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“We All is Teachers”: Emergent Bilingual Children at the Center of the Curriculum

Ysaaca Axelrod

It is 9:30 am and the children in the classroom have just finished describing to their teachers where they are going to play for their morning “work time.” Diego announces “*Yo cocino mucha comida, mucha comida para Flor y luego en área de bloques voy a hacer una casa*” (I am cooking lots of food, lots of food for Flor and then in the block area I am going to make a house). Marcelo says “*Yo voy a la casa a poner un doctor*” (I am going to the house to put on a doctor [outfit]), Javier chimes in “No, I am going to be the doctor, *¿esta bien?, yo sabo lo que hace un doctor* (Is that ok? I know what a doctor does). Soraya invites Luna to “*lavando un dirty dog, esta muy sucio*” (bathe a dirty dog that is very dirty).

After they describe their plans, they go off, sometimes to the area that they planned, and sometimes not. Within 5 minutes the classroom is humming with children playing, going across areas of the classrooms, switching back and forth between languages, while the teachers move around the classroom observing and joining children at play for the next hour. If a visitor stepped into this classroom, they would have a hard time finding the adults, instead it is the voices and bodies of busy children moving around that stand out in this space. (Field Notes, October 4, 2010)

These notes describe a 4-year-olds Head Start bilingual (Spanish/English) classroom in an immigrant neighborhood in New York City. The children are predominantly children of Dominican and Mexican immigrants. Most speak Spanish at home, but some of the Mexican families also speak Mixtec, an indigenous language. The children in this community are frequently labeled as “at risk” in schools because of their lack of language (i.e., lack of mainstream U.S. English), immigration status, race, or ethnicity.

Curricular practices are increasingly standardized with narrow definitions of language and literacy (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2010), and an increase in teacher-directed and -led instruction with little time and space for children to engage with and learn from their peers (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). However, at this Head Start program, the primary focus is on children’s socio-emotional development, using a play-based curriculum. The teachers see their role as nurturing language skills so that the children can learn how to communicate their feelings and

emotions in order to participate in the classroom community. Language and play are important tools for the children to learn and develop skills across all domains.

The Head Start teachers embrace “dynamic bilingualism” (García, 2009) in their own language practices and support the children’s translanguaging practices—or the way they move back and forth between languages, depending on the context and listeners. Dynamic bilingualism is a shift away from the idea of bilinguals possessing two separate language systems. It describes the complex language practices of bilingual speakers, and acknowledges that it the interrelationship between languages is expansive and evolving (García, 2009).

The teachers also view all of the children’s interactions with language and texts, and the tools used to create texts, as valuable emergent literacy practices, “an early version of an ability that will develop further over time” (Lindfors, 2008, p. 53). Children’s oral language, their play with texts (Axelrod, 2014a), and conversations with peers are seen as critical to their language and literacy development, in stark contrast to many classrooms that serve children who are labeled “at risk.”

John Dewey said, “The child is the starting point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard” (1902/1990, p. 187). The teachers in this Head Start program (while they did not refer to Dewey) embrace this philosophy by putting each child at the center of the curriculum and focusing on his or her individual development.

This article focuses on the possibilities and benefits of flexible curricular practices that build on children’s existing language skills, positioning the children as knowledgeable and active learners. It also recognizes the challenges of enacting classroom practices that take a stand against current thinking.

The data described here was collected as part of an ethnographic case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) that took place over the course of an academic year (September through July) in a Head Start classroom. I examined the language and literacy development and practices of emergent bilingual 4-year-olds and developed an understanding of the multiple factors that influenced the children’s language development, language policies in the school, curriculum, and teacher and family ideologies. I was particularly interested in how the children used language(s) to interact with peers, the ways in which they negotiated across their languages over time, in different contexts and with different people.

Data for the study was collected through classroom observations (3 to 4 times a week for the entire school day); formal interviews with the families, teachers and administrators (one hour long, twice during the study, conducted in language of choice, typically in Spanish, with families and teachers); a focus group interview with the families (all families were invited, six participated); an artifact collection of children's work (photographs); and countless informal conversations with families, teachers, administrators, and children (which were included in field notes).

There were 13 children in the classroom, all of whom participated in the study. Half of the children came from homes where the families spoke Mixtec (all but one also spoke Spanish at home), four (all identified as Mexican) spoke only Spanish at home, two (identified as Dominican) spoke both English and Spanish, and two children (one identified as Black, the other as African-American) spoke only English at home. Most of the children had attended the Head Start program the previous year as 3-year-olds.

The two teachers in the classroom were both immigrants, one from the Dominican Republic and one from Argentina. They both spoke Spanish and English, and were both mothers whose children had attended this Head Start program. I also interviewed the Head Start executive director and educational director. I had frequent informal conversations with Joan, the educational director, an African-American woman who was eager to hear about my research and share her experiences working in the program for over 30 years, and to describe the shifts that had taken place in the field of early childhood education during her career.

My role as a researcher was as a participant observer, moving across the continuum of participation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During the study I also took on several other roles, alternating between researcher, teacher, and sometimes playmate. As a native English and Spanish speaker I was able to engage with the children and families in both languages, as well as recognize the dynamic nature of bilingualism.

Interviews with the families, teachers, and directors highlighted the complexities and challenges of having a play-based program that honored the children's language practices. Joan, the educational director, talked about the challenges the program faced with funders, the feedback about their students from the local elementary school, and families' expectations of what school should be like. She felt that the pressure to conform to the current "push-down, standard, English-only, reading and writing focus" was coming from all directions.

Teachers at the local elementary school said in interviews that they were concerned that the children who came from the Head Start program did not have many of the skills associated with kindergarten readiness, such as knowing letters and sounds, numbers, and shapes. They felt that the program should spend less time playing and more time preparing the children for kindergarten.

Joan had also heard these concerns; however, she was unwilling to compromise her belief in the importance of play for early childhood, and particularly for these children. She noted that given their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status these children tended to attend low-performing elementary schools. These schools were under particular pressure to increase test scores, which often meant a standardized curriculum, increased teacher-directed instruction, and few opportunities for the children to play. “It doesn’t make sense,” she said, “children, all children, need to play, it’s how they learn.” She said that many families at first adopt the discourse of “kindergarten readiness” for their younger children. “But, then they come here, and they see the kids happy and engaged, and we can show them how they are learning. We need to teach families about the importance of play, so they recognize it too.”

Joan also felt strongly that Head Start’s practice was about honoring the children and their families’ linguistic practices. Joan identified as a language learner, since she spoke English and a bit of Spanish: “I don’t know if we are even called a bilingual program, we try to meet children where they are, I don’t know what to call us, a ‘considerate language program,’ it’s hard to explain.” The program’s goals around bilingual education were neither political nor “fashionable,” as Joan put it, rather a way to honor each child and their families’ language(s), and to help them develop them to support their future learning and endeavors. While Joan’s position was unwavering, the interviews with the families and teachers revealed more hesitancy.

The families were caught between the societal discourse around schooling and language and their personal experiences at the school. They were often confused about the classroom curriculum (“why do they play so much?”), wondered why their children didn’t have homework, and were concerned about academic skills such as knowing the letters of the alphabet and being able to write, and about why their children weren’t being taught more English. Their concerns were fueled by their desire for their children to be successful in school.

In spite of living in New York City, the families were aware of the dominance of English-only language ideologies (Crawford, 2004). One mother said, “*Mi tia me dice que mi hija tiene que saber todas las letras y los números en English cuando entre a kinder, porque si no la van a poner con los niños con problemas.*”

(My aunt says that my daughter needs to know all her letters and numbers in English when she goes to kindergarten because if not they will put her with the children with problems).

The families' views on school and the role of language instruction drew on their own experiences of traditional teaching practices, of children sitting at desks learning from the teacher. At the same time, the families spoke highly of their experiences at Head Start; they loved the teachers, who they felt treated their children well, and they recognized that their children loved school. The families felt at home at the school and were glad that they could communicate with the teachers. In fact, many returned to Head Start even after their children had moved on, in order to ask for help with their children's schooling. In addition, families were pleased that their children were maintaining Spanish.

Interviews with the teachers offered a nuanced perspective. They were able to articulate the struggle between their beliefs and knowledge as teachers and their experiences as mothers who could identify with the families' questions and concerns. Teachers Massiel and Viviana embraced the school's curriculum and language philosophy. They wanted every child to be able to communicate in whatever way they felt most comfortable. They saw how the children developed through play and felt that play offered opportunities for every child to engage in the classroom at their own level and at their own pace.

Do you remember Estrella at the beginning of the year, she said nothing, her mom even laughed at us when we talked to her about how quiet she was in the classroom. But look, slowly, she started pointing and saying "this" "that," "I want to play there," and now, look at her, she is running the classroom. Before (making worried face), I was worried about her going to kindergarten and what the teachers there would say, but now, pshaw, she will be fine, more than fine, they will have their hands full trying to keep up with her. Even in English, she is doing well, both in English and Spanish, she is talking so much, she just hides the English from us, I hear her talking to Miss Joy [volunteer in classroom] in English, but she stops and gives me that look [opens eyes wide], ha, ha, yes, the teachers will have their hands full. (Interview with Massiel, March 2011, translated from Spanish)

For the teachers, language was the vehicle to help the children develop social skills, ways to express themselves and to advocate for themselves. While they saw bilingualism as an advantage and something to strive for, in practice they were more concerned with each child's socio-emotional well-being and ability to use language to communicate. The teachers fostered the children's existing

language practices, but were also keenly aware of the challenges the children would face in schools and in society if they were not able to speak English. They often used the phrase “*la realidad es que*” (the truth/reality is) as they struggled between the theoretical ideals of bilingual education and bilingualism and what they perceived to be the realities of the U.S., in particular discrimination against Spanish speakers. The teachers’ language ideologies drew on their own experiences as Spanish-speaking immigrants and as mothers of children who spoke only Spanish when they entered school.

When I asked the teachers how they made choices about which language to speak and why, their answers always came back to individual children and their needs.

A veces uno quiere hablar en español y a veces en inglés. ¿Tu me entiendes? Si estoy hablando de los billes, o taxes, o cosas como mas cosas de la vida, entonces lo hablamos en inglés, pero si estamos hablando de los sentimientos, de las cosas de adentro, de cosas que uno quiere hablar con su mami, entonces, lo que me sale es hablar en español. Yo veo eso con mis hijos, casi siempre hablan en inglés, pero cuando algo les está pasando en el corazón, entonces, vienen, “Mami, I want to talk in Spanish” y entonces yo se que es algo serio y necesitan su mami. (Sometimes you want to talk in Spanish and sometimes in English. Do you understand? If I am talking about bills, or taxes, or things that are more like daily life stuff, then we talk in English, but if we are talking about feelings or intimate things that you want to talk about with your mom, then what comes out is Spanish. I see that my own children usually speak in English, but when something is happening in their heart, then they say “Mommy, I want to talk in Spanish” and then I know it’s something serious and they need their mom.)

(Interview with Massiel, December 2010)

Massiel saw translanguaging as an integral part of her own language practices. She and Viviana engaged in dynamic bilingualism in their interactions with their own children and families, so they were able to understand how the school-children moved back and forth between languages. Unlike Joan, whose language ideologies built on her philosophies around language and the mission of the school, the teachers drew on their personal experiences to shape their views of language and how they approached language in the classroom.

Similarly, Massiel and Viviana understood families’ concerns and questions about the play-based curriculum. In a conversation with the teachers, Massiel said, “In my country, school is desks and chairs, a chalkboard and a teacher standing in front talking, and I imagine that this is what a lot of

the parents think school is.” Viviana added, “Yes, so what we have to do is teach, show them, how the children are learning through play, you know, what is happening at the block area, family area... so they can see, yeah, language development, social skills, math skills.”

In this conversation, the teachers are illustrating what Dewey describes as the “contrast between traditional and progressive education” (1938/1997, p. 17). Traditional school is where teachers transmit existing information and knowledge to students to prepare them for future endeavors. Progressive education focuses on the importance of experiences that help students to learn and develop understanding and build knowledge, or to use experiences to make sense of existing information. Viviana highlights how children are acquiring skills through their play; however, as she states, it is less obvious than when a teacher is standing in front of the class engaging in direct instruction.

The curricular practices at Head Start embraced many of the principles that Dewey (1938/1997) puts forth as being key to progressive education: learning experiences, drawing on children’s prior knowledge, the importance of context, the role of cooperation in teaching children social skills, the importance of choice, and the role of the teacher to support and scaffold learning experiences.

In her book *I Learn from Children*, Caroline Pratt (1948/1990) describes her development as a teacher, rejecting traditional schools and focusing on what she learned from her interactions and observations with children. She asks, “Was it unreasonable to try to fit the school to the child, rather than—as we were doing with indifferent success—fitting the child to the school?” (p. 8). Over sixty years later, these words still resonate with early childhood educators who attempt to create classroom spaces that are child-centered in the midst of high stakes testing, mandated standards, and core curricula.

In this Head Start school, the children, their language practices, and their interests guided the daily activities in the classroom. Every visit to the classroom was unpredictable—the children might be at a Michael Jackson concert (Axelrod, 2014b), discussing why a snowman melted in the rain, creating books about butterflies in the shape of butterflies, figuring out why mixing all the colors created brown, determining how many letter “a” magnets were needed for everybody’s name in the class, or discussing why it was important to be bilingual. It is difficult to imagine how standardized curricula would foster the richness of the conversations and play that occurred in this classroom. Children were given the time and space to play and learn in ways that allowed them to draw from their full linguistic repertoire and build upon their existing language skills.

The flexible and child-centered curriculum gave the children opportunities to interact with each other and learn from each other, highlighting the role and importance of peer interactions in development. This interaction perhaps best explains children's view of their roles in the classroom.

Javier: I am the teacher.

Estrella: *No, tu no eres la teacher.* (No, you aren't the teacher.)

Javier: *Si, yo soy el maestro.* (Yes, I am the teacher.)

Estrella: Noooooooooo [points to the classroom teacher].

Soraya: We can all be the teachers.

Javier: Yeah, like they be the big teachers and we can be the other teachers.

Soraya: Yeah, I can teach you something.

Javier: Me too, I can teach you something.

Estrella: *Yo soy maestra también.* (I am a teacher too.)

Javier: Yeah, we all is teachers in [this] room.

The children in this classroom saw themselves as capable beings who had knowledge and skills to offer and contribute to the learning of others. They embraced their classroom experiences, which gave them the confidence, even as 4-year-olds, that they could be teachers as well as learners.

Classrooms under current education policy have shifted back to the traditional education that Dewey describes (Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010), where teachers are the possessors of knowledge and children are the recipients. There is little room for creativity, play, and non-standard language practices, given the emphasis on subject matter and order.

What if schools embraced progressive education, as this Head Start program does? Dewey argues that traditional education and progressive education do not need to be set up in opposition to each other; rather, the principles of progressive education can be the means through which to achieve the goals of traditional education. Viviana alludes to this when she talks about showing families how children learn and develop important academic skills through play.

Vivian Paley (2005) writes that play is a child's work and her vivid descriptions of children's play highlight its complexity as well as the richness of what it offers children. Her writing, similar to the descriptions of the practices in this classroom, foreground the children, their words, their actions, and what they are learning through play. In the same way, education policy could highlight practices that move the child to the center, focusing on the child's needs and context, and then think about how to develop curricula that builds on these practices. We must find a way to honor and recognize what children bring, so that they can in turn leverage their resources, prior knowledge, and language practices to support their learning and feel like they "all is teachers."

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