ELL Students Speak for Themselves: Identity Texts and Literacy Engagement in Multilingual Classrooms [1]

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Introduction
Hi! My name is Sidra and it has bee two years since I came to Canada.

.....

Schools and Teachers in Canada

In Pakistan I was starting grade 6 but when I came here they put me in grade 5 because they said I was to small for grade 6. My brothers and sister were in the same school. I was new and I didn't know English I could only say little sentences. I wore cultural clothes and people usually look and judge a new person by their looks. If they see the clothes that I am wearing, are not like their clothes, they will just think that I'm not one of them. If we had

> any partner activities no one will pick me as their partner and I felt really, really left out and kids also made fun of me because I looked different. and I couldn't speak English properly. Teachers in school were really helpful. They tried their best to make me comfortable in class.

.....

> It is Nice when Teachers Respect me. The teachers have been helping me the most by sporting and appreshending me. I was the only person in grade 5 who wore cultureal cloths. The Teachers liked what I wore. They tried to talk to me and ask me qustions, I liked telling teachers about my culture and religion it made feel more comfortable and welcome.

These excerpts from Sidra's five-and-a-half page account of her transition from Pakistan to Canada provide a glimpse into the inner world of an English language learning (ELL) student. Sidra highlights themes that are notably absent from the "scientifically-proven" prescriptions of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). She talks about the struggle to express herself, not just linguistically, but also culturally. Her "cultural clothes" are an expression of her identity that is rejected by peers, causing her to feel "really, really left out." She realizes early that difference often leads to exclusion. However, the rejection by peers is offset by the affirmation from teachers. Respect from teachers played a crucial role in welcoming her into the learning community of the school. This respect manifested itself in genuine interest on the part of teachers in her prior experiences, her culture and religion.

In short, Sidra expresses vividly the importance of human relationships in children's adjustment to schooling. She illustrates how engagement in learning, particularly for ELL students, is fueled as much by affect as by cognition. Despite her still limited access to academic English, she writes extensively because she has a lot to share and she knows that her teacher (Lisa Leoni) is genuinely interested in her experiences and insights. Sidra's account also illustrates the opportunity (and the responsibility) that teachers have to orchestrate interpersonal spaces where ELL students' identities are affirmed, thereby increasing the confidence with which they engage in language and literacy activities.

We inquire in this paper about the role of affect, identity, respect, and human relationships in children's learning. None of these constructs has been evident in the radical educational reforms ushered in by NCLB which, supposedly, are based on scientific research. Drawing on data from a Canada-wide project entitled *From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing Learning Environments for Knowledge Generation Within the New Economy* (Early et al., 2002), we present an alternative set of principles for promoting academic engagement among ELL students. Central to our argument are the inter-related propositions that:

- ELL students' cultural knowledge and language abilities are important resources in enabling academic engagement;
- ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning.

We claim that these propositions are consistent with the scientific research on how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). By contrast, instructional policies and practices currently being implemented in many urban schools systems within the high-stakes testing environment of NCLB contravene some of the core scientific principles of learning that have been established by empirical research. The framework we propose provides a tool that can serve as a starting point in developing school-based language policies that take account of what we know about how people learn.

Instructional Assumptions Underlying Current Reforms

Despite the fact that the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) reported no significant relationship between "systematic explicit phonics instruction" and reading comprehension for normally-progressing and low-achieving readers beyond grade 1, funds under the federal government's Reading First program are provided only to school systems that implement rigidly sequenced intensive phonics instruction throughout elementary school. Only this approach is regarded as "scientifically-proven." Many urban school systems serving low-income students have responded to these mandates by implementing scripted reading programs that tightly control all aspects of teacher-student interaction to ensure that teachers and students stay "on-task." High-stakes testing monitors the extent to which schools are making "adequate yearly progress" and severe penalties can be imposed on students, teachers, and schools that fail to keep pace. Although policies vary across states, students can be retained in grade level or denied high school graduation diplomas, teachers can be dismissed, and schools taken over by private for-profit corporations on the basis of high-stakes standardized test scores (for a detailed review see Brown, Cummins, & Sayers, in press).

The scientific basis and instructional consequences of these policies have been critiqued by numerous commentators (e.g. Allington, 2004; Coles, 2003; Garan, 2001; 2004; Krashen, 2004; McNeill, 2000; Popham, 2004). The essence of these critiques is that education for low-income students has been reduced to a set of one-size-fits-all instructional techniques focused on transmitting discrete skills and information to students, with no scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness of this approach.

The following inter-related assumptions underlying this approach apply specifically to ELL students:

- Students' home language (L1) is at best irrelevant, and at worst an impediment, to literacy development and academic success;
- The cultural knowledge and L1 linguistic abilities that ELL students bring to school have little instructional relevance;
- Instruction to develop English literacy should focus only on English literacy;
- Students can learn only what has been explicitly taught;
- Culturally and linguistically diverse parents, whose English may be quite limited, do not have the language skills to contribute to their children's literacy development.

These normalized instructional assumptions were common prior to NCLB but they have become entrenched much more rigidly as a result of the ubiquity of high-stakes testing and the mandate for systematic and explicit phonics instruction from Kindergarten through Grade 6 (Lyon & Chaabra, 2004). We argue that these assumptions violate the scientific consensus about how people learn (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000). They also reduce the opportunities for literacy engagement within the classroom (Guthrie, 2004). Finally, they are refuted by the empirical data on literacy development among ELL students showing that students' L1 proficiency at time of arrival is the strongest predictor of English academic development (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

How People Learn

The volume written by Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000) entitled *How People Learn* and published by the National Research Council synthesizes the research evidence regarding how learning occurs and the optimal conditions to foster learning. A follow-up volume edited by Donovan and Bransford (2005) examines the application of these learning principles to the teaching of History, Mathematics and Science. The relevance in the present context is that any instructional intervention that claims scientific credibility should reflect these basic principles of learning . Bransford and his colleagues emphasize the following three conditions for effective learning:

Engaging prior understandings
Donovan and Bransford (2005, p. 4) point out that "*new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences*" (emphasis original). Prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their environment and how they organize and interpret their observations. Prior knowledge refers not just to information or skills previously acquired in a transmission-oriented instructional sequence but to the totality of the experiences that have shaped the learner's identity and cognitive functioning. This principle implies that in classrooms with students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, instruction must explicitly activate students' prior knowledge and build relevant background knowledge as necessary.

Integrating factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks
Bransford et al. (2000, p. 16) point out that to develop competence in an area of inquiry "knowledge of a large set of disconnected facts is not sufficient." Students must be provided with opportunities to learn with understanding because "[d]eep understanding of subject matter transforms factual information into usable knowledge" (p. 16). Thus, knowledge is more than just the ability to remember; deeper levels of understanding are required to transfer knowledge from one context to another.

Taking active control over the learning process
Learners should be supported in taking control of, and self-regulating, their own learning. Donovan and Bransford (2005, p. 10) point out that "a 'metacognitive' or self-monitoring approach can help students develop the ability to take control of their own learning, consciously define learning goals, and monitor their progress in achieving them." When students take ownership of the learning process and invest their identities in the outcomes of learning, the resulting understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive.

This account specifies some minimal requirements for effective learning. It also brings into immediate focus the lack of scientific credibility of approaches that rely primarily on simple transmission of knowledge and skills from teachers to learners. Exclusive reliance on transmission pedagogy is likely to entail memorization rather than learning for deep understanding, minimal activation of students' prior knowledge, and passive rather than active learning. Numerous research studies have highlighted the widening pedagogical divide between urban low-income and suburban middle-income schools, with low-income and ELL students increasingly subjected to scripted transmission-oriented pedagogy that fails to build on their pre-existing cultural and linguistic knowledge (e.g. Warschauer, Knoebel, & Stone, 2004).

Teaching for Transfer and Respect

The scientifically-based learning principles articulated by Bransford and his colleagues imply that instruction for ELL students should build on their pre-existing knowledge, aim for deep understanding of issues and content, and encourage students to self-regulate and take ownership of the learning process. Because ELL students' prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, these principles imply that educators should explicitly teach for transfer of concepts and skills from L1 to English. Research clearly shows the potential for this kind of cross-language transfer in school contexts that are supportive of biliteracy development (e.g. Reyes, 2001; see Cummins, 2001 for a detailed review). It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door.

How can we teach for cross-language transfer and literacy engagement when there are multiple languages represented in the classroom, none of which the teacher may know? One approach that we have been exploring in several schools in the Greater Toronto Area involves enabling students to create what we term *identity texts*. We use the term *identity texts* to describe the products of students' creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts which can be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected

back in a positive light. When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers, teachers, parents, grandparents, sister classes, the media, etc.) they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences. Although not always an essential component, technology acts as an amplifier to enhance the process of identity investment and affirmation. It facilitates the production of these texts, makes them look more accomplished, and expands the audiences and potential for affirmative feedback.

Thornwood Public School, a K-5 school in the Peel District School Board, with more than 40 different home languages spoken by its students, pioneered the process of enabling bilingual students to create dual language identity texts (Chow & Cummins, 2003; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). A large number of student-created identity texts in multiple languages can be viewed and downloaded at (http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/). In the initial project, grade 1 students in Patricia Chow's class and later, grade 2 students receiving ESL support from her, created stories initially in English (the language of school instruction) because most of the primary students had not yet learned to read or write in their L1; they illustrated these stories and then worked with various resource people (parents, older students literate in L1, some teachers who spoke a variety of students' languages) to translate these stories into their home languages. The stories and illustrations were then entered into the computer through word processing and scanning. The Dual Language Showcase website was created to enable students' bilingual stories to be shared with parents, relatives, or friends who had Internet access both in Canada and students' countries of origin and for teachers to access or download to use in their lessons, to assess students' L1 literacy skills, or to inspire their students to create multilingual stories.

As the Thornwood Dual Language Showcase project has evolved, students at all grade levels have become involved and the creation of dual language books has become a potent tool to support the integration of newcomer and ELL students. Students write initial drafts of stories in whichever language they choose, usually in their stronger language. Thus, newcomer students can write in L1 and demonstrate not only their literacy skills but also their ideas, feelings and imagination to teachers and other students. The image of newcomer students, in both their own eyes and the eyes of others, changes dramatically when they are enabled to express them*selves*. Newcomer students can also read books in their L1 written by other students or that form part of the school's extensive collection of commercial dual language books. This communicates to students that their L1 talents are welcomed within the school and motivates them to write in their L1. Students can also take these books home from the classroom or school library for reading with their parents. Bilingual high school students have also become involved in helping students to compose and translate across languages.

At Floradale Public School, another highly multilingual school in the Peel District School Board, teacher librarian Padma Sastri has integrated both student-created and commercial dual language books into all aspects of library functioning. Student-created dual language books are displayed prominently near the library entrance, parents are welcomed into the library to read books in their languages to students, and students can check out dual language books to bring home to read with their parents. The following vignette (observed by Sarah Cohen) illustrates how story time in the library functions to acknowledge and affirm students' multilingual talents:

Story Time in the Floradale Public School Library (observed by Sarah Cohen)

Padma arranges her sari around her as she sits in her chair at the front of the rug in the library. Twenty-seven fourth grade students assemble cross-legged in front of her as she launches into the day's lesson.

"Now I need eight people to help with reading the story. *Loud and clear*" Padma emphasizes as she calls two children to sit next to her. Each of them chooses somebody else and so on until there are four on either side of her.

"And who would like to tell the story in their language after we've heard it read?" Several students raise their hands.

(Padma then introduces the tradition of "trickster" stories in many countries around the world, giving examples from Asia, Africa, Jamaica, as well as Native American communities).

"Now here's one more trickster in this story. I need people to tell the story and I need people to say it in another language. Those of you who have another language and want to tell us the story in your language can take a chair and sit at the other side of the rug."

About 12 students bring chairs to sit on the opposite side of the rug from Padma and the six readers.

"Seenah, I'm going to give you the invitation again, would you like to say it in your language? You want to try? Yes? It's always good to try; I like that attitude. As long as you say 'Yes I'll try' it's worth it."

The students arrange themselves on the chairs and Padma distributes sheets with the story script to the children sitting next to her. She assigns roles and instructs them to read over in their mind to make sure there are no hard words. Next she instructs those students left on the rug in front of her on their role as chorus.

"If you go 'Ooooh' then we know you can't hear but if you say 'Ah haah' then you know they are saying it well."

To the readers she says, "Don't say the things in the brackets but do the actions. Do the _____?"

"actions" repeat the children.

"Are we ready?" She asks, "Do we all have our listening ears? Do we have our translating tongues? Let's go. Big voices."
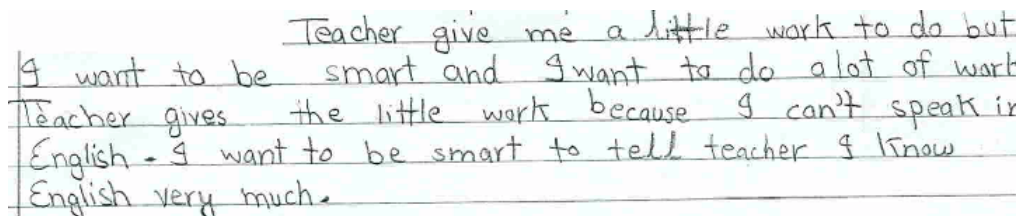
The story telling begins….Padma leads the chorus in their calls of "Oooh" when the voices go too low to be heard and "Ah haah" when the voices are strong and loud. I feel as though I am in a theatre.

When the story finishes Padma jumps in "Great job. Now—who's going to tell the story from beginning to end in English?" One of the students sitting on the rug volunteers and proceeds to lead us through the story in English.

"Now", says Padma as she gestures toward the row of students seated in the chairs opposite her, "These people are going to tell us the story in another language."

I listen amazed as one by one I hear and see the story retold first in Urdu, then Turkish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Gujerati, Tamil, Korean once each and Arabic three times. The other students in the class appear to be equally as entranced as I am, though neither I nor they understand most of the languages being used. It is captivating to see the same story repeated with new or sometimes the same gestures while the words to express the action change. When the last in this sequence of performances has come to a close, Padma directs the students to check out the library books they will take out and invites the next class that has just arrived to replace this one on the rug.

Students who are encouraged to retell stories in their L1 or compose stories in both languages are transferring concepts and insights from one language to another. They are accessing and expressing their prior knowledge through both languages. For most bilingual students, their two languages are likely to be used asymmetrically according to domains such as home, school, religious observance, etc. When students' L1 is welcomed into the school domain, it facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas, and feelings from one domain to another and across languages. By contrast, for ELL students in the early stages of acquisition, that flow encounters a narrow bottleneck when English is the only permissible language of expression within the classroom. Hira, a grade 5 student in Lisa Leoni's ESL class in Michael Cranny Public School of the York Region District School Board, articulates clearly the frustration that students feel in not being able to fully express their intelligence and strong motivation to succeed:

> Teacher give me a little work to do but I want to be smart and I want to do a lot of work. Teacher gives the little work because I can't speak in English. I want to be smart to tell teacher I know English very much.

She also expresses the interplay and facilitation between languages:

> When I am allowed to write stories in Urdu, I feel very comfortable because when I write English its difficult for me. If I write in Urdu I feel very comfortable because in Pakistan People speak in Urdu and we also write in Urdu. …
>
> I enjoy reading in Urdu because its easy for me and I can understand it. In English, I can't understand very well. So, Its not so easy for me to understand English. I can read it very well but Its difficult for me to understand it. In Urdu, I can read anything.
>
> When I am allowed to use Urdu in class it helps me because when I write in Urdu and then I look at Urdu words and English comes in my mind. So, its help me a lot. When I write in English, Urdu comes in my mind. When I read in English I say it in Urdu in my mind. When I read in Urdu I feel very comfortable because I can understand it.

Similar observations regarding cross-language facilitation were made by the other students in Lisa Leoni's ESL class. A selection of their dual language identity texts can be viewed at www.multiliteracies.ca.

In Perminder Sandhu's grade 4 class in Coppard Glen Public School of the York Region District School Board, discussions about students' language and culture were integrated across the curriculum. Students wrote about their languages (see Photograph), discussed the importance of continuing to speak their languages, and worked in pairs to create dual language (or multilingual)

books, often with the help of their parents. The limitations of failing to connect, both cognitively and affectively, with students' prior experience is illustrated by Jagdeep in writing about his engagement with literacy and popular culture outside the school. Jagdeep is fluent in Punjabi, Hindi, and English and, in the following excerpt, he articulates the centrality of his first two languages to who he is and what he enjoys:

> I love Punjabi stories. They're so exciting. It just keeps me hooked right in. When it comes to Hindi movies, I just can't stop watching them! They are very funny and the problems are very sophisticated. It also makes me proud of my cultural background. I sometimes like so much that I watch it over and over and over again! I wish the industry would make more movies + stories because I like them too much! I have a whole cupboard full of Hindi movies + more! That's how much I like them.

Wall chart from Perminder Sandhu's grade 4 class in Coppard Glen Public School in the York Region District Board of Education

For Perminder, acknowledging and actively promoting students' linguistic and cultural capital is not simply a matter of activating students' prior knowledge; it is much more fundamentally fused within a pedagogy of respect. In a discussion among the authors of this paper, she commented:

> I just look at it not as an add-on. It informs my practice right through and through. It runs in the bloodstream of my classroom. I really want to reiterate the point we discussed earlier: It's all about relationships; it's all about how we approach, how we validate students' identities, how they accept their own [identities]. That ethos [shows up] in the running of the classroom, in every subject; it's not an add-on. It doesn't take two extra minutes of my time to get them to see the humanity of another human being at a most basic level. Because once they begin to see their vulnerabilities, their inhibitions, their realities, they connect with it.
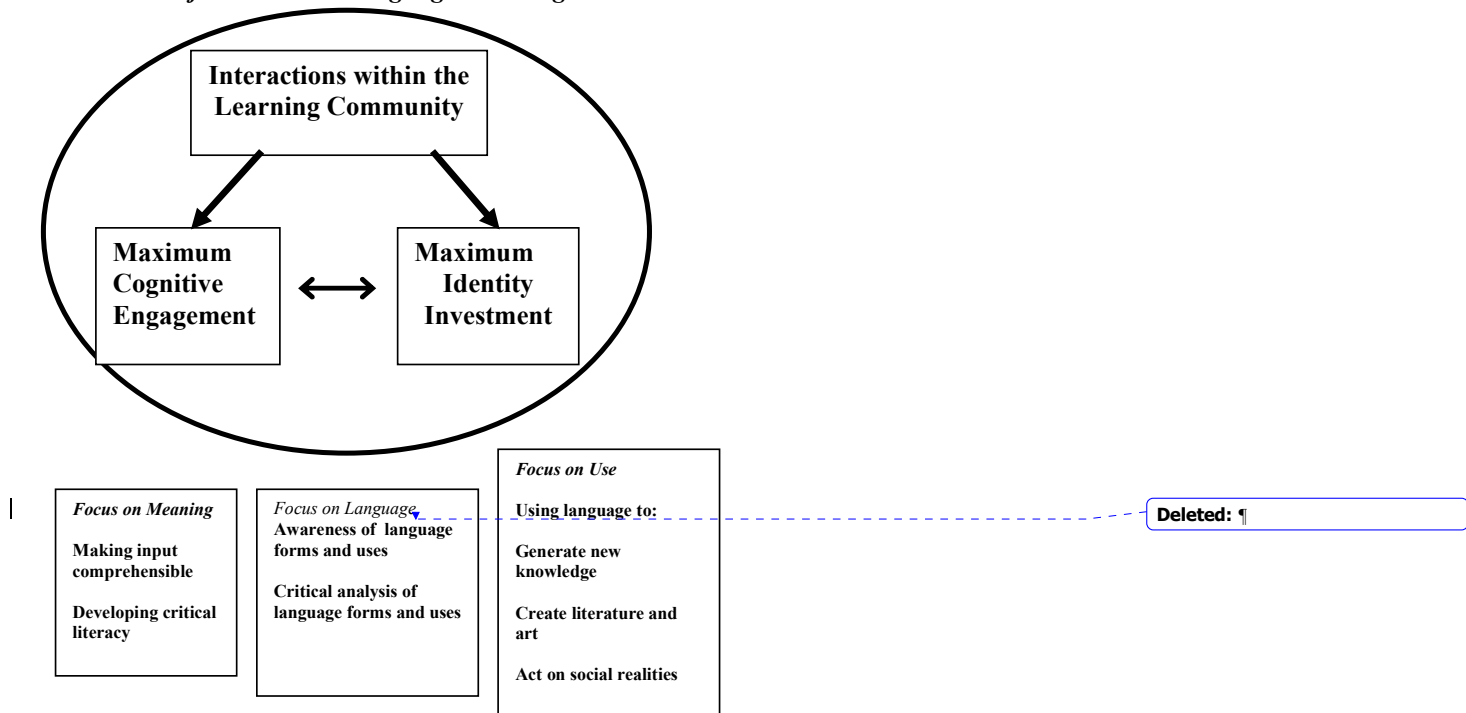
> And yet, ESL is always perceived as an add-on. All my students are ESL because for them English is a second language—there are other languages being spoken [in the home]. So you're talking about a continuum It's not going to be serviced by another person. All my students are ESL. Their language needs are there for me to see every single day in every single subject. As are my own, because I tell my students that I'm also an ESL person myself. (Focus group, April 28, 2005)

The Academic Expertise Framework

The pedagogical orientation illustrated in the examples above differs from current policies and practice in two major respects: (a) the language in which ELL students' prior experience is encoded is acknowledged as an important resource for learning, and instruction explicitly aims for transfer of knowledge and skills across languages; (b) instruction communicates respect for students' language and culture, and aims explicitly to enable students to engage with literacy and invest their identities in the learning process. The Academic Expertise framework (Figure 1) is intended as a tool to stimulate discussion among educators regarding school-based language policy. It is a starting point for discussion at the level of the school rather than a prescription handed down from above.

The framework incorporates the same emphasis on critical literacy, active self-regulated learning, deep understanding, and building on students' prior knowledge articulated by Bransford and his colleagues. However, it also argues for the centrality of *identity negotiation* and *identity investment* in any conception of effective pedagogy. Teacher-student interactions, and other interactions within the learning community (e.g. with peers and parents), create an interpersonal space within which knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated. Learning will be optimized when these interactions maximize both cognitive engagement and identity investment (Cummins, 2001). [2]

Figure 1

A Framework for Academic Language Learning

Interactions within the Learning Community

Maximum Cognitive Engagement

Maximum Identity Investment

Focus on Meaning

Making input comprehensible

Developing critical literacy

Focus on Language
Awareness of language forms and uses

Critical analysis of language forms and uses

Focus on Use

Using language to:

Generate new knowledge

Create literature and art

Act on social realities

Deleted: ¶

Adapted from Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society.* **Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education. p. 125.**

The framework attempts to express in a very concrete way the kinds of instructional emphases and language interactions required to build students' academic expertise. Optimal instruction will include a *Focus on Meaning*, a *Focus on Language*, and a *Focus on Use.* The focus on meaning entails the development of critical literacy rather than surface-level processing of text. The focus on language involves promoting not just explicit knowledge of how the linguistic code operates (e.g. phonics) but also critical awareness of how language operates within society. If students are to participate effectively within a democratic society they should be able to "read" how language intersects with power and how people use language to achieve social goals: to elucidate issues, to persuade, to deceive (or "spin" the truth), to include, to exclude, etc. The focus on use component argues that optimal instruction will enable *all* students (including ELL students) to generate knowledge, create literature and art, and act on social realities.

Conclusion

We have attempted to highlight the problematic nature of *where we are* with respect to current policies and practices regarding the education of ELL students. ELL students (and low-income students generally) are increasingly in classrooms where instruction violates what we know about how people learn, where literacy instruction substitutes for literacy engagement, and where students' home language proficiency is viewed as, at best, irrelevant to their academic progress in English.

We have illustrated through concrete classroom examples an alternative set of pedagogical policies and practices that highlight *where we want to be*. These policies and practices build on the scientific consensus about how people learn, promote literacy engagement through the creation of identity texts, and enable students to use their home language as a resource for learning.

The Academic Expertise framework provides a tool intended to help us articulate *how we get to where we want to be*. Rather than a set of top-down one-size-fits-all mandates enforced by punitive sanctions, the framework offers a tool for resistance to these mandates. It highlights the fact that educators, individually and collectively, always have *choices*. The educators whose classrooms are profiled in this paper exercised their choice to go beyond conventional curricular guidelines and mandates. They sought to meet curricular expectations and standards in ways that acknowledged and respected students' prior knowledge rather than ignoring or just paying lip-service to what students were bringing into the classroom. They were able to engage ELL students in powerful literacy practices (e.g. creating identity texts) much more rapidly than if the classroom were an English-only zone.

The choices made by these teachers also transformed the kinds of role that parents could play in their children's education. Parents became collaborators with their children and the teacher in creating identity texts that affirmed not only the students' intelligence, imagination, and multilingual talents, but also the funds of knowledge available in the community (see also McCaleb, 1997; Moll, et al., 1992).

So when we talk about the *whole child,* let us not forget the *whole teacher.* The process of identity negotiation is reciprocal. As they open up identity options for students, teachers are also defining their own identities. The teachers who supported and appreciated Sidra in her initial struggles to express herself and belong in her new school environment were also articulating what being an educator means to them. They saw Sidra not as a "limited English proficient" student but as a young person with intelligence, emotions, aspirations, and talents. They opened up pedagogical spaces where her identity and talents could be expressed and affirmed.

Although NCLB has reinforced the bleak pedagogical landscapes that exist in many urban school systems, on the positive side, it *has* re-inserted the achievement of ELL and low-income students into policy discussions. Schools cannot meet adequate yearly progress goals without improving the achievement of these students. We have suggested that this goal will be achieved much more effectively when the construct of *identity investment* is taken into consideration as a core component of learning, at least equal in significance to cognitive engagement. We have shown

how ELL students' literacy engagement is promoted when teachers connect with students in ways that are simply not possible within the constricted pedagogical space permitted by one-size-fits-all curricular mandates. Many teachers understand intuitively that human relationships are at the heart of schooling. Student achievement will increase significantly only when this insight is shared at all levels of educational policy making.

Footnotes

1. The research reported in this paper was carried out with funding (2002-2005) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (M. Early, *From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing Learning Environments for Knowledge Generation Within the New Economy*).

2. Although the construct of identity investment has not received much attention in the cognitive psychology or educational reform research literature, it has emerged as a significant explanatory construct in the educational anthropology and second language learning literature (e.g. Fordham, 1990; Norton, 2000).

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