

The Cultured Word: Cultural Background, Bilingualism, and the School Library

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Research indicates that cultural background creates a framework through which people view, interpret, and assign meaning to texts. This article presents the major research related to, and the major issues underlying, cultural background as a framework for textual meaning-making, bilingualism, and literacy development. This article also considers why these issues are important to school librarians and offers suggestions for making multicultural materials central aspects of school library collections and curricula.

Introduction

Reading is a highly individual experience; each person experiences texts in a unique manner. Although other factors also influence the construction of meaning from texts, research indicates that cultural and linguistic background creates a framework through which people view, interpret, and assign meaning to texts. For this reason, an understanding of the relations among cultural background, bilingualism, and literacy is crucial for school librarians. This article considers the major research related to, and the major issues underlying, cultural background as a framework for textual meaning-making and literacy development and the importance of these issues to school librarians.

Cultural Background as a Framework for Meaning-Making

It is important for school librarians to realize that students' cultural backgrounds affect their interpretations of all of the library materials with which they interact. Each time a person reads or listens to or views a text of some type, he or she relates it to his or her "wider social and cultural formations and categories" (Giroux, 1987, p. 177). For example, speakers of different languages are likely to have dissimilar interpretations of a movie scene in which an entire family is speaking loudly at once. Both a Midwestern US English-speaker and a Costa Rican Spanish-speaker would probably share the objective interpretation that the scene shows five people of various ages speaking simultaneously. The two speakers' interpretations of the characters' feelings, however, would probably differ. To the English-speaker, the scene would probably indicate familial discord, because many English-language cultures consider interrupting and not listening to other speakers to be rude. To the Spanish-speaker, the scene would probably indicate familial harmony because many Spanish cultures consider vocal frequency and

volume to indicate social comfort and general happiness. Similarly, if two students, one native to the US Midwest and one native to Costa Rica, were listening to their school librarian read a picture book aloud, each would interpret the story differently based on their different cultural backgrounds.

Not only does cultural background help to determine the messages a person extracts from a text, it also helps to determine the facility and accuracy with which she or he extracts those messages. Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979) asked a group of college students from the US and another group from India to read one letter describing a typically American wedding and one letter describing a typically Indian wedding. Participants read the letters from their native countries considerably more rapidly, and they were able to recall the native letters with significantly more detail and accuracy than the non-native letters. These results indicate that readers understand more easily and more fully texts depicting aspects of their native cultures. Consequently, students are likely to comprehend library materials that reflect their native cultures better than those that reflect other cultures.

Cultural Background and Literacy

Cultural background also exerts a strong influence on the concepts of literacy and literacy education, concepts crucial to the mission of the school library. Most standard dictionaries indicate that the term literate means being able to read and write. However, such a definition is both simplistic and exclusionary, for concepts of literacy vary from culture to culture (Ferdman, 1990; Vandergrift, 1995), and many concepts of literacy include abilities other than reading and writing. As Ferdman explained,

An illiterate person is someone who cannot access (or produce) texts that are seen as significant within a given culture. That same person, in another cultural context, may be classified as being quite literate. When a number of cultures co-exist within the same society, it is more likely that we will encounter variant conceptions of what constitutes being literate, (p. 186)

Cultural background not only informs the meaning a person makes from a text, it determines the texts with which that person must be familiar to be considered literate.

The definition of literacy used in this article is the ability to interpret and to create culturally significant texts in a manner generally accepted and understood in an individual's cultural community. This definition emphasizes the fact that students from different cultural communities are likely to construct different meanings from the same texts and to value different types of texts. Above all, this definition highlights the connection between culture and the construction of textual meaning.

Unfortunately, the culture-specific aspect of literacy is not recognized in most texts that are used for formal education in the US: "The technologies of teaching literacy, as in standardized textbooks, curriculum materials, classroom practices and testing, often assume a nonexistent single standard of

literacy" (Vandergrift, 1995, pp. 41-42). Because most of these educational materials represent the culture of the majority, the frameworks through which children of minority cultural groups interpret texts are often inconsistent with the frameworks through which those texts were created, which places minority children at a distinct educational disadvantage.

That is, whenever the cultural framework through which a reader views texts, and for that matter, the world, contrasts with an author's cultural framework, that reader is likely to have more difficulty in comprehending that author's work than in comprehending the work of an author with whom she or he shares a cultural framework. It follows that some of the documented educational difficulties of minority language-speaking students are attributable to inconsistencies between minority and majority cultural frameworks, not to individual learning disabilities. School librarians must be sensitive to this educational barrier for minority students and encourage teachers to incorporate texts that represent minority students' cultures into their lessons to help minority students overcome this obstacle to literacy.

Worse yet for minority students, the cultural hegemony of most educational materials forces them to choose between achieving academic success by embracing the hegemonic culture and subjugating their native culture, or preserving their native culture by rejecting the hegemony of the majority culture. As Ferdman (1990) explained,

When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person's cultural identity and in the learning situation, the individual is faced with making a choice that has implications for his or her acquisition of reading and writing skills, as well as for his or her relationship to particular texts and the symbols they contain. The student must either adopt the perspective of the school, at the risk of developing a negative component to his or her cultural identity, or else resist these externally imposed activities and meanings, at the risk of becoming alienated from the school, (p. 195)

No students should ever be forced to choose between becoming the best students they can become and embracing the culture of their families. By providing materials that represent the various cultural backgrounds of their students, the school library can show minority students that the school respects their cultures as well as the majority culture.

Bilingualism and Literacy

In view of these effects of cultural background on the construction of textual meaning, it is important for school librarians who serve bilingual students to understand the ties between bilingualism and literacy.

Bilingualism has been a major topic of research for about the last 100 years. During the first few decades of the 20th century, research results generally indicated that bilingual children scored lower on intelligence tests than their monolingual peers. Reevaluation of these early studies led the next generation of scholars to reject them due to methodological flaws. One such

flaw was not controlling for socioeconomic status, now known to be the major cause of low reading and writing skills among non-native English-speakers living in the US (Ortiz, 1989). Another major flaw was the assumption that all bilingual children are balanced bilinguals, with equal proficiency in both languages. In actuality, most children have one clearly dominant and one clearly subordinate language (Umbel, Pearson, Fernandez, & Oiler, 1992).

This second generation of bilingual scholars produced studies that directly contradicted earlier findings. Peal and Lambert (1962) controlled for levels of bilingualism, socioeconomic status, and other variables to show that a large sample of bilingual children scored higher on intelligence tests than did a comparable sample of monolingual youth. This study and other studies to follow (Diaz, 1985) essentially destroyed the belief among researchers that bilingualism impairs children's intellectual development.

However, despite decades of extensive research that contradicts this idea, it persists in the public arena. The pervasiveness of this myth has led to considerable resistance to the provision of badly needed bilingual education programs (Cummins, 1984) and has become a serious obstacle for bilingual educators to overcome. School librarians must understand that although bilingual children may read and write in the dominant school language at lower than average levels, this reduced literacy competence probably has nothing to do with the children's intelligence levels. Socioeconomic status, not intelligence, is the prevailing cause of reduced literacy levels among bilingual school children. School librarians should also realize that bilingual students may be much more proficient in reading and writing in their home languages than they are in the school language.

Bilingual Education and Language Acquisition

Other recent research has concentrated on the effects of bilingual education. There is general agreement that bilingual education, in which children receive instruction in both L1 (the language of a child's family) and L2 (the language dominant in a community and the dominant language of the school), results in significant educational gains in both languages, rather than in thwarted development of one or both languages (Edelsky, 1986; Rodriguez, Diaz, Duran, & Espinosa, 1995; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, Rodriguez, 1999). Further, these studies have shown that bilingual students enrolled in L2-exclusive instruction suffer significant proficiency losses to their L1. Again, many members of the public believe the opposite, which creates a serious obstacle to the provision of bilingual education. Based on this knowledge, school librarians must work to publicize these research results in order to win badly needed support for the collection of bilingual library materials.

Furthermore, bilingual education shows students who speak minority languages that their L1s are respected and legitimate. In their bilingual

interviews with young Punjabi/English-speakers attending English-only schools, Martin and Stuart-Smith (1998) found that children's attitudes toward their L1 and L2 reflected their perceptions of cultural attitudes toward the two languages. When interviewed in Punjabi, the children expressed equally positive attitudes toward Punjabi and English, reflecting their parents' acceptance of both languages as necessary for their cultural, social, and economic well-being. When interviewed in English, the same group of children expressed much more positive attitudes toward English than toward Punjabi, reflecting an implicit message they received from the L2-only educational format: Punjabi is not an important enough language to merit use in school.

As a result, school librarians must be aware that their disregard of students' native languages can send strong, albeit unintended, messages of disapproval to minority language-speaking students. Librarians who speak minority languages should do so on occasion in front of their students. Monolingual school librarians should invite speakers of other languages into the school library to tell or to read stories that incorporate words from minority languages, thereby making minority languages a part of the library environment.

Social Context and Bilingual Language Acquisition

Another direction of recent research is in the consideration of the importance of the social context in bilingual development. Hakuta and Garcia (1989) stressed that bilingualism is a social as well as a cognitive condition. As Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland (1997) explained,

Placed in the context of what is known now about children's language development, it would seem that programs for bilingual learners should be bilingual-bicultural in nature. Bilingual-bicultural programs support children's concept acquisition and development in their native language as well as in English and make use of the culture and contributions of the minority language to support the curriculum as well as the learner's self-concept. These programs enlist the native language community, consciously building connections between school and home that result in tremendously successful school experiences for bilingual learners, (p. 44)

Societal approbation is an extremely important component of this social aspect of bilingualism. With his Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen (1981) found that positive affective factors, such as feelings of security and self-confidence, promote L2 acquisition, whereas negative affective factors, such as anxiety and low self-esteem, obstruct L2 acquisition.

Thus, not only must school librarians show support for minority students' languages, they must also create library atmospheres that support and promote minority family heritages and cultures. Visual inclusion in the library physical environment is especially important in achieving this goal. The posters and other artwork in the library should depict people of multiple

ethnic, racial, religious, and so forth backgrounds. The library decor should also reflect a multicultural world community, such as a Japanese vase used as a flowerpot or a Russian balalaika used as a wall hanging. Student members of these cultures will notice and appreciate these little gestures of acceptance, and these items will spark culture-based discussions among the library users.

Social acceptance also figures strongly in self-motivation for literacy education. For example, Townsend and Fu (1998) documented a grade 2 Chinese boy's entry into a US school. Under the leadership of a highly supportive teacher, the environment of Xiaodi's grade 2 classroom was encouraging and supportive to his English development. Xiaodi's cultural difference helped to make him one of the most popular students in the class: "His friends all admired his ability to write in Chinese and were fascinated by the Chinese characters he used.... Classmates clamored for him to decorate their [self]-published book covers with Chinese writing" (p. 196). Xiaodi soon learned to read and write in English and grew into an enthusiastic reader and writer, composing a series of illustrated short stories in his free time. However, when he changed schools in grade 5 and entered a classroom environment far less supportive of his cultural background, Xiaodi's feelings of social rejection spread to his attitude toward reading and writing, and he soon ceased all related leisure activities.

What does this mean for the school librarian? It means that one of the most important components of promoting minority students' literacy development is the school librarian's personal attitude. An openly supportive school librarian could have helped to counteract the negative affects of Xiaodi's unsupportive grade 5 teacher by giving him a print-rich environment in which to seek support and refuge.

Indeed, it is the school librarian's responsibility to ensure that the library collection and curriculum affirm students' individual differences, as well as the value of all human cultures. Certainly, exposing students to every extant world culture is not possible, nor is it necessary. Rather, school librarians should create culturally tolerant and accepting learning environments that promote understanding and appreciation of the concept of individual differences in general.

Multicultural Literature in the School Library

Probably the most effective method of creating the culturally tolerant and acceptant school library environment discussed above is through the integration of multicultural literature into the collection and curriculum. These materials benefit all students: bilingual and other minority students; majority Students; minority and majority students in culturally mixed educational settings; and minority and majority students in culturally monolithic educational settings.

Benefits to Bilingual and Other Minority Students

First, multicultural literature benefits bilingual and other minority students. For bilingual students, the use of literature in students' L1s increases their interest in learning to read and write. As Schon (1999) argued, to "entice the ever-increasing number of Spanish-speaking adolescents into the world of books and reading, our task is certainly made easier with books written in the language that students know and understand" (p. 127). The familiar cultural concepts and visual images in these texts give bilingual students a sense of security, familiarity, and confidence that encourages them to want to learn to read and write.

In addition, the provision of LI materials helps to compensate for the educational disadvantage, as discussed above, that many bilingual students encounter:

It is important for children to have an opportunity to read books written in their first language. This exposure allows them to bring their knowledge of that language to the act of reading—an advantage that English-speaking children have every day. (Galda et al., 1997, p. 104)

Again, the crucial connection between cultural background and the creation of meaning from texts surfaces: culturally familiar texts in the school library collection facilitate students' reading and writing development.

The provision of LI materials is also essential in preserving students' linguistic heritages, a goal that is extremely important to many parents and other caregivers of bilingual children. Schechter, Sharken-Taboada, and Bayley (1996) studied Spanish-English bilingual parents' and guardians' reasons for raising their children bilingually. For all the caregivers interviewed, the primary reason to raise their children as bilinguals was a desire to preserve family culture and history by passing on their native languages to the next generation. By collecting materials written in students' various home languages, school libraries can support caregivers' efforts to maintain their cultural heritages.

Moreover, for both bilingual and other minority students, the use of multicultural materials in both L1s and L2s serves to affirm the validity of students' native cultures. As children mature, they collect and combine clues from their surroundings (including mass media, literature, teachers, librarians, parents, etc.) to form self-images. As Roethler (1998) explained in his discussion of African American children's identity formation, "One of the ways in which black children in America create their schemata is through the illustrations they encounter in the literature to which they are exposed as children" (p. 96). If children do not see children similar to themselves in school texts, they are likely to feel as if they themselves do not merit textual inclusion. Literary inclusion in the library collection, in words, pictures, and sound, is crucial in helping all children to form healthy self-images and

strong estimations of self-worth, and it sends a message of approval from the librarian to the minority student population.

Benefits to Majority Students

Including multicultural texts (both majority-language only and semi-bilingual materials) in the school library also benefits monolingual children who speak the language of the majority. Through multicultural literature, majority children can experience lives culturally different from their own, which results in deeper understandings and acceptances of individuals different from themselves (Agosto, 1997; Macphee, 1997; Stewig, 1992; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992; Vandergrift, 1995). In short, exposure encourages acceptance and appreciation.

Wham, Bamhart, and Cook (1996) documented this connection between exposure to multicultural materials and an increased awareness and acceptance of individual differences. They compared the attitudes of an experimental group of kindergarten, grade 2, and grade 4 students involved in a year-long, multicultural literature intensive program at school with the attitudes of a control group of kindergarten, grade 2, and grade 4 students whose school curricula included few multicultural materials. Throughout the year, members of the experimental group exhibited increasingly positive attitudes toward people of cultural backgrounds different from their own, whereas members of the control group exhibited increasingly negative attitudes toward people of cultural backgrounds different from their own.

This study suggests that not only does the use of multicultural materials increase children's positive attitudes toward human differences, but that without education and intervention, negative attitudes actually increase as children mature. For this reason, school librarians should select multicultural materials as often as possible when presenting materials to their students. Elementary school librarians who read stories to their classes should try to present an array of culturally, linguistically, ethnically, religiously, and so forth varied materials throughout the course of the school year. When engaging in readers' advisory with their students, middle school and high school librarians should consciously recommend similarly varied materials. Of course, in order to present and suggest multicultural materials to their students, librarians themselves must expand their own reading habits to incorporate these diverse materials.

Benefits to Minority and Majority Students in Culturally Mixed Settings

Multicultural materials also benefit both bilingual and monolingual children in culturally mixed educational settings. As minority and non-minority students study multicultural materials together, they create social bonds that facilitate the reading and writing development process for both native and [non-native speakers. L2 learners benefit from having monolingual speakers

with whom to converse and from whom to learn, and monolingual students gain confidence through shared experiences with students less proficient in the school language. "Consequently, literacy is more likely to develop through activities that create relationships between English learners and English speakers representing various literacy levels" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 645). School librarians can bolster the literacy benefits of mixed-linguistic classrooms by pairing bilingual and monolingual students for collaborative library and homework activities.

Although simply presenting and assigning multicultural literature has benefits both to members of the marginalized groups depicted in the literature and to members of majority and other minority groups, moving children beyond mere textual consumption to analysis and interpretation increases the educative value of a multicultural library collection. "The issues of racism, discrimination, and inequality are made concrete when multicultural literature is used as more than a window to look at others, becoming, instead, a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue" (Macphee, 1997, p. 35). Consequently, school librarians must encourage young people to discuss, evaluate, and critique multicultural texts, thus opening up discussions of racial, ethnic, and other diversity issues.

In addition, it is shown above that a cultural connection with a text increases the facility, accuracy, and comfort with which a student interacts with that text. As a result, children are likely to find critical and evaluative work with non-native texts more taxing than similar work with native texts. School librarians need to guide their students through the examination of these materials, helping to ease the interpretation process and helping students learn how to appreciate and to experience multicultural literature with depth and sensitivity.

This is not, by any means, to imply that children cannot enjoy and appreciate multicultural literature on their own—quite the contrary. Rather, librarians can facilitate and deepen children's early experiences with multicultural literature, thereby encouraging them to continue their multicultural explorations independently as more informed readers with more mature understandings of, and responses to, what they read, view, and hear.

Benefits to All Students

The final value of including multicultural literature in the school library is perhaps the most obvious, yet it is possibly the least commonly discussed in the research literature. Quite simply, many multicultural materials are of such high literary and artistic quality that to dismiss them simply because of their different formats would be to deprive all students, minority and majority, of a large body of rich literature. These materials deserve to be included in library collections based on their literary qualities alone. Independent of their value as cultural teaching tools, many multicultural materials express the literary and artistic talents of minority groups in ways that people of all

cultural backgrounds can appreciate and enjoy. To overlook these materials simply because their narratives incorporate scattered unfamiliar words or because their illustrations depict unfamiliar settings and scenes is to deny children the right to experience the literary and artistic wealth of the myriad non-Anglo, non-Western European cultures that thrive in the United States, Canada, and around the world.

Conclusion

Armed with a deeper understanding of the relationships among cultural background, textual meaning-making, bilingualism, and minority student literacy development, school librarians can better serve their students, leading them toward more developed levels of literacy and a greater appreciation of basic human differences. To reiterate, this article suggests numerous methods through which school librarians can work toward achieving this goal.

School librarians should:

- consciously cultivate a personal attitude that supports, respects, and celebrates the diversity of the student body and of the world;
- create a strong multicultural and bilingual materials collection;
- expand their own reading habits to include a wide array of multicultural materials;
- integrate multicultural and bilingual materials into the library curriculum, through methods such as reading or telling multicultural or bilingual stories, promoting these materials through readers' advisory, and inviting guests to the library to tell stories, read books, or present programs that represent minority cultures and languages;
- encourage teachers to incorporate multicultural and bilingual materials into their lessons;
- guide children in their examination of multicultural and bilingual literature to ease their struggles with culturally unfamiliar texts;
- encourage student dialogue about diversity issues;
- pair bilingual and monolingual children for library and homework projects to increase the literacy skills and confidence of all children;
- create a visually diverse library environment by including people of all backgrounds in graphic depictions in the library decor, as well as by placing objects that represent different cultures around the library.

By incorporating these simple suggestions into the school library program, school librarians will ensure that multicultural materials hold a significant place in the lives of their students, minority and majority alike, while leading them toward a deeper appreciation of human diversity in general.

Notes

(1) Throughout this article, the term text refers not only to written documents, but also to information presented in other formats, such as illustrations, videos, and audio clips.

(2) Many conflicting definitions of the term multicultural exist: "Some refer to American ethnic experiences apart from Anglo experiences; others include experiences from countries outside

the US as well. Still others include any non-mainstream experience, such as the Jewish experience, or even Anglo cultural groups such as the Appalachian" (Yokota, 1993, p. 157). Although the focus of this article is on non-majority language-speaking cultural groups, the term multicultural is used to describe any non-majority culture, including non-majority cultures that speak majority languages, such as Jewish Americans, as well as the cultures of any countries other than the US. The reason behind the choice of this definition is that the use of all such materials leads to some or all of the benefits discussed.

(3) Semi-bilingual texts integrate occasional LI words and phrases into a primarily L2 composition (Agosto, 1997).

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