

# Building Worlds and Identities: *A Case Study of the Role of Narratives in Bilingual Literature Discussions*



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*This article investigates the use of oral narratives by a 7-year-old Mexican born girl (Isabela) participating in small group literature discussions in a bilingual 2nd-grade classroom in the U.S. over a year. The study is grounded in sociocultural and critical perspectives and uses narrative and transactional theories to understand literacy events. Qualitative case study design and critical discourse analysis provided the methodological tools to examine both the role of narratives in Isabela's discussions of texts and the role of context in shaping her talk. Data include transcripts from 15 small group literature discussions conducted in English, Spanish, or both and an interview with parents. In-depth analysis of one of her narratives indicates the ways in which the representational and interactional roles of narratives came together to support Isabela's construction of identity. Access to narratives and to her first language enabled this English language learner to develop situated identities in two arenas: an academic identity as a skillful student who participated effectively in the literature discussions and an ethnic and cultural identity rooted in her country of origin and Spanish language. The ways in which she used narratives of personal experiences in bilingual literature discussions and self-regulated her discourse according to the linguistic composition of the groups suggest a notion of achievement that departs from that of policymakers who interpret achievement only in terms of standardized test scores.*

TEACHER: So, what if Ms. Smith [the principal] comes in and says to us: "You cannot speak any more Spanish" and she takes away all the Spanish books *y se lleva todo en español y dice ella*: [and she takes away everything that is in Spanish and she says:] "From now on it's English only." How would that make you feel?

MARIO: Sad.

TEACHER: Why? Why would it make you feel sad? No more speaking in Spanish, no more Spanish books, no more songs, nothing. Just English all day. *Como, ¿qué tú crees, no más español, Mario, nada más inglés?* [Like, what do you think, Mario, no more Spanish, only English?]

MARIO: *Triste*. [Sad].

DAYANARA: I'd feel sad because my nana when she talks to me in Spanish, when she talks to me in Spanish, I have to talk in English to her because I can't talk Spanish.

(From literature discussion *In My Family/En mi familia*, 3/18/98)

The above excerpt was part of the discussion of Lomas-Garza's (1996) picturebook *In My Family/En mi familia* in a 2nd-grade bilingual classroom. The children were engaged in the construction of narratives about personal experiences as part of their responses to the text. (All of the participants' names except the teacher's are pseudonyms.) In this excerpt 7-year-old Dayanara brought into the discussion her experience of language loss which affected her communication with her Spanish-speaking grandmother. When teacher-researcher Julia López-Robertson posed the opening hypothetical question to her students, Julia and I could not anticipate that it was close to the day when limiting the access to bilingual education and even prohibiting the use of Spanish for instruction would become a reality in Arizona because of the approval of the English-only Proposition (Proposition 203, called "English for the Children" legislation).

Scholars studying classroom instruction after the approval of a similar English-only legislation in California (Proposition 227) point to the pressure placed on teachers to move Spanish speakers toward English as soon as possible. This pressure has led some teachers, and even entire schools, to

eliminate the use of Spanish texts and talk for supporting English language learners as readers and to privilege oral proficiency over meaning making (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato, 2000). Such instruction rarely considers different ways of knowing and making meaning, such as the use of oral narratives, or the use of quality children's literature as important aspects of classroom instruction, which may have implications for Latino/a students' access to learning and participation in schools.

Scholars whose work addresses the education of Latino/a students (e.g., Darder, 1995; García, 2001; Nieto, 2002; Soto, 1997) highlight the importance of creating learning contexts that value children's language, lives, and identities. As Nieto (2002) argues, acknowledging, respecting, or dismissing children's language and identities can indeed be noteworthy factors in promoting or hindering students' learning. More specifically, Latino/a scholars have raised the issues that "too often, in the primary grades, Latino/a children's cognitive development is put on hold until they can learn English" (Jiménez, Moll, Rodríguez-Brown, & Barrera, 1999, p. 225; cf. Reyes & Halcón, 2001) and that the reading instruction many of them receive does not draw and extend the resources they bring to school (Moll, Díaz, Estrada, & Lopes, 1992).

My concern about these issues led me to complete a one-year qualitative study of Julia's bilingual 2nd-grade classroom prior to Proposition 203 in Arizona. The study shifts the focus of the discussion on English language learners' (ELLs) education from mov-

ing them toward English as soon as possible to a focus on what is possible when ELL students have access to their home language and to different mediational means such as narratives as they engage in literature discussions. I examined the potential of children's literature to encourage thoughtful discussions in English and Spanish among young ELLs and the nature of the talk of bilingual students discussing children's literature in small groups (Martínez-Roldán, 2000).

Framed by sociocultural theory and a critical approach to discourses, this study draws on and extends one aspect of that larger study through a case study in which I analyze the narratives of a beginner reader, Isabela, a 7-year-old Mexican-born student, within the context of small group literature discussions. I examine the ways in which her narratives of personal experiences and storytelling functioned as cultural tools that mediated her participation in literature discussions and the role of the context in mediating her production of narratives. The following questions guided the analysis:

1. What roles did narratives play in Isabela's participation in small group literature discussions?
2. In what ways did the linguistic composition of the small groups (being in a Spanish-dominant group or in an English-dominant group) shape Isabela's use of narratives?
3. In what ways did a context that allowed access to multiple mediational means enable Isabela's discussions of texts?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Literature Discussions*

In this section I locate my study within the landscape of research on classroom talk about a particular type of text: children's literature. The benefits of reading and discussing literature for mainstream students have been addressed extensively in the professional literature from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Beach, 1993; Lewis, 2001; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995; Short & Pierce, 1998; Sipe, 1996). Some of the benefits for students include becoming skillful and competent readers, becoming thoughtful and critical readers, and developing a clearer sense of what it means to be better citizens in a democratic society.

Only a handful of studies, however, have focused their analysis on literature discussions with second language learners in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Klassen, 1993; Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997; Samway & Whang, 1996), and even fewer studies have focused on literature discussions in elementary bilingual classrooms either in whole or small groups (Battle, 1995; Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Martínez-Roldán, 2000). Indeed, no research on literature discussions in bilingual classrooms can be found in recent reviews about research on response to literature (e.g., Galda & Beach, 2001; Grossman, 2001; Marshall, 2000), a situation that Grossman acknowledges to be an omission in the research on literary response, which she describes as follows:

Another lacuna in research on literary response has to do with the issue of the readers included, and not included, in studies of

reader response. Many of the studies of reader response have been conducted with middle-class Caucasian students. To what extent can this research help us understand how racial or ethnic identities shape readings of text? How do second-language learners respond to literary texts in both their native language and in a second language? Understanding the “funds of knowledge” that second-language learners and other non-mainstream students bring to literature . . . can help teachers reconsider classroom practices that can enable more students to join the conversation. (p. 428)

Following Marshall’s (2000) description of the research on response to literature, this case study works within the empirical tradition of research focusing on both readers’ responses to texts and on the context in which those responses take shape. I focus on use of personal narratives, a very recurrent response in the second-grade bilingual children’s responses to literature in the larger study, paying special attention to an English language learner who stood out as a storyteller in the small group literature discussions over a year. Small group literature discussions or literature circles are small groups of students who read or are read the same book (or several books related to a single theme or broad issue) and then meet to discuss their understandings with one another (Short, 1995, 1997).

Since the work of Eeds & Wells (1989) on children’s responses to literature, researchers have investigated how personal experiences related (and sometimes not so related) to the texts have been a part of children’s process of making meaning from the texts and an important part of their literary understanding. For example, in Sipe’s (1996)

study of the construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in response to picture storybook readalouds, he found that personal responses to literature—when the children connected the texts to their own personal lives or used knowledge from the texts to inform their lives—was an important aspect of children’s construction of literary understanding, representing 10% of all the children’s responses to the literature. For some students in his study, as in Cox and Boyd-Batstone’s (1997) research, personal responses to literature provided them with an opportunity to become storytellers and to be active participants in the discussions.

Although narratives of personal experience are very common in young children’s responses to literature, some educators tend to worry about children’s engagement in this type of discourse as part of their discussions of texts. Roller and Beed (1994) openly share their initial concern over children’s making chains of personal stories as part of their responses to literature. The students engaged in accounts of personal experiences that began with ideas related to the discussion of the text, but after several stories the connection to the text often seemed to get lost. The teacher was nervously thinking about whether and how to bring them back to what she considered the task of interpreting the text. With observation and reflection, Roller and Beed overcame their concern and came to value the students’ responses as serving an important purpose in the children’s process of making meaning. The authors

argue that when children's oral cultures join with the adult's culture, "there is a place for a variety of styles and forms of language that in collaboration may contribute to literate and personalized interpretations of texts" (p. 515).

The next discussion places the study of personal narratives in children's responses to literature within a larger discussion of the roles of narratives in people's lives. The discussion is informed by multiple theoretical lenses but keeps at the center a sociocultural and critical perspective to the study of narratives of personal experiences.

### *Narratives as Cultural Tools*

A sociocultural theory of learning and development stresses the great importance of cultural resources (signs, symbols, interpersonal relations, and activities) in the formation and development of thinking (Moll, 1990, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). At the core of this theoretical perspective is the claim that higher mental processes in the individual have their origin in social processes (Wertsch, 1985). Narrative is one of the cultural tools that mediate people's thinking. Wertsch (1998) studied its role as a mediational mean for representing the past. On assigning narrative the character of cultural mediational tool, Wertsch (1998) explains:

Borrowing from Mink (1978, p. 144), my central point has been that "the cognitive function of narrative form . . . is not to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of interrelationships of many different kinds as a single whole." It is this tendency of narrative to "grasp together" (Mink, 1972, p. 736) diverse elements such as "agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, un-

expected results, etc." that is at the core of my treatment of narratives as cultural tools. (p. 106)

Wertsch (1998) argues that this "grasp[ing] together" is usually reached through the coherence created by the different elements of narratives. Relevant to this study is also Wertsch's discussion of the irreducible tension between agent, which he defines as "individual-operating-with-mediational-means" (p. 26), and the mediational means, in this case narrative as a tool. Although Wertsch studies narratives as they appear in historical texts and narratives constructed by college students to represent American history, his characterization of narratives as cultural tools and his discussion of the tension between agent and mediational means provides a strong basis for studying the role of other forms of narratives, such as oral narratives of personal experiences, which is the focus of this article.

Scholars drawing from different perspectives (e.g., psychology, literary studies, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics) have examined the roles of personal narratives in people's lives. In what follows I briefly discuss the nature of oral narratives and two roles well documented in the scholarship on narratives: the representational and interactional roles of narratives (Miller, 1994; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Worthman, 2001). The discussion concludes by addressing the relationship between narrative and identity (Gee, 1990, 1999a).

### *Narratives of Personal Experiences*

Ochs and Capps (2001), in studying personal narrative as people use it in

their daily lives, propose that personal narrative has properties characteristic of other genres. They identify, as does Wertsch (1998), the sense of coherence as an important element in a definition of personal narrative:

Personal narrative is a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience. (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 2; cf. Kermode, 1967)

Ochs and Capps (2001) add that the characteristic of coherence is based on cultural ways of telling (Heath, 1983). They stress that this aspect of children's narratives of everyday experiences, a coherence that responds to cultural ways of telling, has not been extensively addressed in developmental studies of children's narratives and that most of what has been done is limited in at least three ways:

1. Most studies examine how children (re)tell or comprehend "once upon a time" or picture-book narratives rather than their ability to narrate personal experience;
2. Most studies are culturally skewed, based primarily on White, middle class, English speaking populations; and
3. Most studies rely upon only one conception of narrative.

As Och and Capps argue:

Narrative competence is generally viewed as the ability to recount a narrative by oneself (one active teller), in a rhetorically effective manner (high tellability), which is relatively

self-contained (detached from surrounding discourse), with a coherent and progressive beginning, middle, and end (linear organization), and a constant moral stance. (p. 61)

Ochs and Capps acknowledge the benefits of studying this type of narrative but point out that such studies neglect to consider the various shapes and functions that narratives take in everyday life when the purpose is collaborative sense-making rather than performing. The following studies address two of those functions.

### **Representational Role of Narratives**

There is a significant body of professional literature on personal narratives that describes narratives as serving primarily a representational function in two ways: a means by which the narrator can reach a better understanding of the world and a more socially oriented way by which the individual self is defined or recreated. Narratives have been described as ways of making meaning from people's lives (Bruner & Lucariello, 1989; Miller, 1994; Rosen, 1986) and as the imposition of formal coherence on a virtual chaos of human events that when shared with others may help people to reach a collective understanding of important themes such as fear, courage, and loss (Rosen, 1986).

Along the same lines, Ochs and Capps (2001) state that most narratives of personal experiences function as "a sense-making *process* rather than as finished product in which loose ends are knit together into a single storyline" (p. 15; emphasis in original). It is precisely because of the openness and

complexities of narratives of personal experiences that Ochs and Capps view them not as a homogeneous genre having a set of distinctive fixed features but rather as varying in relation to the five dimensions they enumerate in their definition, which I cited above.

People's narratives about personal experiences also provide an important site for the social construction of self. In her study on language socialization, specifically on storytelling, Miller (1994) argues that personal storytelling is an important means by which young children, together with family members, experience and reexperience self in relation to others. She infers that stories of the children's experience in which they were co-narrators particularly defined and redefined self in relation to others in both the past events and the actual social circumstances of the telling. By examining co-narrations to see what they reveal about self in relationship to others, Miller points to a social aspect of narratives that goes beyond the representational function, placing the emphasis on the interactions among tellers and audiences.

#### **Interactional Roles of Narratives**

Wortham's (2001) study contributes further to an understanding of the social aspect of narratives by examining their function within the unfolding relationships among the people involved in the narrative event, which he calls the interactional function of narratives. Drawing on Bakhtin's work, he proposes a dialogic approach to the study of narrative that examines how narratives define not only the narrator

but the relationship between the narrator and the audience. After examining different types of discourse (an autobiographical narrative by an adult, a classroom discussion, and a television newscast), Wortham proposes that "an empirically adequate account of self-construction in personal narrative must acknowledge that narrative discourse both represents the narrator's self and positions the narrator interactionally" (p. 13).

Wortham (2001) acknowledges that the opportunity to tell stories about their lives can help personal narrators establish a coherent sense of who they are. However, he argues, narrators do more than understand themselves differently by representing their lives, for "they also learn how to act in characteristic ways with respect to others by enacting characteristic positions as they narrate their lives" (p. 157). The representational and interactional functions of narratives of personal experiences can thus interrelate so as partly to construct the self.

#### **Narratives and Identity: A Critical Perspective**

Scholars in and outside the U.S. have documented how some pedagogical practices in mainstream classrooms create academic identities for minority students associated with failure at school (e.g. Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994; Toohey, 2000). Gutiérrez and Larson used sociocultural/sociohistorical theory combined with critical theory to provide a more comprehensive account of the relationship among culture, development, and ways of knowing. The au-

thors acknowledge that though their emphases differ, both theories converge on the social construction of knowledge and the importance of context. Their study shows how certain patterns of discourse in classrooms restrict access to certain forms of knowledge, learning, and legitimate participation for Latino/a children.

Integrating a critical perspective in my theoretical framework allows me to connect the study of Isabela's narratives with larger issues of equity and access. The body of work on critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a variety of tools that can support such a perspective. Scholars engaged in critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1999a; van Dijk, 2001) have developed specific methodological tools from very different theoretical frameworks to describe and explain "the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353).

Gee's (1990) sociocultural approach to language and literacy, although different from the sociocultural/historical theory of human development from which I draw, converges with it in important ways. Both stress a view of literacy as embedded in sociocultural practices, as "composed of diverse, but closely interrelated 'tools' (mediating devices, Wertsch, 1998) for learning, development, and activity within concrete social practices at specific, socioculturally diverse sites" (Gee, 1999b, p. 358). Such perspective on literacy, along with Gee's interest in educational issues and his application of CDA to

examine children's narratives, led me to use his work for my analysis of Isabela's narratives.

When people speak or write, Gee (1999a) maintains, they craft what they have to say to fit the situation or context in which they are communicating. At the same time, the ways in which people speak create the very situation or context. As other scholars do, Gee describes narratives as important sense-making devices. For him, "people often encode into narratives the problems that concern them and their attempts to make sense or resolve these problems" (p. 134). According to Gee, through language—and through narrative as a form of language—people construct or build the following six areas of reality: 1) meanings and value of aspects of the material world, 2) activities, 3) politics (the distribution of social goods), 4) connections, 5) semiotics, and 6) identities and relationships. I shall return to these building tasks in the methods section.

Gee (1999a) developed several tools of inquiry that help to study how the building tasks are carried out and with what social and political consequences. The most relevant of these tools for my study are his constructs of *situated identities*, *situated meanings*, and *Discourses*. Situated identities are different identities or social positions that people enact and recognize in different settings. Situated meanings are local meanings assigned to language and words within specific situations, grounded in actual practices and experiences. Discourses are "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words,



acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities” (p. 142). They are ways of displaying membership in a particular social group, and in this sense, a Discourse is a sort of “identity kit” (Gee, 1990, p. 142). These constructs will inform my analysis of the roles of narratives for Isabela within the context of the small group literature discussions.

## **Method**

I combined qualitative research methods from ethnography and case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998) to examine Isabela’s use of narratives over a year, and critical discourse analysis methods (Gee, 1990, 1999a) to examine in depth one of the narratives constructed by Isabela as she participated in literature discussions.

### *Qualitative Case Study Design*

The study described in this article draws on and extends a one-year study in which I examined bilingual young students’ responses to literature. It is crucial to situate the study of Isabela’s narratives within the larger study of the children’s responses to literature. Methods for the larger study included field notes from participant observation, audiotapes, and transcripts of 75 small group literature discussions or literature circles; videotape of literature circles; informal interviews with nine case study students and some of their parents; and samples of students’ written responses to literature. The discussions took place each week or every other week. I participated in the classroom from one to three times weekly, whenever literature discussions were held,

organizing and facilitating the discussions together with Julia, the teacher. I also audiotaped and analyzed all of the different types of reading events in the classroom for one week and attended several classroom activities and events related to reading over the year.

As part of the original study, transcripts of 11 literature circles went through two layers of analysis: a thematic analysis of the students’ discussions and an analysis of their literary responses. From the analysis of their literary responses, I found that the students had a variety of literary responses to texts, including analytical talk (comments addressing the stories as a cultural product, focusing on the language of the texts, analyzing the art of the illustrations, and making narrative meaning); intertextual connections (to other texts, to movies, and to soap operas); and personal responses or connections to life experiences. Personal responses comprised 36% of the students’ literary responses. (For a detailed explanation of how the percentages per category were determined, see Martínez-Roldán, 2000.) The category of connections to life experiences usually involved both narratives of personal experiences and storytelling of scary stories.

The study reported in this article represents a third layer of analysis in which I used a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999a) to develop a better understanding of the use of narratives of personal experiences and storytelling among young English language learners (ELLs) in literature

discussions. A case study student was selected by purposive sampling, which as Merriam (1998) indicates “is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand and gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (p. 48).

Isabela stood out from the beginning in the literature discussions as a storyteller. The narrative of personal experiences was a form of language used by all children as they responded to literature, particularly by the Spanish-dominant students whose narratives were longer and more complex than the narratives of their English counterparts. In that sense Isabela is representative of the Spanish-dominant students. However, her recurrent use of narratives of personal stories and storytelling and the length of her stories made her a unique case from whom I could gain more understanding about the possible roles of narratives of personal experiences in ELLs’ discussions of texts.

In the study reported in this article, I used audiotapes and transcripts of all the small group literature discussions in which Isabela participated over a school year, 15 in total. I revisited the transcripts, searching for instances of narratives of personal experiences and storytelling, and examined the types and content of the narratives. I found two broad categories of personal response that will be discussed as part of the results: comments and/or narratives in which Isabela connected parts of the books to lived experiences and narratives of scary stories. To examine the

role of the context I identified the literary genre of the texts discussed by Isabela as well as the linguistic composition of the groups: “Spanish” being a group composed only of Spanish-dominant students, and “Bilingual” being a group having both Spanish- and English-dominant students.

### *Discourse Analysis Methods*

I then chose one narrative from Isabela for a detailed discourse analysis. It was one of her longest narratives, so I could use it to gather much information on the roles of narratives in Isabela’s participation in literature discussions. It was also one of the narratives in which issues of language and identity came together in her discourse, which struck me as important for gaining insights into the use of narratives by children from diverse (non-mainstream) ethnic background.

After my initial analysis of the content of Isabela’s narrative, I used Gee’s (1999a) notions of *semiotic building*, *world building*, and *socioculturally-situated identities* as tools for my analysis. Gee defines semiotic building as a search for clues used and given by the speaker to assemble situated meanings about what semiotic or communicative systems of knowledge and ways of knowing are relevant and activated in the discourse. World building examines the situated meanings of some of the words that seem important in the situation described by the speaker and the situated meanings and values that seem to be attached to places, times, and so forth. Identity building examines, among other things, the relationships

and identities (roles, positions) that seem to be relevant to the situation described by the speaker.

Because Isabela's narrative took place within the context of a small group literature discussion, it was important to preserve as well as possible the dynamics of interactions by attending to the conversational turns of different speakers as Isabela told her story. Therefore, the narrative is organized first in conversational turns, sequentially numbered. Second, I organized the narrative into stanzas and lines using Gee's (1999a) definitions. Briefly defined, lines or *spurts* as he has also called them, are small chunks in speech that usually contain only one salient piece of new information serving as the focus of an intonational contour. Stanzas are "sets of lines about a single minimal topic, organized rhythmically and syntactically to hang together in a particularly tight way" (p. 106).

Following Gee (1999a), I identified the stanzas in Isabela's narrative by looking for occasions when character, place, time, event, or function of a piece of information changes. For easy reference I numbered the stanzas and lines. Some conversational turns were longer than others and had more than one line. Some stanzas were co-constructed between Isabela and other members and so have more than one conversational turn, such as stanza 5 of the narrative "The Story of the Park" discussed in the Results section.

These organizational and analytical tools facilitated a closer examination of Isabela's narrative by focusing on small pieces of information (stanzas and

lines) that revealed details that may have been overlooked if I had looked only at conversational turn. They also enabled, along with the building tasks (Gee, 1999a), an examination of the structure of the narrative, its coherence, and its roles. Notational devices used in the transcripts to name some features of speech are listed in the Appendix. In summary, the combination of both qualitative case study and critical discourse analysis methods promised to offer a rich picture of the roles of narratives in Isabela's discussions of texts.

### **Context**

The setting for the study was a bilingual elementary school in a community in Arizona that was primarily Mexican American. At the time of the study, the state of California had just approved the English Only Legislation (Proposition 227). Concerns about the possibilities similar legislation taking hold in Arizona had begun to be the subject of discussions in academic environments and among some parents of the children in this study. The school had a Two-Way Developmental Bilingual Education Program where Spanish and English were the languages of instruction. Twenty-one seven- and eight-year-olds participated in this study in a second-grade classroom. Most of them had been together since first grade with Julia as their teacher as part of a looping strand. The students were all of Mexican descent, three of them being also of Native American descent from the Yaqui and Pima nations. Ten were English dominant and eleven were

Spanish dominant as determined by the school's classification of language proficiency.

Isabela, the case study student for this study, was a seven-year-old Mexican born girl, the third of five children in her family. She was a first-generation immigrant whose family had moved from Mexico to Tucson 4 years before the study. She grew up on different ranches in Mexico as her parents moved to find jobs. At the time of the study her father was working in construction and her mother was a homemaker. Both parents were Spanish speakers. From observations of Isabela's interactions and her mother's report, Isabela spoke mostly in Spanish and occasionally codeswitched to English, usually with English speaking peers. Isabela was considered a beginner reader and writer of Spanish.

Julia López-Robertson had been a bilingual teacher for 5 years. The daughter of a Cuban father and a Colombian mother, she was born and raised in Boston. As a young student she was punished at school for speaking Spanish. This experience seemed to play a role in her thinking. She strongly supports Latino children's academic development through their first language while they learn English. Having experienced low expectations and discrimination, Julia held high expectations for her students and valued students' first language, not only as a resource but as a right (Ruiz, 1984).

Julia created a learning environment where the children were invited to think, especially about the books

they read and the themes they studied; to share their thoughts with others in whatever language they wanted; and to pose questions to each other inviting their peers to extend their comments on a regular basis. Everyone was expected to engage in that kind of discourse; it was part of the cultural practices of the classroom.

### *Social Organization of the Classroom*

Julia's classroom resembled the bilingual classroom described by Moll and Whitmore (1993). The students in Julia's classroom were encouraged to ask others for help when they needed it, so they had access to others' expertise. They usually sat four students per table and participated from different types of grouping throughout the day. Asking for and bringing support and help as well as sharing materials were part of the classroom culture. The students soon introduced newcomers to the classroom routines and practices.

Although reading and writing instruction were offered in the student's first language, English and Spanish were used throughout the day. Often English dominant students and Spanish dominant students provided words to each other when they were trying to use their second language. The students had access to a variety of texts. Different types of books and print materials in both languages filled the classroom and the students continually moved between Spanish and English texts and among different text genres. The rich literate environment in both languages was intended to extend students' op-

portunities to interact with diverse texts and diverse readers throughout the day.

### *The Language Arts Program*

Julia expressed that her main goal as a reading teacher was for her students not only to learn to read but also to leave her classroom with a love of reading and themselves as readers and thinkers. The curriculum offered the students numerous opportunities throughout the day for using language—specifically reading—in meaningful situations, for learning about reading, and for learning about other content, life outside of school, and themselves (Halliday, 1975, 1979; Short, 1997). There was, however, a language arts block where specific reading engagements were emphasized. Depending on the day, during that block the class engaged in such activities as guided reading groups according to language dominance and proficiency, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time, literature discussions, shared reading, and writing workshop.

The students had a daily story time in which they were read a variety of books in English and Spanish. Sometimes the books read aloud led the class to discuss them, pose questions, make connections to other readings and similar events, and make extensive comments. Those discussions during story time served as a kind of apprenticeship for the students on how to talk about books, and that kind of talk carried on into their small group literature discussions in which they not only talked about the literary elements of the texts but also posed questions to each other

and made connections to other texts and to life experiences. Although many teachers in mainstream classrooms have either guided reading groups or literature discussion groups in their curriculum, at least at upper levels, the trend has been to choose one of them, often substituting literature discussion groups for guided reading groups (Short, 1999). Julia integrated both reading engagements in her 1st- and 2nd-grade curricula, understanding that the two engagements differed from each other not only in their organization (text selection, grouping) but also in their purposes.

Guided reading in Julia's classroom was intended to support students' learning about the reading process, to increase the students' repertoire of reading strategies, and to increase the students' confidence as readers. Small group literature discussions, on the other hand, were designed to provide students with an aesthetic experience with literature (Rosenblatt, 1995), to give them a chance to make connections and pose questions, and to help them develop their own taste in books. Students had the opportunity to pay attention to their personal responses to the books while simultaneously learning to evaluate literature. The small group discussions also encouraged thoughtful discussions among all the children regardless of their reading proficiency or language dominance. In those discussions students had the opportunity to develop an opinion about social issues and to stand up for their ideas while listening to others and considering different perspectives (Martínez-Roldán

& López-Robertson, 1999). Finally, the small group discussions offered a particular space where Spanish language (oral and written) was valued, supported, and fostered and where everyone was encouraged to be bilingual.

Almost a week before each discussion, the children were presented with four books available in both languages to choose from. We chose the books to be offered taking into account their literary quality (Freeman, 1998; Schon & Corona-Berkin, 1996), the characteristics of quality multicultural children's literature (Yokota, 1993), their availability in both Spanish and English (with few exceptions), and a focus on social issues.

When Julia and I organized the literature circles, we encouraged students as individual readers and as a group to have a variety of responses to literature. We believe, with Rosenblatt (1978, 1995), that rather than approaching a piece of literature for the first time by focusing and examining its literary elements, students should be allowed to respond to the text in whatever fashion they choose. Therefore, we did not assign roles for the students to perform in the literature circles. We believed that assigning roles to the students, although well intentioned, controls students' interaction with texts and ultimately constricts their responses and their discourse. Although the students were young and were from working-class, minority families and were consequently described by many as students at risk, we trusted them as readers and thinkers who could talk about texts without the scaffolding

of roles or handouts. The following excerpt, which is the beginning of their first literature discussion in second grade, shows our expectations for the discussions:

1 TEACHER: Whoever wants to, can start.  
I mean, if you're ready. You don't have to raise your hands. Just remember that if one of us is talking, the rest of us listen. So go ahead.

2 DAYANARA: Let's go like this you guys (pointing to the members of the circle in the order she is suggesting they talk).

3 TEACHER: Go ahead.

4 JOSÉ: What do I talk about, my favorite part?

5 TEACHER: Anything that you want. You can tell us your favorite part, something it made you think [of]

6 JOSÉ: [It] made me think of *The Little Red Hen*.

7 TEACHER: OK. And it's our job to listen to what he says, and if we have questions, we ask him questions. If you have a comment about what he said, we can make comments. Well, I have a question. Why did it make you think of *The Little Red Hen*?

(From the discussion of *Green Corn Tamales/Tamales de elote*, 8/26/98.)

In summary, the following schedule established the organization of the discussions. The week before the discussion, Julia gave a brief talk on each book and read it aloud, if possible, in both languages. On Monday the students chose two titles, writing why they chose their first option. That same day, Julia organized the small groups and

they took the book home for two to three days with a letter from the teacher. Whether the child could read the book independently or not, Julia asked that a relative read the book with the child one or two times before the day of the discussion just to share their responses about the stories. We asked the students to select three parts of the story to share in the small groups. They were invited to use post-it notes to mark the page(s) or section(s) they would like to share. Once we met, they looked at the pages marked with the post-it notes and began talking about why they had selected those pages. Some students wrote questions on the post-it notes.

The groups met with Julia or me for about 20–40 minutes while the rest of the class responded to the books through writing, sketch to stretch, graffiti, letter writing, poems, and so on (Short & Harste, 1996). That same day or the next, each group had an informal sharing of their book with the class. Occasionally, the students had a more formal sharing of their discussions, wherein as a group they took time to think how to share the book with the class.

## Results

This section has three parts. It begins with an overview of Isabela's use of personal responses and narratives in which I characterize Isabela's storytelling as part of her home's funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Secondly, I offer an overview of Isabela's use of narratives over a year, examining the interplay between her use of narrative (agent) and the role of the linguistic

composition of the groups (context) in shaping, facilitating, or constraining her use of narratives. Finally, I use critical discourse analysis to describe and examine in detail one of her narratives, focusing on the roles of the narrative in her participation in the small group and the role of multiple mediational means in her construction of the narrative.

### *Narratives as Funds of Knowledge*

As found in literature discussions with mainstream students (Sipe, 1996), Isabela was also involved in a wide range of types of literary talk in response to the texts, such as analytical talk, intertextual connections, and personal responses. The category of personal responses, which represented 40% of Isabela's literary responses in four small groups studied initially in the larger study (Martínez-Roldán, 2000), included all of the comments and/or narratives in which Isabela connected to life experiences, both to events that had happened to her and to others. The content analysis of the transcripts showed that most of Isabela's narratives of personal experiences related to the past. Figure 1 provides an example from the discussion of Hoffman's (1996) *La asombrosa Graciela* [*Amazing Grace*]. The original language used by the participants has been kept in the excerpts throughout the article, which will be displayed in double columns as needed. To the left is the transcription using italics for the Spanish text, to the right is the translation to English.

During an interview with Isabela's mother, she informed me that Isabela liked book stories that made her recall

*Me acordé de algo de lo que estaba diciendo la Diana. Que cuando yo estaba en mi pueblito, los otros días, allá iba a salir en lo que llegaba mi hermana y le pedí mucho dinero a mi mamá. Me compré cinco jamoncillos, una soda y cinco porritas de las que me gustan. (. . .) Y comprábamos muchas cosas y luego me las comía, y luego me dolía la panza.*

I remembered something related to what Diana was saying. That when I was in my little town, some days ago, I was going outside until my sister came home and I asked my mom for a lot of money. I bought five “jellies,” one soda, and five porritas of the ones that I like. (. . .) And we bought a lot of things, and then I ate them, and then my belly hurt.

Figure 1. An example of a narrative of a past experience

past lived experiences or family events such as when her mother made Mexican tamales. (See Figure 2.)

Isabela’s mother confirmed her daughter’s preference for telling stories: “*De cualquier cosa hace un cuento ella*” [She makes a story out of anything]. Storytelling was a pattern of discourse Isabela engaged often with her cousins, especially the telling of scary stories. Isabela’s mother said that when they visited their relatives, Isabela and her cousin usually ended up arguing and fighting over who knew more scary stories. A scary story was a narrative that had sensational elements intended to scare (e.g., dead people, bloody people,

the devil, or mummies). Isabela’s participation all along in literature discussions confirmed her mother’s observation. The content analysis of Isabela’s responses to the texts in small group literature discussions over a year shows that she engaged in the telling of narratives of scary stories, narratives about family experiences, visits to her home town, and her experiences at school.

Narratives, particularly storytelling, seemed to be part of Isabela’s ways of knowing (Heath, 1983; Leland & Harste, 1994) and part of her home’s funds of knowledge. From my interactions with Isabela’s mother, I realized that Isabela’s

*A Isabela le gustan más, por decir, un cuento que ella haya vivido algo atrás. Por decir, cuando los libros de los tamales, ella, como que le hacen recordar atrás cuando uno hace las cosas, cuando la navidad; cuentos que a ella le queden. Los quiere juntar como con su vida, así. (Interview, Nov 5, 1998)*

Isabela likes more, let’s say, a story that she may have lived somewhat [something similar] before. Let’s say, like with the stories of tamales, they made her remember the past, like things that one has done, like Christmas; stories that remain with her. She wants to make them part of her life, like that. (Interview, Nov 5, 1998)

Figure 2. Isabela’s mother on Isabela’s story preferences



and her mother's ways of speaking were very similar. Isabela's mother told no fewer than nine short stories or anecdotes full of humor, lessons, and family history in one single semi-structured interview. In this household, as Isabela and her mother confirmed, stories and storytelling were shared among members of the extended family.

I argue that telling stories is as much part of Isabela's household's funds of knowledge as is her father's knowledge of building roofs. The concept of funds of knowledge usually "entails a broader set of activities which require specific knowledge of strategic importance to households" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 323). Usually those funds are essential to households' subsistence (economical or social) and include material and intellectual resources that families obtain and distribute through strategic social ties or networks. Although the art of storytelling does not have a direct link to the economy of Isabela's family, storytelling does have a social impact in the family insofar as it keeps the family traditions, history, and values alive, thereby helping to construct a sense of belonging and identity that may support the ability of the family to participate in society.

*Overview of Isabela's Narratives:  
The Interplay between the  
Individual and the Context*

Table 1 presents an overview of the literature circles in which Isabela participated over the year. It includes some of the mediational means that were part of the context of the literature circles: the text discussed in each discussion,

the genre of the book, and the linguistic composition of the group. It also includes two broad categories of narratives in which Isabela engaged: stories of life experiences and scary stories. As Table 1 illustrates, Isabela engaged in storytelling of scary narratives only in Spanish groups throughout the year. Indeed, her longer narratives of personal experiences also took place in the context of small groups made up either entirely of Spanish speakers or in Spanish-dominant groups. It is not possible to offer an in-depth discussion of the differences in Isabela's use of storytelling according to the linguistic composition of the groups within the scope of this article. However, a glance at some of the bilingual discussions points to the interplay and tension between the individual—Isabela's self-regulating her discourse—and the context—the linguistic composition of the groups—that constrained or shaped her telling of narratives. I am appropriating Wertsch's (1998) definition of agent or individual as "individual-operating-with-mediational-means" (p. 26), which overcomes the tendency to set a dichotomy between individual and context.

Examples from two different bilingual groups and one monolingual group provide insights into how the composition of the groups shaped Isabela's use of narratives. An excerpt from the discussion of García's (1987) *My Aunt Otilia's Spirit/Los espíritus de mi tía Otilia* shows the complexity of the interplay between individual(s) and context. One might have expected that this text (the only scary storybook we offered for discussion), chosen by Isabela among

TABLE 1  
Overview of Literature Circles in which Isabela Participated over a Year

DATE	BOOK TITLE AND GENRE	TWO BROAD CATEGORIES OF NARRATIVES	LINGUISTIC COMPOSITION
8/26/98	<i>Green Corn Tamales/Tamales de elote</i> - Modern variant of traditional story	Connections to life Scary stories	Spanish
9/2/98	<i>(Qué montón de tamales! (Too Many Tamales)</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life	Spanish
9/16/98	<i>Guillermo Jorge Manuel José. (Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge)</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life Scary stories	Spanish
9/23/98	<i>El tapiz de abuela (Abuela's Weave)</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life	Bilingual
9/25/98	<i>El tapiz de abuela (Abuela's Weave)</i>	Connections to life	Bilingual
10/7/98	<i>Uncle Nacho's Hat/El sombrero del tío Nacho</i> - Legend	Connections to life Scary stories	Spanish
10/21/98	<i>La cama de Isabella. (Isabella's Bed)</i> - Fantasy	Connections to life	Bilingual
10/23/98	<i>La cama de Isabella. (Isabella's Bed)</i>	Connections to life	Bilingual
10/28/98	<i>My Aunt Otilia's Spirits/Los espíritus...</i> - Fantasy, scary story	Connections to life	Bilingual
2/4/99	<i>La mariposa</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life	Bilingual
2/18/99	<i>La mariposa</i>	Connections to life	Spanish
3/4/99	<i>El libro de los cerdos (Piggy Book)</i> - Fantasy	Connections to life	Bilingual
3/11/99	<i>La asombrosa Graciela (Amazing Grace)</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life	Bilingual
3/18/99	<i>Pepita Talks Twice/Pepita habla dos veces</i> - Realistic fiction	Connections to life	Bilingual
3/25/99	<i>La niña invisible [The Invisible Girl]</i> - Fantasy	Connections to life Scary stories	Spanish

other options, would have elicited scary stories from her. Instead, she took on the role of facilitator of Spanish language for the only English-dominant boy in the group. He was working hard to recover his Spanish because, as he said, he wanted to be able to talk to his grandmother. Isabela and other Spanish-dominant students assumed the role of facilitators of language for him.

The context of this small group also led Isabela to engage with the

students in the oral reading of some parts of the text that they liked in such a way that the most experienced readers in the group supported Isabela as they read collaboratively: “*La cabeza estaba donde deberían estar los pies y los pies donde debía estar (pausa, leyendo lentamente) y viceversa*” [The head was where her feet should be and her arms where (stopped and read slowly) and vice versa]. After that sentence Isabela looked for a page in the book and read a favorite

part independently, receiving the support of others only occasionally: “*Mis dientes (inaudible) y mis pelos se pusieron parados y mis pies dijeron: échense a correr*” [My teeth were (inaudible), my hair stood up, and my feet said: get ready to run]. Then Isabela commented: “*Eso me gustó*” [That I liked].

In the discussion of Lester’s (1992) *Isabella’s Bed* in another bilingual group (two English-dominant boys, one Spanish-dominant boy, Isabela, and Julia), Isabela did not engage in long narratives or storytelling although the story was about a grandmother’s telling stories of adventures to their children. The boys did not provide an avid audience for storytelling. Isabela instead engaged in translating some of her and others’ responses into English or Spanish and in playfully reading and dramatizing the part of the book she liked the most, the last page when the grandmother says: “I have so many stories to tell you.” She did not engage in storytelling but voiced her responses to the text within the literature circle.

Although Isabela engaged in storytelling only when she had a Spanish-dominant audience, monolingual groups (groups having only Spanish-dominant students) also presented Isabela with challenges. Both linguistic contexts shaped and were shaped by Isabela’s participation. In the literature circle discussing *Uncle Nacho’s Hat/El sombrero del tío Nacho* by Rohmer and Zubizarreta (1989), the students showed great interest in listening to Isabela’s stories as soon as she expressed that the book reminded her of a story. Isabela then engaged in the storytelling of a

long scary story in which some of the students participated as co-tellers. At the same time, other students in the same group, a boy and a girl, questioned the veracity of her story, to which she responded: “*Porque yo, cuando a mí me dicen esas cosas, me asusto, y las cuento yo pa’ que, pa’ que me digan si es cierto o no, porque así también dicen que si tienes miedo que te encajan unas uñas por atrás*” [Because, when someone tells me these things, I get scared, and I tell them (the stories) so you can tell me if they are real or not, because someone has also told me that if you are scared, someone will scratch your back]. After discussing if scary stories are real or not, Isabela closed the discussion with the short story in Figure 3, in which she volunteered an explanation to justify her use of storytelling before being asked.

It is interesting to observe at the end of this short scary story and at the end of the literature discussion, Isabela’s effort to place her stories within an acceptable type of literary response. That last comment suggests that she was monitoring or self-regulating her discourse (and the audience’s discourse) to accommodate it to the nature and expectations of the small groups, which were organized around a discussion of a text. Indeed, her response to literature through the use of stories, resembles what happened in Solsken, Willett, and Wilson-Keenan’s (2000) study on the hybridity of texts created by a student. In their study, a Latina girl interwove home, school, and peer language practices to serve a variety of social and personal agendas. Isabela stretched the notion of connections to books a great

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*Aquí estamos contando las historias y ahí sale la momia. Sale la momia y le decimos (cambiando el tono de voz): “Aquí estamos,” y pedimos ayuda. Y venimos con la cruz en la mano y venimos con un padre, y así (gesticulando con las manos) le echa agua bendita, ¿ve? Y por eso yo cuento esas historias porque me recuerda de los libros.*

There we are telling stories, and then the mummy comes. The mummy comes and we say: “Here we are,” and we ask for help, and we come with a cross in our hands, and we come with a priest, and in this way (gesticulating with her hands) he spreads holy water on it, do you see? And that’s why I tell these stories because they remind me of the books.

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Figure 3. A story to justify telling stories

deal. Isabela described her use of storytelling of scary stories as a way to talk about texts “*porque me recuerda de los libros*” [because they remind me of the books], suggesting how Isabela creatively and actively appropriated and contributed cultural resources into the literature discussions and how the context shaped and was shaped by her responses. This glimpse of the qualitative analysis of Isabela’s use of narratives over the year points to one of the roles of narratives and storytelling in her discussion of texts: to enable her to draw on funds of knowledge that allowed her participation in literacy events at school.

### *The Narrative of a Recent Immigrant*

The narrative presented in Figure 4, which I titled “The Story of the Park,” was told by Isabela during the literature discussion on *Pepita Talks Twice/Pepita habla dos veces* by Lachtman Dumas (1995). In that picture book the author tells the story of a bilingual girl named Pepita. Tired of translating for both English and Spanish speakers, Pepita decides not to speak Spanish anymore

but changes her mind. This literature discussion was 20 minutes long and had three Spanish-dominant students and only one English-dominant student, a girl who described herself as being bilingual, although her production of Spanish was limited.

In this discussion the students’ talk focused strongly on the tensions that the main character of the story, Pepita, experiences for being bilingual, specifically, tensions associated with her role as a language broker for the community. The students also shared their opinions about being Spanish-English bilingual speakers, saying that it is better to be bilingual because they can communicate with their grandmothers in Spanish and because, as Isabela said, “*Bilingües está más bien, porque podemos hablarle a amigos en inglés*” [To be bilingual is better because we can talk in English to friends]. The students also shared their own experiences as bilingual speakers. Within this context Isabela told a long narrative about an experience she had when she came from Mexico to the United States, which I examine through critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The story was completed or revisited at four different moments within the Pepita literature discussion, which I grouped as follows: first moment (Stanzas 1-3), second moment (Stanzas 4-7), and third and fourth moment (Stanzas 8-10). The moments worked together to create a coherent narrative. Since it was told in four different moments, there are gaps in the sequence of numbered turns in the narrative. The gaps identify how much talk occurred between moments. The talk not included as part of the excerpts involved the sharing of different experiences among the different members of the groups and comments about the text. Those comments addressed different topics and for reasons of space, they are not included in the following analysis. For reasons of space and clarity, I also kept the pseudonyms of the participants and the numbers of conversational turns in the Spanish text leaving only the number of stanzas and lines in the English translation.

### **Organization of the Story: Coherence through Non-linearity**

Although Isabela's story was completed at four different moments within the literature discussion, the moments worked together to create a coherent narrative, a feature that Wertsch (1998) places at the center of his characterization of narrative as a cultural tool. The cognitive function of narratives, he asserts, is the way in which the narrator integrates a set of interrelationships and events of different kinds into a single whole. One dimension of narratives that leads to coherence is the linearity

of a story (its temporal and causal organization). Isabela's story had the typical elements associated with a complete and coherent story, such as introduction, climax, resolution, and so on, but she reached the coherence of her story in a non-linear way. The process of creating her story can be better described as having a sort of circular motion, as evidenced in the ways she advanced her story by revisiting aspects of what she had previously told, making changes, and adding new information.

I entertain two interpretations for the non-linearity of Isabela's story. The first is the representational role of narratives that allows the narrator to represent and make sense of past and difficult experiences. If one accepts a broadened concept of narrative competence that includes both linear and non-linear formats, non-linearity in a story may reflect the narrator's process of making sense of difficult experiences gradually and tentatively.

Isabela moved back and forth on her description of the discriminatory experience she was telling as one in which others laughed or not at her: "*y todos se reían de mí*" [and everyone laughed at me] (line 4); "*No se reían de mí*" [They didn't laugh at me] (line 7); "*porque aquí se ríen mucho*" [because here they laugh a lot] (line 21). She also moved back and forth to explain her dilemma and the tensions between what she wanted to do and what seemed to be a more appropriate behavior: "*me dio ganas de pegarle, pero no le pegué*" [I wanted to hit them, but I didn't hit them] (lines 43-44); "*Me daba ganas de pegarle, pero no les pegué*" [I wanted to

**Stanza 1**

100 Isabela:

- 1a. *Cuando yo llegué,*
- 1b. *recién yo llegué aquí,*
2. *yo no sabía nada de inglés*
3. *y hablaba puro español*
4. *y todos se reían de mí.*

**Stanza 2**

101 Teacher:

5. *¿Dónde?*

102 Isabela:

6. *Como cuando estaba,*
7. *No se reían de mí,*
8. *fue que me decían cosas*
9. *que, que yo no estudiaba inglés 'onde (donde) vivía antes.*

**Stanza 3**10. *Unas niñas,*11. *porque estábamos allá en el parkesito*12. *y fueron unas niñas*13. *y dije: "estamos nosotros jugando más primero aquí"*14. *y ellas se reían de mí.*

103 Teacher:

15. *¿Y cómo te hizo sentir eso que se burlaran de ti?*

104 Isabela:

16. *Mal.*

(From 105–116 the students shared some of their experiences as bilingual speakers and language brokers for their families. Isabela then continued her story.)

**Stanza 4**

117 Isabela:

17. *Yo, me gusta más allá 'onde (donde) yo vivía*
18. *porque aquí,*
19. *allá no se reían de mí porque yo no podía hablar en inglés*
20. *y me gusta más allá*
21. *porque aquí se ríen mucho.*
22. *Se reían de mí cuando yo no podía hablar en inglés.*

**Stanza 5**

118 Luis:

23. *¿Y por [qué se ríen?]*

119 Nadine:

24. *[A mí]*

120 Teacher:

25. *[Wait], Luis te hizo una pregunta.*

121 Isabela:

26. *¿Mande?*

122 Luis:

27. *¿Por qué se ríen?*

123 Isabela:

28. *Ah, porque yo no podía hablar en inglés.***Stanza 6**

124 Teacher:

29. *¿Pero eso pasa todavía?***Stanza 1**

1a. When I came,

1b. Just when I came here,

2. I didn't know anything about English

3. and I spoke only Spanish

4. and everyone laughed at me.

**Stanza 2**

5. Where?

6. Like when I was,

7. They didn't laugh at me,

8. it was that they said things to me,

9. that, that I didn't study English where I lived before.

**Stanza 3**

10. Some girls

11. because we were there in the small park

12. and some girls came

13. and I said: "We are playing here before you"

14. and they laughed at me.

15. And how did it make you feel that they were making fun of you?

16. Bad.

**Stanza 4**

17. I, I liked to be more there where I lived before

18. because here,

19. there they didn't laugh at me because I

couldn't speak English

20. and I like more there

21. because here they laugh a lot.

22. They laughed at me when I couldn't speak English.

**Stanza 5**

23. And why do [they laugh?]

24. [I]

25. [Wait], Luis asked you a question.

26. Pardon?

27. Why do they laugh?

28. Ah, because I couldn't speak English.

**Stanza 6**

29. But does that still happen?

Figure 4. *The Story of the Park*

Figure 4. continued

125 Isabela: 30. No, 31. <i>pero me gusta más allá.</i>	30.No, 31. but I like to be more there.
126 Nadine: 32. <i>A mí me gusta [hablar]</i>	32. I like to [speak]
127 Luis: 33. [¡Ah!], <i>porque donde tú vivías no se reían de ti.</i>	33. [Ah!], because where you lived they didn't laugh at you.
128 Isabela: 34. <i>Allá en Caborcas</i> 35. <i>porque allá hablaba puro español yo.</i>	34. There in Caborcas, 35. because there I spoke only Spanish.
<b>Stanza 7</b>	<b>Stanza 7</b>
129 Sandy: 36. <i>Where did you come from?</i>	36. Where did you come from?
130 Isabela: 37. <i>En (pause)</i>	37. In (pause)
131 Sandy: 38. <i>You can tell me in Spanish.</i>	38. You can tell me in Spanish.
132 Isabela: 39. <i>OK. En Caborcas.</i> 40. <i>Somos "caborquellejos"</i> 41. <i>y somos atilenos.</i>	39. OK. In Caborcas. 40. We are "caborquellejos" 41. and we are <i>atilenos</i> .
(In the next turns all of the members of the group engaged in the telling of stories about traveling to their home towns and about their roles as language brokers. They also talked about the characters in the book.)	
<b>Stanza 8</b> <i>Resolution 1</i>	<b>Stanza 8</b> <i>Resolution 1</i>
147 Isabela: 42. <i>Allá, cuando se rieron de mí,</i> 43. <i>me dio ganas de pegarle</i> 44. <i>pero no le pegué</i> 45. <i>porque mi hermana me dijo: "You are going to be in BI:G trouble."</i>	42. There, when they laughed at me, 43. I wanted to hit them, 44. but I didn't hit them 45. because my sister told me: " <u>You are going to be in BI:G trouble.</u> " (From 148-152 there is talk about fights.)
(From 148-152 there is talk about fights.)	
<b>Stanza 9</b>	<b>Stanza 9</b>
153 Isabela: 46. <i>Cuando se rieron</i> 47. <i>me daba ganas de pegarle</i> 48. <i>pero no les pegué</i> 49. <i>porque yo quería ser amable con los demás niños que había allá.</i>	46. When they laughed 47. I wanted to hit them, 48. but I didn't hit them 49. because I wanted to be nice to the other children who were there.
<b>Stanza 10</b> <i>Resolution 2</i>	<b>Stanza 10</b> <i>Resolution 2</i>
154 Luis: 50. <i>Yo tengo que pegarle a mi primo para que se calle.</i> 155 Isabela: 51. <i>Yo quiero ser amable con los demás que viven aquí</i> 52. <i>porque yo me enojé un MONTÓN</i> 53. <i>y mi hermana me dijo: "yo le pego,"</i> 54. <i>y le dije: "No,"</i> 55. <i>y fui,</i> 56. <i>y le pegué una cachetada</i> 57. <i>porque me dolió mucho que me dijeron eso.</i>	50. I have to hit my cousin so he gets quiet. 51. I want to be nice to the others who live here 52. because I got VERY mad 53. and my sister said: "I will hit them," 54. and I told her: "No," 55. and I went, 56. and I slapped her 57. because it hurt me a lot that they said that to me.
156 Teacher: 58. <i>¿Te dolió mucho?</i>	58. Did it hurt you a lot?

hit them, but I didn't hit them] (lines 47 and 48), and finally, "*y fui, y le pegué una cachetada*" [and I went, and I slapped her] (lines 55 and 56).

The process of gradually and tentatively making sense is also reflected in the moral stance of Isabela's story, in which she considered different moral stances about what was appropriate to do in a situation like the one she was describing. Isabela said: "*pero no le pegué, porque mi hermana me dijo:*" [but I didn't hit them because my sister told me:] 'You are going to be in BI:G trouble' (lines 44 and 45); "*pero no les pegué porque yo quería ser amable con los demás niños que había allá*" [but I didn't hit them because I wanted to be nice to the other children who were there] (lines 48 and 49); and finally, "*y le pegué una cachetada porque me dolío mucho que me dijeron eso*" [and I slapped her because it hurt me a lot that they said that to me] (lines 56 and 57).

A second complementary interpretation for the non-linearity of Isabela's story and its constructed through four different moments is that her process of construction may reflect her knowledge of the expectations within the literature group (that other members can ask questions, and other members should have an opportunity to talk). She was therefore sensitive to these expectations and to her audience's needs and interests, as she demonstrated in other discussions, particularly within bilingual groups. Moreover, her audience participated in the co-construction of the narrative, an aspect that I address later, and so the non-linearity

speaks to the social aspect of her narrative.

Isabela reconciled her two roles, one more personal (her role as a storyteller to make sense of the experience and finish the story) and the other more socially oriented (her role as a member of the literature group discussion). Isabela had other conversational turns in the literature discussion among these four moments. In those conversational turns she followed the discussion, posed questions to other members about their responses, and had other types of responses to literature related to the book under discussion. She was able to follow the line of discussion that the other participants suggested but also to intertwine effectively and complete her narrative, sometimes clearly embedded in the context of the discussion of other students. After Luis's comment on how he hit his cousin sometimes (line 50), Isabela introduced a different solution to the dilemma presented in her narrative (Stanza 10) in which she finally slapped the girl, which illustrates not only how the members of the group mediated her narrative but the process of co-construction of meaning.

Isabela was taking on the identity of a skillful student (without excluding other possible identities) who knew how to participate in the discussion of texts as a literate member of the group (listening, responding to other's comments, and bringing experiences connected to the topic of the books, and so on). This notion of achievement departs from views of policymakers who inter-



pret achievement only in terms of standardized test scores (e.g., Kanstoroom & Finn, 1999).

### Building Worlds and Situated Identities

Isabela's narrative served not only as a cultural tool to represent and make sense of past experiences, but it also served to build worlds and socio-culturally-situated identities (Gee, 1999a). These roles and building tasks, however, were shaped, facilitated, and constrained by other mediational means, such as the Spanish language, her peers, and the teacher. In that sense, Isabela's narrative was mediated and mediating (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). My analysis will concentrate now on two building tasks described by Gee (1999a), world building and identity building, to explain Isabela's discourse more broadly.

The worlds built by Isabela through her narrative point to the relationships and identities she was negotiating and illustrate how the narrative became a tool or mediational means in this process. Isabela used a variety of linguistic devices and resources, such as opposites, quoting, and codeswitching, that not only worked together in the creation of a narrative that had high tellability and coherence (Ochs & Capps, 2001) but that were also tools she used to build worlds and situated identities. Those linguistic resources provide numerous cues, pointing to the ways in which her narrative positioned her and the members of the group in certain ways.

Isabela's use of opposites, dichotomies, and parallelisms, for example,

makes evident that there are two worlds juxtaposed in her discourse as represented in the following words:

Here, in the small park (USA) ↔ There, where I lived before (Mexico)

I didn't know anything of English ↔ I spoke only Spanish

Everyone laughed at me ↔ They didn't laugh at me

These opposites make reference to place, language, and attitudes. Isabela's use of opposites suggests a tension, for she seems to be trying to find and define her sense of place and belonging within the tensions and demands of two socially and linguistically different worlds. In this process she was negotiating her identity. This tension produced contradictory emotions: "*Me daba ganas de pegarle*" [I wanted to hit them] and "*Yo quería ser amable*" [I wanted to be nice], as mentioned before. Having just arrived in the United States, Isabela had one of those experiences that teach recent immigrants which language counts in the U.S. She received the lesson that here you either speak English or people laugh at you. She also may have learned that one needs to be aggressive to fight for one's rights.

At the essence of sociocultural theory is the notion that "human thinking develops through the mediation of others" (Moll, 2001, p. 113). Next, I address how Isabela made meaning and gained insights into her two opposite worlds with the mediation of the teacher and her peers. Isabela's story began as a short anecdote told in one single conversational turn (lines 1-4), one of the many anecdotes

the children shared in the discussions. Within the literature circles the students engaged in storytelling extensively only when there was an interested audience willing to listen, pose questions, or add comments, and that was also true for Isabela, even though she was an accomplished storyteller. In this narrative not only the teacher but also the students showed great interest, and from line 5 on a process of mediation took place that extended Isabela's—and other members'—meanings and understandings.

The teacher's question about where the experience occurred (line 5) and how it made her feel that others were laughing at her (line 15) made Isabela expand and add details to her story and reflect upon her own feelings. Julia also made sure that Isabela listened not only to her as the teacher but to her peers' questions. She did so even to the point of strategically controlling the students' turn taking at some points of the discussion until the questions were answered. Stanzas 5 and 6 provide an example of that situation when Nadine attempted to take the floor of the discussion. Nadine had to wait several turns to talk about her role as a language broker for her grandmother. The teacher acted as mediator by facilitating students' interactions and creating opportunities for the members of the group to participate in Isabela's process of meaning making. The teacher also mediated the discussions in many different ways that are beyond the scope of this article (e.g., participating as a reader and being an active listener and kidwatcher, which enabled her to know

when to follow up in students' comments or when to conclude the discussion).

The students were also mediators and co-constructors of the narrative. As mentioned above, Luis's comment (line 50) about his fights may have precipitated Isabela's revision of the end of her story. Following are some examples involving Luis and Sandy that illustrate how both Spanish and English-dominant students mediated Isabela's construction of narrative, meaning, and identities while they similarly engaged in a process of making meaning and positioned themselves within the narrative.

Isabela had already mentioned that the reason the girls in her story laughed at her was because she did not speak English when in Stanza 5, Luis, a Spanish dominant student, asked, "*¿Por qué se ríen?*" [Why do they laugh?] (lines 23 and 27). It seems that Luis was having a difficult time making sense of the reason why someone would laugh at another person for not speaking English. In Stanza 6 he seemed still to be thinking of Isabela's experience and listening to her. At that point he made a statement indicating an understanding of why she preferred where she lived before: "*¡Ah!, porque donde tú vivías no se reían de tí*" [Ah!, because where you lived they didn't laugh at you] (line 33). As a result of Luis's comment, Isabela mentioned for the first time the name of her town: "*Allá en Caborcas, porque allá hablaba puro español yo*" [There in Caborcas, because there I spoke only Spanish] (lines 34 and 35). Thus, this interaction seemed to support Isabela's

understanding of what those two worlds looked like and what it meant to belong to them.

Isabela then positioned herself as being *atilena* (from Atil, Mexico) and a Spanish speaker, which suggests the beginning of the development of a collective identity (Trueba, 1999). Stanza 7, in which Sandy (English dominant) wanted to know more about the place Isabela came from, illustrates the power of peer mediation in Isabela's construction of an ethnic identity in the sense that Sandy's question and comment led Isabela to affirm her sense of belonging. The stanza also shows how the narrative positioned the participants interactionally (Worthman, 2001).

It seems that Sandy interpreted Isabela's long pause (line 37) as signaling a codeswitching to English, as the Spanish-dominant students usually did when responding to English speakers. Sandy knew by experience how hard it was to speak in a second language (Sandy said in a previous discussion that is hard to speak both languages) and had received support from the Spanish-dominant students previously when she wanted to participate in the discussion in Spanish. She thus invited Isabela to use Spanish, the language in which Isabela could fully express her ideas without constrictions. This attitude was contrary to that of the girls in Isabela's story who laughed at her for speaking Spanish. In that sense Stanza 7 paralleled in part the content of Isabela's narrative. With this invitation Sandy positioned herself as being different from the English dominant girls who laughed at Isabela, which illustrates the

interactional role of narratives (Worthman, 2001) through which participants, in this example a Spanish-dominant and an English-dominant girl, recreated and negotiated relationships.

Sandy's invitation led Isabela to connect language (Spanish) and place to a sense of belonging and a sense of self that she articulated as follows: "*Somos 'caborquellejos' y somos 'atilenos'*" [We are '*caborquellejos*' (from Caborcas) and we are *atilenos* (from Atil)]" (lines 40 and 41). Isabela's pause before answering Sandy's questions may also be explained as Isabela's difficulty expressing her identity in English because language and identity are so strongly interconnected for many ethnic groups. Like the Mexican American students in Pease-Alvarez's (1993) study, Isabela constructed her identity connecting to both country of origin and language. In that sense Sandy mediated Isabela's construction of identity by validating what seemed to be so deeply a part of Isabela's identity: to speak in Spanish and to name herself using the Spanish patronymics of two little towns from Mexico.

In her review of scholarship on ethnicity, Mercado (2001) presents a view of ethnicity as an important source of identity and a marker of solidarity for children and youth. She highlights that ethnicity is also "about the quest for community and belonging" (p. 679). Isabela had expressed in other literature discussions a strong sense of belonging to Atil, Mexico: *Yo creo que I, yo belong a mi casa del Atil*" [I think I, I belong to my house in Atil], "*I belong to my pueblito*" [little town] she

had said in a previous discussion (*La mariposa*, 2/4/99). When I asked her what made her feel that she belonged there, she responded: “*Porque allí yo nací y allí yo tengo que estar*” [Because I was born there and it is there where I have to be].

McCarty and Zepeda (1999), in their discussion about Native American naming, argue that “self-naming is perhaps the simplest yet most profound act of human autonomy” (p. 200). Isabela affirmed her identity in this excerpt through self-naming as a family of “*caborquellejos*” and “*atilenos*.” Mexican, Mexican American, or Latina are names that other people assign to children such as Isabela, but she identified herself and her family as “*caborquellejos*” and “*atilenos*.” Her self-identification revealed an important axis of her construction of identity (McCarty & Zepeda, 1999): an identity where sense-of-belonging is linked to the local community where she was born and raised before her family moved to the U.S. Isabela’s words, as a Mexican girl, reflect what McCarty and Zepeda describe as one of the most salient and resilient factors in the identity formation of indigenous groups in North America; that is, the embeddedness within indigenous communities of a “*sense of self in sense of place*” (p. 198; emphasis in original) and the role of language in constructing and reconstructing sense-of-place and sense-of-self. In other words, for Isabela identity, place, and language were intertwined in narrative.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Considering that school’s responsibility is to offer equal educational opportuni-

ties to all students, this case study has implications for teaching practices and educational policies for English Language Learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. Next I address three aspects of this study that have implications for ensuring and extending English Language Learners’ access to learning: providing access to narratives, to students’ first language, and to discussions of texts that address critical issues within heterogeneous groups.

#### *Access to Narratives*

This case study illustrates the various roles of narratives in an English language learner’s participation in literature discussions. The study shows that having access to narratives enabled Isabela to draw on funds of knowledge that allowed her participation in literacy events at school. Isabela’s narratives played a representational and an interactional role in her discussions. Narratives, as cultural tools, served Isabela not only to represent the past but also to enable her and her audience’s self construction, their construction of situated identities. This study therefore adds a new dimension to the professional literature on sociocultural theory that examines classroom instruction by illustrating the ways in which narratives mediate students’ construction of identities.

Isabela’s narrative enabled her to develop situated identities in two arenas. On the one hand, she developed an academic identity as a skillful student and storyteller who participated effectively in small group discussions of literature and who self-regulated her

discourse accordingly to the linguistic context of the small groups. On the other hand, she articulated a cultural identity rooted in her experiences in her country of origin and as a recent immigrant in the United States. This case study demonstrates how the two identities can come together in a school setting and in a literacy event when a teacher creates the context where a variety of cultural tools—such as the use of narratives of personal experiences and students’ first language—are available and valued, suggesting a positive relationship between ethnicity and learning. As Mercado (2001) points out: “Teachers need to have a more expansive view of the complex role that ethnicity and ethnic identification have in human development, both of which influence and are influenced by the teaching and learning process” (p. 679).

This case study also shows that students’ narratives may not reflect the type of linearity that is so valued in mainstream discourse and research. Isabela’s narrative reached its coherence through a nonlinear process that might reflect patterns of home-based discourse but also seemed to reflect her process of meaning making of a discriminatory experience. As has been found in studies with mainstream populations, this case study also shows that narratives among bilingual young students can also be co-constructed, that is, not so much told to others but told with others. The co-construction of narratives enabled other members of the groups to position themselves as certain kinds of persons, in this case as supportive Spanish and English-dominant

students, not a small contribution in an English-only era. The co-construction of narratives challenges an individualistic view of narrative performance and speaks of the need to provide opportunities for jointly-created narratives in classrooms.

### *Access to Language*

The findings of this study suggest the importance of allowing the use of students’ first language (in this case, Spanish) to facilitate the learning of English and students’ literacy development. In this specific bilingual learning context the students’ home language was regarded as an intellectual resource and a tool for thinking that the children brought to the educational process. Therefore, Isabela was regarded as a bilingual student whose linguistic and cultural resources were acknowledged and used by the teacher for instructional purposes. Isabela’s linguistic repertoires enabled her to participate as a literate member of the classroom within different small group literature discussions with either Spanish-dominant or English-dominant students.

Having access to two languages shaped Isabela’s use of narratives. In a Spanish linguistic context, although she had a range of responses to literature, she drew much on narratives and storytelling to make sense of texts and life. In the English-dominant groups, she assumed the role of facilitator of Spanish for the English-dominant students who were working on recovering Spanish and occasionally made translations of her and others’ responses into English or Spanish. Isabela did not

engage in storytelling or long narratives in English-dominant groups, even if the texts were suitable to engage students in storytelling, which suggests that Isabela monitored her discourse as she moved from Spanish-dominant groups to English-dominant groups.

Having access to different linguistic contexts and different audiences made available a range of roles for Isabela that allowed her participation as a literate member of different groups, which points to the benefits of providing bilingual and heterogeneous learning contexts to English language learners. Mainstream teachers of linguistically diverse students face the challenge of mediating students' learning by creating opportunities to tap into students' first language while they learn English, even if a teacher does not know the language of the students. A first step in this direction is to acknowledge the important and positive role of the first language in learning.

This case study also illustrates how empowering and beneficial it is for linguistic minority students when their home language and culture are valued rather than ignored. For some students, such as Isabela, their ability to use their native tongue represents an important axis of their construction of identity, specifically their identification with the ethnic-cultural group of their parents. Providing students with access to their native languages as they negotiate cultural identities has implications for students' successful participation at school, which is relevant to goals of equity and justice in education (Nieto, 2002; Soto, 1997). The argument made

here about the benefits of enabling instead of restricting students' access to diverse linguistic and cultural resources challenges instruction enacted through English-only legislation.

### *Literature Discussions*

This study also contributes to the professional literature on children's responses to texts by focusing on a population that is almost absent from that discussion, bilingual (Spanish/English) young children discussing literature in small groups. Literature discussions in this bilingual classroom used and extended the resources students brought to school by providing access to multiple mediational means as the students talked about texts: students' languages, the mediation of peers in heterogeneous groups, the mediation of adults, and the content of texts that addressed social issues relevant to the students' lives.

As Isabela's narrative illustrates, small group literature discussions provided a context where these 7-year-old students entered a discourse through which they were able to reflect on experiences of discrimination and even were learning to position themselves as empowered students willing to defend their rights. This case study suggests that there is no need for delaying children's discussions of critical issues until they first learn to decode, a practice that emphasizes skills at the expense of content and thoughtfulness. The tensions described by Isabela through her narrative have been described as characteristic of bicultural children (Darder, 1991). Reading and talking about those

experiences can benefit not only bilingual/bicultural students but mainstream students as well. It can also benefit teachers. As Valdés (2001) points out, teachers, especially mainstream teachers, may have little awareness of how language discrimination operates in the lives of young immigrant students and in the lives of their parents.

Finally, I want to highlight an additional potential benefit of the literature discussions as organized in this bilingual classroom, namely, to influence parents' perceptions of the value of reading and talking about books at school and home for the academic success of their children. According to Isabela's mother, the literature discussions impacted Isabela's motivation and

academic achievement in general: "*Pues a mí me gusta. Isabela sí ha adelantado mucho. (. . .) Se me hacía muy atrasada en todo y no le echaba ganas. (. . .) Me gusta porque está saliendo adelante.*" [I like it (the activity of literature discussions). Isabela has improved a lot. (. . .) I found that she was so behind in everything and was not motivated (. . .) I like it because she is 'moving ahead']. It is not my intention to establish a causal link between the literature discussions and Isabela's motivation and later performance at school but to bring the parents' perspectives instead. Isabela, indeed, "*le echó ganas,*" and she graduated in June 2002 from fifth grade. She still likes to tell stories, both personal and scary ones.

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#### APPENDIX

Notational devices used in transcripts to name some features of speech:

Brackets [ ] indicate overlapping speech.

Capitalized words are emphatic (said with extra stress).

A colon following a vowel indicates elongation of vowel.

Codeswitching will be represented by underlining.

Parentheses indicate additional information.