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Literacy development of linguistically diverse first graders in a mainstream English classroom: Connecting speaking and writing

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Abstract Children who speak different home languages and dialects in a monolingual classroom often carry the challenge of having to develop literacy in a different language. This article presents a qualitative study of five first graders who speak different home languages in an inner city mainstream English classroom. Through interviews, classroom writing, field notes, and recorded classroom interaction, I present findings that indicate that writing in mainstream English can be problematic cognitively and emotionally for these children. I also offer some ways to foster an intercultural space for these children in a monolingual classroom and help find a way of validating diverse students' language and culture.

Keywords early literacy; home language; writing; written and spoken discourse

Introduction

With the trend in American education toward English-only mandated classrooms, as typified by California's Proposition 227, students who speak different home languages and dialects often carry with them the challenge of developing literacy skills in a different language. To investigate how students who speak other mother tongues develop literacy in a monolingual classroom, I conducted a qualitative study of five bilingual students in a monolingual English first grade class in a New York City Public School.

Research context

The investigation took place in a diverse district in a New York City Public School. The school had 1140 students, of whom 8.7% were white, 47.9% were Black, 27.9% were Hispanic, and 15.5% were Asian. The first grade comprised 199 students. The first grade class in which I conducted the study had 20 children. Recent immigrants comprised 12.2% of the school population. Those eligible for free lunch comprised 82.9% of the school's population. The average eligibility for free lunch in the New York City Public Schools is 73.9%, so this places this school considerably below the poverty line of the average school. The average New York City Public School is allotted US\$10,961 per child, whereas this school spent US\$9177 per child, or considerably below the average. The school's percent of utilization is 120.6%, so facilities were overcrowded.

New York State has a mandated standardized English Language Arts exam that is the assessment tool used to hold schools accountable for students' scores, as well as a standardized writing test in second grade. This school had 60.1% of students meeting standards in 2003, but only 52.7% met standards in 2004. This placed the school in the disadvantaged position of having declining literacy scores. Toward the end of raising standardized scores, the school's administration mandated an English Balanced Literacy program throughout this school. Balanced Literacy is a reading, writing, and oral language program that develops literacy and oracy concurrently and in an interrelated way in young children in literate environments (Sulzby and Teal, 1991). English Second Language Services are available on a limited basis to 212 students classified as English Language Learners. A separate standardized exam is given to the Limited English Proficient students. The students in my study were not receiving these services. All but one of these students had received English Second Language Services and had all scored out, although 'minimally' according to their first grade teacher. Scoring out entailed the children passing an English proficiency standardized test. The class's first grade, tenured teacher had 10 years experience in the New York City Public Schools and had received considerable staff development in Balanced Literacy, as well as other literacy programs.

My interest in teaching linguistically diverse students to write in standard form English came out of my work as a consultant teacher for 14 years in the New York City Public School System. I was called on to work with students who were 'at risk' of failing their grade. In most cases, these students would be linguistically diverse and their 'insufficiencies' were usually judged by their writing in standard form English.

I found a dissonance, or emotional disconnect, between the written discourse in mainstream English they were mandated to perform in the classroom and their home languages. As many teachers have found, 'students who are free to comment on their lives can often do so with minimal guidance, in compelling ways' (Lincoln, 1995: 92). I got this impression from listening, over many years, to my students who spoke different home languages than mainstream English.

I became an adjunct lecturer at a City University of New York (CUNY) college with a large Anglophone Caribbean population. My students, who were very articulate orally, struggled with putting that communicative competence into written form in mainstream English. I attended two summer Symposia for the Study of Teaching of Writing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with 10 other scholars, including Peter Elbow, who encouraged us to have students talk onto the page (see Elbow, 1995). This was a freewriting technique in which students wrote freely, as if speaking in their most comfortable language, whether their home language or mainstream English.

Out of this experience with the Symposia for the Study of the Teaching of Writing, I experimented with my undergraduate Caribbean teacher candidates, inviting them to write in their home languages or dialects. The most significant aspect of this experiment was the positive emotional reactions of the students who participated (Kennedy, 2003).

Out of 15 teacher candidates in my class, 10 accepted my invitation to write in vernaculars. All the students, regardless of whether they accepted the invitation or not, expressed a positive reaction to having their home language acknowledged in the classroom setting. This small experiment seemed to point to the political and sociological implications of suppression of vernacular Englishes in school communities. The devaluing of students' cultures and identities seemed not an insignificant factor in the reluctance of these students to perform in standard form. The process of inviting students to write in vernaculars is a nurturing one that should be explored in order to honor the students' cultures and make them feel included in the classroom community.

Theoretical framework

A survey of the literature indicated that academic stress is usually related to a discrepancy between the immigrant child's cultural values and those promoted in US schools (Esquivel and Keitel, 1990). Learning styles that are culturally based can be a disadvantage or an advantage to an immigrant

child depending on what is being demanded by the majority culture (Tania, 1992). Learning style here is defined as the way people come to understand and remember information (Brown, 1998). If learning styles are culturally based in American mainstream English, learning styles from children's home cultures would not be privileged in a monolingual classroom.

Children actually use linguistic codes to construct contextually appropriate and coherent text. This understanding is important in that it gives a more complete picture of young children's developing expertise in functioning language use (Fang, 1999). So children with linguistic codes in languages or dialects other than mainstream English must rely on their home language structure to then decipher English. The understanding non-native speakers of English derive from linguistic codes carries important implications for their attitudes toward the host culture and its language and also for the evolution of second-language identities (Meskill, 1996). Elsasser and Irvine (1985) found a reluctance to write in their Caribbean students in their work at the College of the Virgin Islands:

... their reluctance to write [was] directly attributable to the denigration of their native language and their conviction that they do not in fact, possess a true language but speak a bastardized version of English. It is difficult if not impossible to write without a language, and it is emotionally draining to attempt to develop voice and fluency in an education system that has historically denigrated one's own language. (Elsasser and Irvine, 1985: 406)

This estrangement is also reflected in Delpit's (1995) research when she suggests that academic problems attributed to children of color may actually stem from a power structure in which the world-views of those with privilege are taken as the only reality, while the culture of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential or deficient.

If linguistic codes are the thread in emergent writing, then the literature on Caribbean languages and Creoles needs to be considered. Many Caribbeans use some form of Creole or vernacular English in informal communication. According to Craig (1982: 198) for some 90% of the population, however, the 'official language, Standard English, is the preferred medium of public communication, the vehicle of literacy and the medium of education of all levels of the education system'. This disparity between the spoken and written language has caused problems for students who must speak and write in mainstream English. Abd-Kadir et al. (2003: 225) found that the question of whether speaking a Creole or dialect could interfere with a child's mastery of written standard English has received 'little attention in educational research'. In a study of bilingual

children in England, it was found that bilingual children express their constructs of bilingualism, literacy, and identity differently in both languages (Martin and Smith, 1998).

Further, teachers and fellow students sometimes judged students who speak different home languages negatively. Waldsmidt (2001) identified negative attitudes toward the speaking of Spanish by students and teachers in a primary classroom. Skutnabb-Kangas (1999) indicated that language rights were denied to minority speakers in American classrooms. The research also suggests that culture and home practices are vital to learning. In her work with Bangladeshi students in London, Gregory (2004: 104) found 'amazing links between home and school practices'. Garcia (1999) says the community context of any student's background is very important and needs to be respected by classroom teachers.

In many international settings, young children become multiliterate as a normal part of literacy development (Kenner and Gregory, 2003). Research with young children shows how the process of becoming biliterate involves producing the symbols that make up different writing systems. Datta (2000) studied a child who produced three different forms of scripts in Bengali, Arabic, and English and emphasized how children's knowledge is strongly based in the oral, written, and media discourses encountered at home and in communities.

Cummins (1991) stated that concepts and ideas which bilingual children develop in one language could interact with those developed in another. Baker (2000) found in his research that once children understand that letters stand for sounds, or that words can be deciphered from the story-line, these principles could be applied when reading or writing in another language. Researchers have also observed that bilingual children have the ability to write in more than one language within the same text, combining the resources available from their different literacy. For example, Mor-Sommerfeld (2002) showed samples of children writing in both Hebrew and English, switching from one language to the other and finding inventive ways to deal with the different directionalities of each script.

Fang (1999: 179), who studied the sociocultural aspects of the writing process, asserted that 'development of writing involved the assimilation of the mechanisms of culturally elaborated symbolic forms and the use of complex symbolic devices to represent and construct human experiences'. Further, Pennington (1996) argued that users of more than one linguistic code could use the differences in formal properties, semantics, and symbolic association to produce a range of expressive effects. Several authors showed how work that connects home language experience can help engender children's development in a second literacy. Datta (2000)

gave examples of how to connect with children's imaginative worlds, which come from texts and events encountered in homes and communities, and relates how these experiences can become part of English writing development. Kenner and Gregory (2003: 186) asserted that research has demonstrated that when children are given the opportunity to 'work with their home languages and literacies in supportive mainstream classroom environments, their English development also benefits'.

Deeply embedded in this research is the link between spoken and written word. From Bakhtin (1986) to Elbow (1995) to Gee (2001), the reflexive property of written and spoken discourse is an attribute that must be accounted for. Bakhtin (1986) acknowledged the centrality of social interaction to literacy learning. He developed a concept of 'voice' that he felt comprised the social and cultural history of the user. This 'voice' always expresses a point of view, whether in spoken or written discourse.

Elbow (1995) took Bakhtin's theory of complex voices further as he argued seemingly conflicting claims about the relationship of speech and writing and cautioned that as teachers we need to be aware of the complexity of the relationship between speech and writing. He suggested that teachers capitalize on the oral skills students possess and help students apply those skills to writing with immediacy and efficacy. Gee (2001) stated that reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, or using language to think and act on the world.

Discourse and the discourse community the writer is involved with are central to the writing process. The theoretical framework offered thus far provides a rationale for engaging the discourse community in the culture of the classroom and transforming the shared knowledge to written text. Kutz (1997: 140) attested that in a discourse community meanings are 'negotiated by the participants in an ongoing discourse'.

If I were to encourage the social construction of students who spoke different first languages, I would need to access their cultural and linguistic experiences as a bridge to mainstream English. This community of shared knowledge would have to be accessed in order to offset the emotional disconnect of students not raised in homes with mainstream English.

Participants

The students in this case study were five first grade students in a diverse, inner city, New York City Public School. Each child spoke a different home language or dialect than standard form English. Table 1 indicates the five students, first language spoken, country of origin of student and parents,

age of student, pre-school experience, and date of entry into the New York City Public Schools.

I entered the classroom and began working with these children at the invitation of the teacher. The teacher assessed the five students in the study as 'at risk' for holdover in first grade. Upon assessment of the children, I learned that they all spoke different home languages/dialects than mainstream English and were judged 'at risk' largely based on their writing performance. In second grade, students in New York City must take a standardized writing test, so there is additional pressure to have them perform in written English text.

All the children, except for one, Naheed, were born in the USA, yet all the children spoke different home languages and some spoke more than one. I listed languages that parents or teachers indicated, or where children

Table 1 Description of participants^a

<i>Student's name^b</i>	<i>Parents' country of origin</i>	<i>Other languages spoken besides mainstream English</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Date of entry into the public school system</i>	<i>Pre-school prior to entry^a</i>	<i>Age on entering first grade</i>
Clover	Mother born in Haiti	Creole and Spanish	USA	2 September 2003	Head Start Program	5 years, 10 months
Hailey	Mother born in Southern USA; Father born in Haiti and Step Father born in Jamaica	Vernacular Caribbean English and African American Vernacular English – Southern – some Creole	USA	2 September 2003	Haitian Pre-school	6 years, 2 months
Jimmy	Mother and Father born in Guyana with East Indian Grandparents	Vernacular English and Hindi	USA	18 September 2002	Pre-school within public school	6 years, 6 months
Naheed	Father born in India; Mother born in America	Punjabi	India	2 September 2003	None	5 years, 10 months
Parvati	Mother and Father born in Pakistan	Urdu and Punjabi	USA	23 September 2002	Pre-school indicated, but not the type	6 years, 2 months

Notes: ^a Based on parent questionnaire information, ^b Names of children changed to protect confidentiality.

demonstrated some spoken or written competence in word usage in that language. Two spoke Punjabi, two spoke Haitian Creole, two spoke vernacular Englishes, one spoke Spanish and one spoke Urdu. Hailey was considered a native English speaker despite the fact that she spoke two varieties of vernacular Englishes and some Creole. Her birth father was Haitian and she had gone to a pre-school where classes were conducted in Haitian Creole. The other children received English Second Language (ESL) services, but had recently scored out when I began working with them in January. To score out children took and passed a standardized English proficiency exam and exited ESL services. All the children had been in this particular school since at least kindergarten. All, except for one, Naheed, had some sort of pre-school experience.

Study design and analytic framework

Seeking an understanding of what it meant for linguistically diverse children to participate in literacy practices in a monolingual English class, I undertook a small qualitative study of five children. In keeping with a qualitative tradition, I utilized a variety of methods of data collection and pursued data within the multiple contexts of literacy practices in this first grade classroom in the 2004–5 school year in order to produce a study of a monolingual American English classroom. The first grade teacher invited me into her room to assist with these five students who were considered ‘at risk’ for holdover in first grade. Their difficulties were located largely in their writing in mainstream English. I therefore worked with these children from January to June 2005 trying to bridge the gap between the students’ home languages and mainstream English writing. I also took copious notes during class time.

I used formal and informal interviews with the children, written parent surveys and audio-taped interviews with the teacher, and audio-taped classroom interactions. I taped the interviews over five class periods throughout the length of the study. The classroom teacher throughout the school year also informally gleaned information from the parents on a one-to-one basis. All of this was transcribed. I also made notes of what children told me informally. I used written class samples done individually by the students and in full-class session at the front of the room with the teacher. I also collected samples of student writing during my writing sessions with the children. Interviews were conducted in English, as this was mandated in a monolingual English classroom.

My analysis of the data occurred concurrently with the collection throughout my study. I used a constant comparison method to code field notes and

interview transcripts and to create conceptual categories (Merriam, 1998). I focused on two areas: the children's self-concepts as multilingual learners and analysis of their writing development over the period studied. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection 'of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives' (Merriam, 1998: 3).

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Data for the article were qualitative and drawn from a variety of sources. At the conclusion of the study, I reread my entire corpus of field notes and transcripts and analyzed writing samples. I focused on two basic areas: self-concepts of students as multilingual developers of literacy and analysis of their writing development from the beginning to the end of the school year. I also tried to determine ways in which my interventions with the children seemed to help advance their writing in mainstream English through analysis of their writing (Green, 1990) and their own notes and words to me at the end of the year.

Student voices were an integral part of this study. Lincoln (1995: 93) stated that in order for teachers to become authentic researchers in classroom life, they must rely on 'observation, the ability to "hear" well and deeply, or simply to listen, the ability to ask good questions, and the ability to deconstruct the "texts" of student life'. Student interviews were audio taped and transcribed at different points from January to June, focusing on student feelings about their multiliteracies. Classroom-based writing was reviewed for the school year, from September to June, and writing samples were analyzed from the researcher-based work that took place from January to June. The parent interviews were undertaken largely at intake of the child into the public school system, although the teacher supplemented with frequent parent conversations during the school year. Questions to the parents focused on the children's origins, linguistic backgrounds, and preschool experiences. Teacher interviews focused on the writing development on the students and were done informally from January to June and formally by audiocassette and then transcribed.

A baseline assessment of the children's writing was done from the Fall of 2004, (reported in Table 2) using the Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990). Another assessment was done, using the same instrument, based on the writing the children did with me in Winter 2005 and again in late Spring 2005 (see Tables 3 and 6).

Analysis of the children's writing from the Fall of 2004 to Winter 2005

indicated the children's lack of progress in the compositional levels (see Table 4). Realizing the children were all speakers of different home languages than mainstream English, I used an adaptation of an interview instrument that had been adapted from an instrument developed for bilingual kindergarteners (Kuball, 1997) to see if I could understand some of the language issues that might be contributing to their reluctance toward writing (see Appendix). I had used the Kuball interview instrument in the previous year with second graders who spoke different home languages than mainstream English, and I adapted it based on this experience. The interview was geared toward a younger child and more focused on general literacy. I redesigned the interview for an older child to focus specifically on writing practices.

I observed from those interviews, and subsequent interviews, that the children had reluctance even identifying as multilingual speakers and writers. I tried to find a way to bridge the gap between the spoken and written word (Elbow, 1995) and endeavored to develop an intercultural space for the children's cultures (Fang, 1999). Gutierrez et al. (2001) suggest a kind of hybrid literacy as a bridge to mainstream English. With collaboration from the classroom teacher, I drew on the practices of speaking onto the page and language hybridity, and invited students to write in their natural voices, including using words from their home language.

My analysis of data focused on two major categories: self-concept as multilingual learners and English Language writers and discourse analysis of children's writing samples from the beginning to the end of the year. These categories gave focus to my data collection, as I sought to confirm, disconfirm, and add concepts. In the following sections, I present findings that develop these two major analytic categories. I also reflect on interventions that seemed to work with these five children in improving their writing in standard-form English.

Assessment of student writing in the fall of 2004

I analyzed samples of student work from the fall of 2004, based on the Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990). Four compositional levels are outlined by this scale: Compositional Level 0, where a child writes nothing or a 1-word statement; Compositional Level 1, where a child writes a simple message and/or a list of 10 or more words; Compositional Level 2, where a child completes a thought, a message of two or more sentences, or a list of short sentences; and Compositional Level 3, where the child writes a long story of 4 or more sentences with a plot or a long letter that focuses on a single subject.

Both Levels 1 and 2 are considered low. Table 2 shows the result of this assessment from the fall of 2004, based on children's class work.

The children, as the classroom teacher pointed out, were functioning at a low compositional level. It should be noted that Green (1990) used this scale on kindergarteners who were a year below, in chronological age, the students I was assessing. Therefore, these children were even more delayed in compositional level than it would immediately appear. I did the analysis of the children's writing from class work they had done in the fall.

In the fall, Jimmy wrote as a response to literature:

Uf the peel ne hu

There is an attempt here to write a simple statement of five words, but it is unclear and at the early stage of invented spelling. The teacher said that at this stage he was only capable of reading six sight words.

Clover wrote a response about her favorite part of a story that was read to her:

I love what

Clover's spelling is good here and she started well, but her teacher complained that she did not seem to focus and never finished her writing assignments. Clover wrote the prompt her teacher gave her to begin, but did not go further.

Table 2 Assessment of first graders' composition skills in the fall of 2004^a

<i>Student name</i>	<i>Compositional level 0: The child writes a no-word or one-word statement – low</i>	<i>Compositional level 1: The child writes simple messages and/or a list of 10 or more words – low</i>	<i>Compositional level 2: The child writes a complete thought, a message of two or more sentences, or a list of short sentences – high</i>	<i>Compositional level 3: The child writes a long story of four or more sentences with a plot or a long letter that focuses on a single subject – high</i>
Clover		1		
Hailey		1		
Jimmy		1		
Naheed		1		
Parvati	0			

Note: ^a Based on Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990).

Hailey wrote a response to a read-aloud:

The cism SoBe The Man Mad a Soth.

Here Hailey wrote a statement, but it was not decipherable. She knew to include a capital at the beginning and punctuation at the end, but had trouble with upper/lower case placement. 'The Man' is conventional spelling and 'Mad' is invented, but the rest cannot be read. Her teacher complained that she was not quite sure how to convey her thoughts in writing, although she communicated well in class orally.

Naheed wrote as a response:

Ma I love tha ata w nam

She had mastered conventional spelling in 'I love', but approached conventional with 'tha' and 'nam'. She attempted a statement, but it was not clear what she was trying to write.

Her teacher called her writing immature. She said she had trouble sounding out words. Parvati was given the assignment of writing a response, and only drew a picture. The picture had many details. The teacher said that she was still developing her strategies in emergent writing but was falling behind.

Assessment of student writing in winter 2005

At the teacher's request, I began working with the students in this study in January of 2005. The classroom teacher was concerned with these five students' literacy development, particularly in writing. I used the same instrument to analyze the children's writing as had been used with their work in the fall. I chose to pull the students out and observe them work on classroom writing they needed to accomplish. Table 3 shows the analysis of their writing from winter 2005.

I could see why the teacher was concerned. Parvati was the only student who had improved, according to the Compositional Level Scale (Green, 1990), since the fall. Additionally, Jimmy and Naheed had actually gone down a level, while Clover and Hailey had made no progress. Table 4 shows the comparison.

I wondered why, in a classroom where an experienced teacher practised a proven literacy program – Balanced Literacy – two students had not progressed and two had actually declined in their composition levels.

Table 3 Assessment of first graders' composition skills in winter of 2005^a

<i>Student name</i>	<i>Compositional level 0: The child writes a no-word or one-word statement</i>	<i>Compositional level 1: The child writes simple messages and/or a list of 10 or more words</i>	<i>Compositional level 2: The child writes a complete thought, a message of two or more sentences, or a list of short sentences</i>	<i>Compositional level 3: The child writes a long story of four or more sentences with a plot or a long letter that focuses on a single subject</i>
Clover		1		
Hailey		1		
Jimmy	0			
Naheed	0			
Parvati		1		

Note: ^a Based on Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990).

Table 4 Assessment of first graders' composition skills from fall 2004 to winter 2005^a

	<i>Declines 1 level</i>	<i>Progresses 0 Levels</i>	<i>Progresses 1 level</i>	<i>Progresses 2 levels</i>	<i>Progresses 3 levels</i>
Clover		X			
Hailey		X			
Jimmy	X				
Naheed	X				
Parvati			X		

Note: ^a Based on Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990).

Exploration of self-concept

After interviews with the children and their teacher, I realized that all these children spoke home languages other than mainstream English. All but one of the children, Naheed, had been born in the USA. I knew they could draw on their experiential English skills as well. Four of the children had received ESL services and were recently taken out due to testing that evaluated them as English proficient enough to function without ESL.

To explore some of these issues with the children, I began by reading them a book about speaking a language other than English called *I Hate*

English (Levine, 1989). The children responded with their own stories of learning English. One student wrote:

I feel different when I spek Spanish. I feel different bcus other pepal spek English
 This child spoke Creole and Spanish at home but is based in a monolingual English classroom. The book is about an Asian girl who came from Hong Kong to New York City not knowing English and this was the child's response. This main character was clearly feeling alienated about her multi-lingualism. Other children articulated to me informally how hard it was to speak a different home language than English outside the home.

Another student wrote a letter to the main character later on in a class session:

Dear yoon,
 My dad is from Idia
 And my mom's from America.
 I know how lonely you must be
 I will be your friend.

I wondered what their self-concepts about being multilingual were and how that affected their performance in mainstream English. In a study of Spanish-speaking bilingual children, identity issues surfaced for all the children (Soto, 2002). I devised an interview based on an interview instrument that had been used with Spanish- and English-speaking kindergarteners (Kuball, 1997). The questionnaire (Appendix) asked if they could write various things in English or other languages. Table 5 shows the results of the six-question interview of the five students.

Table 5 Results of the Kuball (1997) – based interviews with the five students

<i>Question</i>	<i>Clover</i>	<i>Hailey</i>	<i>Jimmy</i>	<i>Naheed</i>	<i>Parvati</i>
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	No	No	No	No	No
3	Yes – Spanish/English	No	No	Yes – Punjabi	Yes – Urdu
4	No	No	Yes – in script	No	No
5	No	No	Yes – English	Yes – Punjabi	Yes – English
6	Yes – Creole	Yes – English or how my dad writes in Creole	Yes – English	No	No

The questionnaire of the children's self-concept as writers showed some poor self-concepts overall and some doubts about their identities as writers. All the children knew they could write their name in English. They all said they could not write their name in the other languages they spoke. In response to question three, which asked if the children could speak any language besides English, three of the five did own to speaking other languages besides English and two did not own to speaking Vernacular Englishes.

Hailey, who spoke Creole, a Vernacular Caribbean English and an African American Vernacular English, did not espouse another language. Jimmy, who spoke Vernacular Guyanese English and Hindi, did not espouse another language. Clover admitted to speaking English and Spanish, but not Creole, which later came out in interview. Parvati, who spoke Urdu and Punjabi, admitted to speaking only Urdu. Naheed, the only child born out of the country, espoused speaking Punjabi, which was her first language. All the languages the children did speak were confirmed by parent or teacher interview. This did not create an experiential base for the connection between their mother tongue and writing.

Hailey did not acknowledge her Vernacular Englishes of Jamaican or African American Vernacular English and only mentioned knowledge of Creole under writing a book in another language. Later in the semester, she used some Creole words in her writing. Her father spoke Creole and she went to a Creole-speaking pre-school. Jimmy did acknowledge some aspects of a Guyanese Vernacular English, but did not tell me until later informally that he and his family speak 'Indian'. The parents indicated they spoke Hindi at home. Parvati said she could speak Urdu, but left out the fact that she also speaks Punjabi, a language in which she communicated with Naheed. Both of her parents spoke Urdu and Punjabi at home. Naheed, the only child born in a different country than the USA, was the only child who admitted to speaking all the languages she spoke.

Clover reported that she could speak only English and Spanish in interview. Here's an excerpt:

Excerpt from Clover's Interview:

Kennedy: Can you speak any other languages besides English?

Clover: Yes.

Kennedy: What other languages do you speak?

Clover: Spanish and English.

When I ask her if she can write a book in any language, Creole hesitantly comes up:

- Kennedy: Can you write a book in any language?
Clover: Yes, in Creole.
Kennedy: In Creole? Ah, you can speak Creole?
Clover: Yes.
Kennedy: Ah, you speak English, Spanish and Creole.
Clover: Yes.

Excerpt from Jimmy's Interview:

- Kennedy: Can you speak any language besides English?
Jimmy: No.
Kennedy: Where was your dad born?
Jimmy: Guyana.
Kennedy: Where was your mom born?
Jimmy: In Guyana.
Kennedy: Guyana also. Have you been to Guyana?
Jimmy: No. Ah-yea.
Kennedy: Do they speak the same there?
Jimmy: No.
Kennedy: What do they sound like?
Jimmy: They sound different.

Jimmy would not own to speaking Hindi or Guyanese Vernacular English, although informally later in the year, he told me his family did speak 'Indian'.

Excerpt from Parvati's Interview:

Parvati espoused speaking Urdu, but left out that she also speaks Punjabi.

- Kennedy: Can you speak any other languages besides English?
Parvati: Yes, it's Urdu.

Later on, after working with Naheed and Parvati together where they spoke Punjabi together and after interviewing Naheed, who said she speaks Punjabi, I asked Parvati:

- Kennedy: I just spoke with (Naheed) and she says she does not speak Urdu, but she speaks Punjabi to you. Did you learn to speak Punjabi?
Parvati: Yes, I know a little bit.

Here it emerged that Parvati did have a functional usage of Punjabi, but did not admit to it until pressed. In a parent interview, it came out that both parents spoke Urdu and Punjabi at home.

It seemed to me from the interviews with the children, and their writing, that there were large areas of discomfort in their roles as multilinguals in their monolingual English classroom. None could write in their home

languages without assistance from me, although this was not surprising, since they received no schooling in their first languages. Four admitted to speaking one language that was different from English, but reluctantly and only after repeated questioning did the children admit to speaking two languages other than English. The two children who spoke Vernacular Englishes did not acknowledge these language forms at all. Instead of embracing their bi- and multilingualism, they often approached linguistic diversity with reluctance. One child, Naheed, acknowledged she spoke the languages she spoke. This did not provide an easy bridge between speaking and writing for this group of children.

Inviting students to write onto the page

I spoke with the children's teacher and she readily agreed that I could encourage the children to 'speak onto the page' (Elbow, 1995) in an attempt to bridge that disconnect that I had found in the literature between speakers of different home languages and mainstream English (Elsasser and Irvine, 1985). Speaking onto the page is a freewriting methodology in which the child writes in a natural voice in any language he/she is comfortable with. I encouraged children to use a form of 'hybridity' or mainstream English combined with the first language:

Through participation in . . . communities characterized by their high students expectations, meaningful and rigorous learning activities, hybrid language practices, and collaborative and supportive strategies, students can expand the set of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural tools and practices needed for meaningful and substantive learning. (Gutierrez et al., 2000: 104)

We decided to try poetry writing with the children, as it was a genre that would probably lend itself to this format.

I read the children some poetry about friendship and invited them to write in their home languages. The children seemed uncomfortable doing this at first, preferring to write in mainstream English, with two exceptions. Naheed wrote the following:

My Dost the Bird
 I lernd th smell the floed
 I lernd to sing with my Dosat Bird
 My Dosat Bird Blue
 My Dosa the Bird Sing

The word for friend in Punjabi, Naheed's first language, is 'dost'. Gentry (1987) wrote that good emergent writers invent their own spelling and Naheed was certainly doing that in this piece with the use of 'lernd' for learned. She focuses well on one topic.

Hailey wrote the following:

Zamy
I lerd to love from
My zamy the taeer.
I love playing whth
My Zamys.

The word for friend in Haitian is Zammi. In a second draft of this work, Hailey wrote:

Zamys
U lerd to love from my zamy the tcher
I love to playinhg with my zamy.
I like to read from my zamy.
The book is good.

Hailey makes good use of invented spelling (Gentry, 1987) with 'lerd' for 'learned', 'tcher' for 'teacher', and 'playinhg' for 'playing'. She uses 'U' for 'you' in the semiphonetic stage of invented spelling and the transitional stage for 'playinhg' (Lutz, 1986). She is also showing her influence of Creole usage in which 'verbs may appear together without intervening conjunctions' (I love to playinhg [playing]) (Abd-Kadir et al., 2003: 235). She focuses well on one topic and clearly uses good structure in the genre. Their teacher made a bulletin board of their poems and displayed their work.

The children seemed to move from reluctant to more enthusiastic writers in our subsequent sessions. I next invited the children to write poems about flowers. Parvati wrote the following:

Poul
Poul bloom
Poul frech
Poul Colorful
Poul red and blue

Flower in Urdu and Punjabi is Phool. Parvati also uses a transitional stage of spelling with the word 'frech' for 'fresh' (Lutz, 1986). She uses good topic/comment structure here. Naheed wrote:

Fol
Fol is cool
Fol is Good
Fol is red blue yellow green
and orange fol

'Fol' is close to the Punjabi word for 'flower'. Her other spelling is at an advanced correct stage. She demonstrates a good sense of poetic structure here.

Clover, who spoke French Creole, wrote:

Fleul
 Flower are soft flowers blom
 Pepel injoy the flower me too
 I love flowers pepel to

The French influence is seen in her choice of 'Fluel' for the French 'Fleur' for flower.

Her spelling is at a phonetic stage (Lutz, 1986) with 'pepel' for 'people', 'injoy' for 'enjoy', and 'blom' for 'bloom'. She uses a noun/pronoun form particular to her dialect (Abd-Kadir et al., 2003). 'Pepel injoy the flower me too'. Her spelling is sophisticated enough to distinguish the right form of 'too' rather than 'two' or 'to'.

The use of poetry was a genre the children felt comfortable exploring in natural voices. They explored the use of their first language in a mainstream English classroom for the first time.

Writing in class in spring 2005

The teacher reported to me that there had been some improvements in the children's writing in the spring of 2005. The teacher compiled a book of poetry and 'published' it, with a party and celebration. My students were included and proudly displayed their copies. Children were asked to write reports on famous Black Americans.

Here is an excerpt from Jimmy's report:

Ruby Bridges
 Ruby saw a lot of peepul.
 And they lurnd at school.
 They wus smort go to . . .
 Once theeey.
 went hom hr DaD
 lost his JoB,
 thy Moov hr mam has to wit the floor.

Here Jimmy uses various forms of invented spelling. His writing is in the semiphonetic stage, as seen with 'wit' for 'wash' and the phonetic stage, as seen in 'Moov' for 'move', 'Mam' for 'Mom', and 'hr' for 'her'. His writing demonstrates the transitional stage with 'hom' for 'home' and 'smort' for

'smart' (Lutz, 1986). He struggles still with upper and lower case usage, but has a sense of sequencing in this story.

Parvati in a Spring Poem writes:

Windy and Sunny and Spring
1. It's Sunny as the sun.
2. It's windy as the treeys mowing
3. outsid.
4. and It's Spring outSid The flower
and This is the end of the Storey.

Here Parvati has almost mastered conventional spelling and form in the title 'Windy and Sunny and Spring'. Her writing is in the transitional stage (Lutz, 1986) in 'windy' for 'windy', 'treeys' for 'trees', and 'outsid' for 'outside'. She has a sense of the structure of dividing a poem into lines and a title and sense of beginning, middle, and end. She signals the end of her poem with 'This is the end of the Storey', a signifier common in oral story telling that was part of her tradition.

Hailey showed considerable development in writing form and content as she described how to make a cake:

How to make a cake. You
Us flour. Then you us eegs.
Then use mill us shuger.
put it in the ofin
Opin it then put icem
Icing then eat it all.

Here, Hailey shows mastery of conventional spelling. In 'How to Make a Cake'. Hailey's work exemplifies Transitional Phase Spelling (Lutz, 1986) in 'us' for 'use', 'eegs' for 'eggs', 'opin' for 'open', 'shuger' for 'sugar', 'ofin' for 'oven', and 'ising' for 'icing'. She struggles with punctuation, but has a clear sense of content and how to begin and end her directions. She masters sequencing well here.

For the same assignment, Clover described making a sand castle:

I whent to the Beach I mad
A sand. Casll I find sum ceshell
Then I wint to the ilin I wint
Bak to the Beach I tac my ceshell
And I pot thim in to the ilin and
I mad a sand casil agen and
Tis is the end of the store

Here, Clover demonstrated quite a bit of writing development and a whole sense of story from beginning to end. She was largely in a Phonetic Stage

of spelling with 'whent' for 'went', 'Casll' for 'Castle', 'ceshell' for 'seashell', and 'mad' for 'made'.

She still struggles with where to end sentences, but she has a clear sense of beginning, middle, and end. She signals the end of the story with 'Tis is the end of the store'.

Naheed wrote a summary of a story, 'The Amazing Fish':
 a fisherman caught
 an amazing fish. The fish
 told the man he would
 grant him three wishes.
 The fisherman caught
 anothes beautifu . . .

Naheed's conventional spelling has improved significantly here. She has a sense of major events in the story and spells many sophisticated words correctly, except 'anothes' for 'another' and 'beautifu' for 'beautiful'. It looked as if she did not have enough time to finish the piece. She sequenced events well and focused on the topic at hand.

The use of hybridity and natural voice allowed the children to find a bridge between their first languages and mainstream English. The children found commonalities in associations, semantics, properties, and structures between languages. Understandings were transferred between their home cultures and the classroom literacy discourses.

Baker (2000) found that once children understand that letters stand for sounds, and words can be deciphered from the storyline, these principles can be applied to writing in other languages. This was what the young writers were doing with their poetry. Kenner and Gregory (2003) found that the balance of power is heavily in favor of the dominant language in a majority language context. I think the writing of poetry in both languages helped to balance the power for these first graders.

Assessment of student writing in spring 2005

I analyzed samples of the student work in late spring of 2005, based on the same scale I had used for the fall and January writing samples: Lamme/Greene Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990). Tables 6 and 7 summarize this analysis.

The children progressed between one and three levels in their Compositional Levels from the assessment of their class writing in the fall of 2004 to the spring of 2005. Jimmy and Naheed went up one level, Clover and Hailey went up two, and Parvati advanced three levels.

Table 6 Assessment of first graders' composition skills in spring of 2005^a

<i>Student name</i>	<i>Compositional level 0: The child writes a one-word statement</i>	<i>Compositional level 1: The child writes simple messages and/or a list of 10 or more words</i>	<i>Compositional level 2: The child writes a complete thought, a message of two or more sentences, or a list of short sentences</i>	<i>Compositional level 3: The child writes a long story of four or more sentences with a plot or a long letter that focuses on a single subject</i>
Clover				3
Hailey				3
Jimmy			2	
Naheed			2	
Parvati				3

Note: ^a Based on Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990).

Table 7 Assessment of first graders' composition skills from fall 2004 to spring 2005^a

	<i>Progresses 0 levels</i>	<i>Progresses 1 Level</i>	<i>Progresses 2 levels</i>	<i>Progresses 3 levels</i>
Clover			X	
Hailey			X	
Jimmy		X		
Naheed		X		
Parvati				X

Note: ^a Based on Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition (Green, 1990).

Overall, the children seemed to enjoy the experience of writing onto the page. The teacher published their poetry in a bound book and parents and another class were invited for a celebration. Children learned songs and a dance and performed the music and read their poetry. All of the children were promoted to second grade in June 2005. The teacher reported in interviews that the children would ask when I was coming in to do my writing sessions.

The teacher also indicated that the children improved as a result of the intervention. When interviewed, she noted improvement in writing in all the children from January to June. About Clover, the teacher said that she

saw much improvement from the beginning of the year to June. She said Hailey was now on grade level. Regarding Naheed, she indicated that the methodology of hybrid writing 'has helped her not only to communicate verbally, but in written form.' About Parvati, she said, 'She [now] writes with an enormous amount of details. She is competent . . . and developing her strategies'. Of Jimmy, she stated, 'I see remarkable success'.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that writing in mainstream English could be difficult cognitively and emotionally for students who speak different home languages. I also presented some ways in which I found an intercultural space for these children in a monolingual English classroom in order to help them find ways of validating their language and culture.

The five first graders in the study displayed something of a disconnect between their home languages and the mainstream English spoken in their classroom. This was evidenced in their writing and their interviews. In an interview based on Kuball's Questionnaire of English and Spanish-Speaking Kindergarteners (Kuball, 1997), it was revealed that children believed they could write their name in English, but not in another language. Two said that they could not write a story in any language, including English. They all did write. Five said they could not write a word in another language, even though four did. Four children, although admitting to speaking one language besides English, were reluctant to admit to speaking two. Four denied speaking languages that they spoke. Two children did not acknowledge speaking Vernacular Englishes, even though they and their families did. Only one child, the one born in a different country, admitted to all the languages she spoke besides mainstream English.

Using the Lamme/Green Scale of Children's Development in Composition from 0–3 (Green, 1990), the students' writing was assessed in the fall of 2004, winter of 2005, and late spring of 2005. In the fall, these five students scored at a low level of 0–1. In winter, four out of five of the students had either stayed at the same level or declined. That is when I began working with them on their writing, with the 'writing onto the page' writing sessions. In late spring of 2005, all five students progressed to level 2 or 3. Two students progressed one level, two students progressed two levels, and one student progressed three levels. Students in this first grade class were expected to progress at least one composition level in the course of the school year.

Interviews with the classroom teacher indicated that all the students were promoted to the second grade at the end of the year. The classroom teacher

noted significant gains made by the children in their writing in terms of content, detail development, competence, and verbal and written communication. The teacher also noted that the children seemed to enjoy the 'speaking onto the page' writing sessions. It is possible that improvement could have been a result of the one-to-one instruction the children received, but students did indicate appreciation of their first language recognition.

The students were initially reluctant writers. During the 'writing onto the page' sessions, the students developed an enthusiasm for their work. They also indicated gratitude to me informally and in their writing. Here is an excerpt from Naheed's writing:

Dear Ms. Kennedy Thank you
to writer with us. We love you.

And from Hailey:

Dear Ms. Kennedy:
I like [heart drawn] you
Thak you

Implications

In this study, qualitative data indicated that it could be difficult cognitively and emotionally for students who speak different home languages than English to write and practice literacy in a monolingual classroom. Interviews with students, field notes, and student writing indicated the students were reluctant to even acknowledge their multilingualism. Students denied speaking a different home language or did not articulate home languages they spoke. This seems to arise out of a general mistrust of other languages in an English-only classroom. The implication for educators is that we need to seek better ways of validating our students' languages and make them feel more comfortable and competent about their multilingualism.

Methodologies of encouraging students to write in their natural voices and even, in some cases, vocabulary from their home languages, led to positive results in terms of children's composition levels, detail development, competence, and oral and written communication. The implication would be for teachers to seek new ways in monolingual classrooms to honor and acknowledge students' multilingualism.

Elbow (1995) advocated using natural voice in writing and Gutierrez et al. (2001) urged hybridity as a bridge to bilingualism in the monolingual classroom. The five students I worked with certainly responded well to these methodologies. Transference of writing skills from one language to

another (Baker, 2000; Cummins, 1991) was observed in the children's writing samples. Switching from one language to another (Mor-Sommerfeld, 2002) was observed in the children's writing. If we are to encourage a social constructivist approach to the teaching of literacy that the research supports with students who speak first languages other than English, we need to access their cultural and linguistic base as a bridge to school literacy.

The estrangement that Delpit (1992) and Elsasser and Irvine (1985) found in students that stemmed from a power structure in which one culture is valued over another was also evidenced in these students' interviews as they indicated alienation from, and even denial of, their linguistic backgrounds. When schools give status to minority languages and biliteracy as a valued part of education, the outcome will be better for all children, either bilingual or monolingual.

Appendix: Questionnaire for students

Interview based on Kuball (1997) 'The Effect of Whole Language Instruction on the Writing Development of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Kindergarteners', *Bilingual Research Journal* 21(2-3): 1-17.

Name _____ Date _____

1. Can you write your name in English?

2. Can you write your name in any other language?

3. Can you speak any other language besides English?

4. Can you write any words in another language besides English?

5. Can you write a story in any language?

6. Can you write a book in any language?

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