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# Bilingual Classroom Studies and Community Analysis: Some Recent Trends

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Most children attending bilingual education classes in the United States are working-class students. Although rarely addressed in the literature, this fact has major implications for the goals and nature of instruction in these classrooms. In comparison with the schooling of peers from higher-income families, instruction for working-class students, be it in bilingual or monolingual classrooms, can be characterized as rote, drill and practice, and intellectually limited, with an emphasis on low-level literacy and computational skills (see, e.g. Anyon, 1980, 1981; Goldenberg, 1984, 1990; Oakes, 1986; also see Goodlad, 1984). This reduction of the curriculum is not only in terms of content, but in terms of limited and constrained uses of literacy and mathematics, the primary instructional means.

This working-class 'identity' of bilingual education is also reflected in the types of questions and issues that guide bilingual education research. In general, the dominant issues in bilingual education are related to English language learning and assimilation of students into the mainstream, with scant attention paid to academic development or broader social and instructional dynamics. Typical questions include how to determine language dominance; how long the first language should be used in instruction; when to mainstream or transfer students to English-only instruction; and, of course, what sorts of language tests to use to evaluate the effectiveness of one program versus another.

García and Otheguy (1985, 1987), in their revealing research on private bilingual schools located within Cuban working-class (and other) communities in Dade County, FL, have pointed

out the myopia that seems to affect the field of bilingual education research. They report starting their study by trying to address some of the core bilingual education questions mentioned above (García & Otheguy, 1987: 85). They soon discovered that these questions were irrelevant or inapplicable to the schools they were studying. Indeed, their respondents could hardly make sense of their questions: 'These issues are not relevant at all to the people we interviewed. These community educators were only concerned about the best possible way of educating their own children. None of the [Cuban] schools focused solely on bilingualism or monolingualism as a goal. *In fact, there was remarkably little interest in language questions*' (p. 90, emphasis in original). Curricular issues common in bilingual education, such as remedial instruction, the categorization of children by language dominance, or the language of initial reading, were also dismissed by these educators as irrelevant if not nonsensical, and in some instances they had never even heard of them (pp. 90-92).

The primary concern in these schools, then, was not with the typical language issues associated with bilingual education, but with pedagogical issues and academic development, with providing a quality education for the children. Spanish and English fluency and literacy were simply expected and developed as unquestioned, valuable, obvious goals for Cuban children living and going to school in the United States. As the authors reported, in these schools, 'the use of both languages is considered the only natural - indeed the only conceivable - way of educating children' (1985: 13).

García and Otheguy (1987) concluded that

their initial research questions failed because they had uncritically accepted the status quo in bilingual public schools and the limited vision of what is important or what counts as education for these children. They wrote: 'We too had framed our original questions within what one might call the majority context, that is, the intellectual and pedagogical context within which most US-born, white, English-speaking educators frame their thinking about the education of linguistic minorities' (p. 92). This is a context that focuses on 'disadvantages', where explanations of these students' school performance usually assume they come from socially and intellectually limiting family environments, or that these students lack ability, or there is something wrong with their thinking or their values, especially in comparison with wealthier peers (Díaz *et al.*, 1986). This is also a context where the obsession with speaking English reigns supreme – as if the children were somehow incapable of learning that language well, or as if the parents and teachers were unaware of the importance of English in US society – and usually at the expense of other educational or academic matters. In short, to the extent that researchers and practitioners in bilingual education uncritically accept this limited vision of students, and the reductionist instruction that supports this vision, they help sustain beliefs and practices that severely constrain what bilingual teachers and students can accomplish.

### Some Recent Trends

In what follows, I present an example from a recent study in bilingual education that addresses broader social and academic issues than simply learning English, remedial instruction, or basic skills. This study takes what could be called a sociocultural approach to instruction (for additional examples, see Moll, 1990; Moll & Díaz, 1987; also see Cole, 1990; Newman *et al.*, 1989; Rosebery *et al.*, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This approach, influenced in great part by Vygotsky's (1978) and Luria's (1981) formulation of how social practices and the use of cultural artifacts mediate thinking, highlights how classrooms (or households) are always socially and culturally organized settings, artificial creations, whose specific practices mediate the intellectual work children accomplish. When classrooms are viewed in this way, a key focus of study becomes how (and why) children come to use essential

'cultural tools', such as reading, writing, mathematics, or certain modes of discourse, within the activities that constitute classroom life.

These studies, therefore, contribute to recent discussion in these pages and elsewhere on 'participatory' or 'apprenticeship' models of instruction that emphasize 'socializing' or 'enculturating' students into the important practices of, for example, a highly literate or scientific classroom community (see, e.g. Brown *et al.*, 1989; Palincsar, 1989; also see Farnham-Diggory, 1990; Goodman & Goodman, 1990; Heath & Mangiola, 1991; Hirsch, 1989; Holt, 1990). As Resnick (1990) has recently explained in relation to literacy instruction:

The shift in perspective from personal skill to cultural practice carries with it implications for a changed view of teaching and instruction. If literacy is viewed as a bundle of skills, then education for literacy is most naturally seen as a matter of organizing effective lessons: that is, diagnosing skill strength and deficits, providing appropriate exercises in developmentally felicitous sequences, motivating students to engage in these exercises, giving clear explanation and direction. But if literacy is viewed as a set of cultural practices then education for literacy is more naturally seen as a process of socialization, of induction into a community of literacy practitioners. (p. 171, emphasis in original)

Creating the social and cultural conditions for this socialization into 'authentic' literacy practices, or into doing science and mathematics, is central to the studies cited above, and to the example presented below. Within this bilingual classroom, children are active learners using language and literacy, in either English or Spanish, as tools for inquiry, communication, and thinking. The role of the teacher, which is critical, is to enable and guide activities that involve students as thoughtful learners in socially and academically meaningful tasks. This emphasis on active research and learning leads to the realization that these children (and their families) contain ample resources, which we have termed *funds of knowledge*, that can form the bases for an education that far exceeds what working-class students usually receive.

Next I describe research that my colleagues and I are conducting in Latino (predominantly

Mexican) households and bilingual classrooms in Tucson, AZ (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll *et al.*, 1990). I first explain what we mean by funds of knowledge and then present an example of a teacher using this concept in the teaching of literacy to bilingual students. This study, I must emphasize, is only one of several that is helping facilitate a critical redefinition of bilingual education and its purposes (see, e.g. McCarty, 1989). Each in its own way attempts to create positive change in bilingual classrooms by taking full advantage of the sociocultural resources in the surrounding environment, including the children's developing bilingualism and knowledge, and in so doing, illustrates how easily we educators have come to accept notions of limitations and deficits in the education of these children.

### A Funds-of-Knowledge Perspective

The guiding principle in our work is that the students' community represents a resource of enormous importance for educational change and improvement. We have focused our analysis on the sociocultural dynamics of the children's households, especially on how these households function as part of a wider, changing economy, and how they obtain and distribute resources of all types through the creation of strategic social ties or networks (see, e.g. Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1989). For present purposes, I will discuss only the breadth of the knowledge that these social networks can facilitate for a household.

In contrast to many classrooms, households never function alone or in isolation; they are always connected to other households and institutions through diverse social networks. For families with limited incomes, these networks can be a matter of survival because they facilitate different forms of economic assistance and labor cooperation that help families avoid the expenses involved in using secondary institutions, such as plumbing companies or automobile repair shops. These networks can also serve other important functions, including finding jobs and providing assistance with child care, releasing mothers, if need be, to enter the labor market. In brief, these networks form social contexts for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and information, as well as cultural values and norms. Given their importance to a household's well-being, family members invest considerable energy and resources in maintaining good social relations with others that make

up the networks. These relations are maintained through participation in family rituals, such as baptisms, *quinceañeras* (adolescent girls' 'debutante' parties), and weddings, and through frequent, and sometimes strategic, visits (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1989).

From our perspective, the essential function of these social networks is that they share or exchange what we have termed *funds of knowledge*: the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive (see Greenberg, 1989). These funds of knowledge are acquired primarily, but not exclusively, through work and participation in diverse labor markets. With our sample, much of this knowledge is related to the households' rural origins and, of course, to current employment or occupations in what is often an unstable and highly segmented labor market (for examples, see Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1989).

The knowledge and skills that such households (and their networks) possess are truly impressive. To make the point, consider the information presented in abbreviated form in Table 1. This information was culled from our field notes and interviews with a sample of 30 families. We have visited families that know about different soils, cultivation of plants, seeding, and water distribution and management. Others know animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, ranch economy, and mechanics. Many families know about carpentry, masonry, electrical wiring, fencing, and building codes. Some families employ folk remedies, herbal cures, midwifery, and intricate first aid procedures. And family members with more formal schooling have knowledge about (and have worked in) archaeology, biology, and mathematics.

We argue that these families and their funds of knowledge represent a *potential* major social and intellectual resource for the schools. Consider that every classroom has approximately 30 students in it; these students represent 30 households *and* their networks with their respective funds of knowledge. The key point is not only that there are ample funds of knowledge among these working-class households, but that this knowledge is socially distributed. When needed, such knowledge is available and accessible through the establishment of relationships that constitute social networks.

How can a teacher make use of these funds of knowledge within the usual classroom condi-

**Table 1** A sample of household funds of knowledge

| Agriculture and mining   | Economics  | Household management                      | Material and scientific knowledge  | Medicine   | Religion   |
|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| Ranging and Farming<br>Horsemanship (cowboys)<br>Animal husbandry<br>Soil and irrigation systems<br>Crop planting<br>Hunting, Tracking, Dressing<br>Mining<br>Timbering<br>Minerals<br>Blasting<br>Equipment operation and maintenance | Business<br>Market values<br>Appraising<br>Renting and selling<br>Loans<br>Labor laws<br>Building codes<br>Consumer knowledge<br>Accounting<br>Sales | Budgets<br>Childcare<br>Appliance repairs | Construction<br>Carpentry<br>Roofing<br>Masonry<br>Painting<br>Design and architecture<br>Repair<br>Airplane<br>Automobile<br>Tractor<br>House maintenance | Contemporary medicine<br>Drugs<br>First aid procedures<br>Anatomy<br>Midwifery<br>Folk medicine<br>Herbal knowledge<br>Folk cures<br>Folk veterinary cures | Catechism<br>Baptisms<br>Bible studies<br>Moral knowledge and ethics |

tions? We have been experimenting with various arrangements, including having teachers conduct household visits to document funds of knowledge (see Moll *et al.*, in press). Central to this work has been the development of after-school settings where we meet with teachers to analyze their classrooms, to discuss household observations, and to jointly develop innovations in the teaching of literacy, among other matters. These after-school settings represent social contexts for informing, assisting, and supporting the teachers' work: a setting, in our terms, for teachers and researchers to exchange funds of knowledge (for details, see Moll *et al.*, 1990).

Consider the work of a bilingual sixth grade teacher in our project, Ina A., and her development of what we have called the *construction module* (see Moll & Greenberg, 1990). She got the idea for the module (or thematic unit) from the work of other teachers and researchers in the after-school setting, who were experimenting with an instructional activity centered around the topics of construction and building. Construction, it turns out, is a topic of considerable interest to

the students and a prominent fund of knowledge among the households (see Table 1). Ina decided to implement this module in her classroom in an attempt to integrate home and school knowledge around an academic activity. Her efforts, summarized below, represent a good example of mobilizing funds of knowledge for instruction.

**Creating Strategic Social Networks for Teaching**

After discussing with the students the idea of a module or theme study about construction, the teacher asked them to visit the library and start locating information, in either Spanish or English, on the topic. The students obtained materials, for example, on the history of dwellings and on different ways of building structures. Meanwhile, the teacher, through her own research in a community library and in the school district's media center, also located a series of books on construction and on different professions involved in construction, including books on architects and carpenters, and included them as part of the literate resources the class could

use in developing the module. The students also built model houses or other structures as homework, using materials available in their homes, and wrote brief essays describing their research or explaining their construction (see Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

The teacher, however, did not stop there. She proposed to the class inviting parents or other community members who were experts on the topic to provide information that could expand the students' knowledge and work. The teacher reported that the children were surprised but intrigued by the idea of inviting their parents to the class as experts, especially given some of the parents' lack of formal schooling. The first two visitors were the father of one of the girls in the class, who worked for the school district, and a community member who worked in construction. The teacher was particularly interested in their describing their use of construction instruments and tools, and how they used mathematics in their work to estimate or measure the area or perimeter of a location, for example. The teacher described the visits as follows (from Moll & Greenberg, 1990):

The first experience was a total success... We received two parents. The first one, Mr S., father of one of my students, works at [the school district] building portable classrooms. He built his own house, and he helped my student do her project. He explained to the students the basic details of construction. For example, he explained about the foundation of a house, the way they need to measure the columns, how to find the perimeter or area... After his visit, the children wrote what they learned about this topic. It was interesting to see how each one of them learned something different: e.g. the vocabulary of construction, names of tools, economic concerns, and the importance of knowing mathematics in construction. (p. 338)

Building on her initial success, the teacher invited others to make their expertise available to the class:

The next parent was Mr T. He was not related to any of the students. He is part of the community and a construction worker. His visit was also very interesting. He was nervous and a little embarrassed, but after a while he seemed more relaxed. The children

asked him a great number of questions. They wanted to know how to make the mix to put together bricks... He explained the process and the children were able to see the need for understanding fractions in mathematics because he gave the quantities in fractions. They also wanted to know how to build arches. He explained building arches through a diagram on the board, and told the students that this was the work of engineers. (pp. 338-339)

What is important is that the teacher invited parents and others in the community to contribute *intellectually* to the development of lessons; in our terms, she started developing a social network to access funds of knowledge for academic purposes. In total, about 20 community people visited the classroom during the semester to contribute to lessons. The teacher used various sources of funds of knowledge, including the students' own knowledge and the results of their research, their parents and relatives, the parents of students in other classrooms, and the teacher's own social relationships, including other school staff, community members, and university personnel. These classroom visits were not trivial; parents and others came to share their knowledge, expertise, or experiences with the students and the teacher. This knowledge, in turn, became part of the students' work or a focus of study (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

As the year progressed, these funds of knowledge became a regular feature of classroom instruction. The teacher also used homework assignments as a vehicle to tap the funds of knowledge of the students' homes and other locations, such as work sites. All of these activities, from the planning and interviewing to the preparation of a final product by the students, involved considerable reading and writing in both languages by the students. Literacy in English and Spanish occurred as a means of analysis and expression, not as isolated reading and writing exercises. To support the development of writing, and to enable individual assessments, the teacher organized peer-editing groups that focused on how to improve the writing to facilitate the clear expression of ideas, whether in English or Spanish. The teacher evaluated the students' progress by their ability to deal with new and more complex activities, and by their ability to read and produce

more sophisticated writing to accomplish those activities.

Through the development of a social network for teaching, the teacher convinced herself that valuable knowledge existed beyond the classroom and that it could be mobilized for academic purposes. She also understood that teaching *through* the community, as represented by the people in the various social networks and their collective funds of knowledge, could become part of the classroom routine, that is, part of the 'core' curriculum. The teacher's role in these activities became that of a facilitator, mediating the students' interactions with text and with the social resources made available to develop their analysis, and monitoring their progress in reading and writing in two languages.

### Conclusion

A sociocultural approach to instruction presents new possibilities in bilingual education, where the emphasis is not solely on remediating students' English language limitations, but on utilizing available resources, including the children's or the parents' language and knowledge, in creating new, advanced instructional circumstances for the students' academic development. It is revealing, however, that our case study example, as well as other studies of this genre (e.g. Rosebery *et al.*, 1990), represent attempts at change that begin at the classroom level, with the teachers (and researchers) and the students actively shaping and giving intellectual direction to their work. These studies represent, therefore, positive examples, and perhaps a challenge to the instructional status quo, but certainly not systemic changes in bilingual education. It is, nonetheless, this focus on bringing broader research issues to bear on local circumstances that holds promise for change in bilingual education. As Goldenberg & Gallimore (1991) have remarked, 'The prospect of reforming schools depends on a better understanding of the interplay between research knowledge and local knowledge. The more we know about the dynamics of this interplay, the more likely it is that the research can have an effect on the nature and effectiveness of schools' (p. 2).

Our work, then, is an attempt at what could be called 'situated' change. We start with (or develop) the understanding that all classrooms are artificial creations, culturally mediated settings, in the Vygotskian sense, organized

around beliefs and practices that control and regulate the intellectual life of the students. The role of the teachers within these systems is critical, as are their conceptions of what counts or is appropriate in the education of bilingual students, conceptions that are influenced by the larger school and societal context. We have found, as have others (e.g. Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), that although teachers may be quite willing to work for change, developing and implementing innovations is difficult and laborious work. Teachers, however, need not work alone; they can form study groups or other settings as special social and intellectual contexts to plan, support, and study change.

Within these settings teachers can collaborate with other colleagues, including researchers and parents, and receive assistance, as needed, in developing their thinking and their teaching. Creating and maintaining such supportive contexts with teachers seem to be indispensable aspects of obtaining positive change in education; that is, transformation in the conditions for teaching, and for thinking, is necessary if we are to obtain change in the students' classroom performance (see Richardson, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, 1989).

The examples included herein illustrate that practical change can be socially arranged by using and developing the students', teachers', and communities' sociocultural resources, their funds of knowledge, in the service of that change. In doing so, researchers must redefine their roles, transform themselves from passive recorders or analysts of educational success or failure to collaborators in developing potential, exploring possibilities, and perhaps forging a vision of the children's future that will facilitate instead of constrain the education they experience in the present.

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### Questions

1. How has instruction for working-class students usually been characterized? What does Moll mean by 'a sociocultural approach to instruction'? How does this relate to 'critical pedagogy'?
2. What are 'funds of knowledge'? Make a list of the social networks that exist in your community and the funds of knowledge that they transmit. How are such 'funds of knowledge' shared among households?
3. Contrast how households work with how classrooms work. Why are social networks very necessary in working-class families?
4. Why are 'funds of knowledge' important for teaching language minority children? Give some examples of how teachers might use 'funds of knowledge' in their classrooms?

### Activities

1. The guiding principle in Moll's work is 'that the students' community represents a resource of enormous importance for educational change and improvement'. Design a poster in which you list the resources in your community that are valuable to children and schools, and in particular to language minority students and schools interested in bilingualism.
2. Visit two families from ethnolinguistic minorities and list their social networks and their funds of knowledge. Make a chart for the class.
3. Imagine a school where parents and other community members contribute intellectually in the classroom. Compose a policy for the school that lists:
  - a. the aims and goals of this activity
  - b. the frequency and process of the contribution
  - c. the type of topics that would be included.
4. Design a classroom unit based on the 'funds of knowledge' of your community. Involve community residents in the planning of the unit. Share it with the class.

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