as an entry point, Lina and I decided to support Manny’s learning by infusing lessons with visual literacy and theater. In planning lessons together or when I would model lessons for Lina,

we worked on emphasizing language and concepts that could be depicted visually or through role play or imagination (Espinosa, 2006). We invited children to enact their imaginings connected to the concept we were teaching. We also chose genres that had performance components, such as debates, in order to provide curriculum that would open the doors to Manny. For example, in a lesson introducing the concept of historical fiction, I wove in imaginary play by having children pretend that they had a magical basket in which they could put their hand and touch different objects. Imagining these different textures engaged the children beyond oral and written language. Their experience was then tied to an author’s creative leap in imagining a set of circumstances that would create a believable context for historical fiction writing. We believed these techniques would address Manny’s preferences for learning through visual detail and performance while aiding other children in the process of learning in our dual language program.

As the year went on, Lina and I continued our conversations about how this work had an impact on her teaching. She reflected on our work and stated that looking closely at Manny had helped her move to thinking about how to make her class more “kid-friendly.” She noted that the class day was structured around what *she* needed to get accomplished instead of around the more productive intersection of grade-specific curricular needs and the children’s needs. From this realization, Lina began to develop a classroom structure that affected all students by integrating and building on those rich resources children bring to the classroom.

In our study group, we strove to understand children as makers of language rather than just producers of the language we modeled. Manny illustrates this for us at different levels. Manny’s bilingualism is a strength. He is not only a speaker of English and Spanish, his expression of language is influenced by being Dominican in Brooklyn, New York. The language that Manny brings to school explodes the barriers of what is traditionally conceived as literacy, which is often “restricted to formalized, monolingual, mono-cultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 9). Becoming familiar with Manny’s mode of expression and of being in school can be thought of as an extension of bilingualism and actually affects his use of both English and Spanish. When we think of Manny’s language as also encompassing his *use* of it, how he expresses and reveals himself to others, it reminds us that children learn and create because they are participants in the world, a much larger context than the worlds of our classrooms. The contours of Manny’s expression and the learning he brings to the classroom are vital to welcoming all students into our dual language program. This stance challenges us to offer a broader and more appropriate menu of teaching practices and experiences. This is only possible if we understand that children are active participants in the development of their literacies/biliteracies.

This type of coaching through inquiry takes time. Throughout my nearly ten years as a teacher and a coach, I know the demands that schools place on our time. Our focus is most often drawn to meet-

ing deadlines and planning lessons rather than looking at student work. However, this story also illustrates that to truly understand how children learn, we need to firmly ground ourselves in asking questions. This work—the asking of questions and the quest to uncover the answers—is teachers' work.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INQUIRY: MICHAEL'S THOUGHTS

In my third-grade, dual-language classroom, I quite often feel like I am holding everyday teacher-student interactions so close that I am unable to see either the forest *or* the trees. I feel isolated and mired in the minutiae of how to seat students, when to distribute pencils, how to enforce consequences, and how to balance a challenging and authentic curriculum with the all-too-real testing mandates. Along with this isolation come questions and second-guesses about my teaching—"Why is this child not getting it? What am I missing?" The descriptive review group allowed a reprieve from this isolation, even if only for an occasional afternoon.

My colleagues in our child study group routinely offered a fresh perspective, gentle rejoinders, and informed alternatives—"Maybe you are distorting things a little . . . Could it be this? . . . Have you tried scribing for him?" Our sessions were a chance to look in and around my class and to consider my students with clear eyes, stripped of the assumptions and working conclusions that simultaneously enable me to get through each day and prevent me from attempting any strategies that are truly creative. I also found the opportunity to be a

descriptive observer and resource for other teachers to be liberating. Scrutinizing the work of students who were not in my direct care and hypothesizing about how they learn and how they might learn more easily allowed me to marshal all of my experience and training as an educator and truly be of service, without the attendant and unavoidable anxieties of talking about my own students and classroom.

Our collaborative work in the inquiry group consistently made me feel like a professional. Time and again on these Monday afternoons, after an agonizingly long day, I felt that the last thing I wanted to do was micro-analyze another student's work. I had things to do! Yet without fail, I left the meetings feeling energized, excited, and full of renewed respect. This respect was for my colleagues, my coaches, our students' hard work, and for the mysteries and challenges of teaching as a whole. I was continually amazed by and grateful for the perceptive, thoughtful, and cogently argued observations of the other teachers and coaches in the group. The descriptive review was essential, not only in the way it impacted how I saw my students, but also how I saw myself as an educator and member of a professional learning community.

MERGING EXPERIENCE AND THEORY: GROWING UNDERSTANDINGS OF LITERACY THROUGH OUR INQUIRY GROUP

These stories are of building relationships and knowledge together. The relationships between Berky and Graciela; Sarah and her students through music; Laura, Lina, and Manny; and among us

as teachers in an inquiry group helped us to understand the web of relationships that bind us and our students to the world. Our experience of collaborative inquiry around the issue of language learning at our school transformed us, our teaching, and our students' learning. In striving to understand how to open the doors to English and Spanish literacies at our school, we began to develop strategies to meet the "unofficial" world that children brought into our classroom. As an inquiry group, we took *their* invitation to understand how they engaged with and moved through literacy experiences and culture. From this inquiry standpoint, the bilingual teacher's lens is inverted to think about learning that begins with understanding the child rather than with the planning of discrete objectives that tend to dwell on grammatical competencies and the use of functional chunks, or useful phrases, of language.

Our narratives focus on change. These changes are rooted in understanding a particular child, but also impact the community as a whole. Our experience in our inquiry group has brought to the forefront the following vital aspects of growing professionally:

- *Teachers need to carve out time and space to pursue their own questions.* In order for schools to remain dynamic, we must engage in specific conversations about children that move beyond expectations of what normative behavior looks like; many students' strengths cannot be seen through these lenses. Rather, as teachers, we need to develop practices that welcome student diversity.
- *Teachers need to work together to expand the scope*

and development of children's literacies by building on their strengths. We must acknowledge children's unofficial worlds in order to expand our understanding of literacy. Literacy is expressed not only through reading and writing, but through a multiplicity of intentions, actions, and sounds.

- *Teachers need to implement disciplined observation processes that enable them to see learning more clearly.* It is not only the children that we are examining closely. We are also examining ourselves: it is the relationship between students and teachers that we must continue to consider in order to address the potential cultural mismatch between students and schools.
- *Teachers can help one another continue to be flexible and willing to grow.* Teachers bring to the classroom an idea of the boundaries of what constitutes a teaching subject, such as reading and writing. We must be willing to work to enlarge the border of what defines that particular discipline so that it becomes more inclusive of everyone in the community of learners.

Our descriptive processes push us to ask questions about teaching and learning in a dual language setting, questions that have to be planned for and examined within the broader school community. This is a political task because it widens the circle of a functional participatory community. In contrast to the rosy picture of multiculturalism often painted, there are conflicts in incorporating differences in classrooms—and voices in research. The mem-

bers of the New London Group write, "The dialogue will encounter chasms of difference in values and grossly unjust inequities, and difficult but necessary border crossings. The differences are not as neutral, colorful, and benign as simplistic multiculturalism might want us to believe" (2000, p. 37). These "rough spots" or zones of contention are essential, however, because they have the potential to affect creative positive change in the interactions between teachers and students as well as between the school and its students. The conversations in our inquiry group were not always easy and the paths to take with our children were often not very clear. However, the promise of merging our experience, theories, and beliefs about language learning through collaborative inquiry opened up possibilities for us as teachers and learners to restore ourselves as educators who are concerned with students' learning and growth.

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