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## **PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS: A BILINGUAL/TRANSLINGUAL BOOK PROJECT WITH TEACHER CANDIDATE AS AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR IN A BORDER COMMUNITY**

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### **Introduction**

With support from Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (Branch ED), we embarked upon this project at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU), a university in southern Texas, which is a border community where Spanish is spoken by most of the population. In Laredo, 95.5% people are of Hispanic origin. 22.2% of this population are in poverty. The genesis of this project was the need to try to be culturally relevant in the classroom. The project gave student teachers enrolled in an English Language Arts and Reading education class at TAMIU the opportunity to explore culturally relevant literature and author a book for the students enrolled in the classroom in which they were completing their student teaching. This project aligns with our university's mission statement: "Through instruction, faculty and students commit to research and public service. TAMIU improves the quality of lives for citizens of the border region, the state of Texas and national and international communities."

In a time of high-stakes testing, we have moved in a direction where the joy of learning has been lessened and teaching is centered around preparing students for standardized tests. Thus, this project was an attempt to place culturally relevant teaching at the forefront of a literacy course. The project allowed student teachers to engage and create an authentic and meaningful culturally relevant literacy event that they would be able to use in their own classroom settings. Through pedagogical partnership, a student teacher (Fabiola Rodriguez) and a professor (Dr. Filiz Shine) embarked upon this journey. Fabiola observed Dr. Shine's teaching, and the two of us met on a weekly basis after each class to discuss our observations and reflections.

We maintained a relationship where each would serve as both teacher and learner. We both understood what was expected through our partnership as we relied on feedback and reflection during our weekly meetings. This relationship enhanced student learning specifically in the creation of their books for the book project. Student teachers explored culturally relevant books that they could use in the classroom. Through this exploration, they were inspired to write and publish a book that could impact many of the lives of the students they teach. Themes that arose from this journey as pedagogical partners were collaboration, relationships, lifelong learning, and the benefits that culturally relevant practices have upon the classroom climate.

In this partnership, we were intentionally invitational to avoid epistemic violence. Both school districts in Laredo participate in a transitional bilingual program. Linguistic oppression and discrimination have had ramifications for language usage, education, and identity across the border region (Christofferson, 2019). We were intentionally invitational to avoid "epistemic

exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production" (Dotson, 2014). In keeping with this stance, we believe that no student should be deprived of their culture in the classroom. The students in this English Language Arts and Reading education class instead were inspired to write on their own. We believe that because we were invitational to the teacher candidates by reading bilingual and translingual books in the classroom, 95% of the students wrote a culturally relevant book that will be used in their future classrooms. Our goal was to be invitational to the students to write a book that was culturally relevant and sustaining, which affirmed the students' and community's cultural heritage and linguistic capital.

This essay is a critical analysis that sheds light on how a pedagogical partnership can not only affect the professor and the student-teacher partner, but also the students in the student teacher's classroom. In this case, the other teacher candidates in the English Language Arts and Reading education class also benefitted from the relationship between Dr. Shine and Fabiola as they embarked on a journey focused on a reciprocal relationship with the express goal of ensuring student-centered instruction. In this course, teacher candidates focus on reading strategies that should be implemented in their future classroom, which are stepping stones to being excellent elementary reading teachers.

## **First week: Introduction of Pedagogical Partnership and Book Project**

### ***Faculty Partner Perspective***

Our journey began with Fabiola's first observation of my class. I was quite nervous, as it had been some time since I had had someone observing me on a regular basis. This also was a very challenging semester for both Fabiola and me. Some of our challenges were that my computer started erasing Fabiola's observations of its own accord. In addition, one of my student teachers had a family who had medical issues, which was a constant drain on her time. However, I was very excited about this semester and knew that the reflections would lead to some insight into my teaching. I knew that Fabiola and I would learn from this opportunity.

The previous semester, I had asked teacher candidates to produce a picture book in an English Language Arts method class. Students were given an option to write a bilingual or translingual book or just an English picture book. I was disappointed with the results, as only one or two of my students chose to write a bilingual/translingual book. My university is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and almost all my students are bilingual. After this experience, I began to reflect upon my teaching and pondered why many teacher candidates chose to write an English book and not a bilingual or translingual storybook. I wondered whether I had been invitational enough for my students. Purkey and Novak (2016) describe invitational education (IE) as a theory of practice "designed to create and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor" (p. 7).

Comprehending the core of "signal systems," proponents of IE theory attempt to "identify and change those forces that defeat human potential" (Shine & Akçay-Duff, n.d., p. vii). This last statement connects to the thought that if you take the joy out of learning, it defeats human potential. Therefore, the book project in the course for which Fabiola and I partnered was an

attempt to create an authentic, meaningful, and culturally relevant and sustaining practice assignment that would be meaningful and fun for the teacher candidates. My hope was that this would impact them in a way that would motivate them to try this type of project in their own future classrooms.

During our first class, I shared Patricia Polacco's book, *Thank You, Mr. Falkner*, which is based on Polacco's own school experiences. We focused on the cultural elements that Polacco featured in her book, and I shared with the teacher candidates how Polacco had included various cultural elements in her story. When the author was younger, she had had trouble with reading and was teased quite often. Polacco's art is what helped her to get through some of the hard times in her younger years. She had challenges regarding reading; however, a teacher discovered that she is dyslexic and began to help her. The teacher candidates all provided feedback on how much they loved this book. I was surprised that my teacher candidates had not been exposed to this book before. We had rich discussions on how meaningful the story was to them, and they realized that this book, and others like it, could be very useful in their future classroom.

Although I was very nervous about having Fabiola in the class, I went about conducting class as I usually do. An insight that I gained was that it is good to get out of your comfort zone. Although I felt uneasy, it did add a spark back into my teaching practice. I learned that I was enjoying the idea of reflecting upon my teaching, and I would look forward to getting feedback from my student partner. Both Fabiola and I realized once again that learning is lifelong.

### ***Student Partner Perspective***

When starting the process of our pedagogical partnership, I knew that my first day would be nerve wracking, as this is something I have never done before. I knew that I would be observing Dr. Shine and the methods that she employs in her class and providing feedback from the student's perspective of the learning environment. Since I am usually a student, I am typically the one being observed, so I knew that the change of roles would be something that I would have to get used to. As I entered the partnership, I knew that the expectations were high, and that participation would require my full attention. While being a full-time student, part-time student worker, and a participant in a pedagogical partnership, I realized that my time was very limited. Dr. Shine and I had regularly scheduled meetings to reflect, provide feedback, and discuss our progress in our project. This form of communication put our relationship in perspective and exemplified the importance of receiving developmental feedback on how to improve our craft. We knew that through our reflections and discussions we would become better educators in the present and the future.

September 1st was the first day that I observed Dr. Shine's class. The class meets twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. During this class, we introduced the book project. As Dr. Shine was introducing the book, I was interacting with the story as I was asking questions and observing her lesson. I knew the expectations coming into this partnership because Dr. Shine and I had discussed the responsibilities that must be fulfilled by both of us. These responsibilities included observations, feedback, meetings, and participation in writing workshops. Because of these

responsibilities, I knew that I had a position in the classroom where the students would come to me for feedback and advice on their book project.

When starting this pedagogical partnership, I knew personally that it wouldn't be easy to be in front of the class giving advice to students my own age. I knew that it would be an out-of-body experience being seen as someone that students can rely on for feedback and advice on their own assignments, considering I still am a student myself. Having no experience as a teacher in the classroom, I knew that I would have to learn, and I would have to learn quickly, how to talk in front of a lot of people. Personally, I have never observed one of my professors in the classroom before, as I am normally a student who keeps to myself and does what I am required to do. Because of this, I knew that this pedagogical partnership was an excellent opportunity for me to branch out to new experiences and new opportunities that would prepare me to lead my own classroom.

Being on the other side of the desk has taught me that professors do so much prior to each lesson. The time and preparation that goes into these lessons have truly taught me how much and how important it is to be an educator. I know that my personal feedback is not only for Dr. Shine in her studies, but also for various other educators who want to improve their own techniques in the classroom. Stepping into this new role, I knew that I would become somewhat of a model student for the students enrolled in Dr. Shine's classroom. I knew that my feedback and my advice was going to be taken seriously, and because of that I knew that I had a responsibility for understanding the assignment and that it was crucial to this pedagogical partnership.

Learning how to be culturally relevant in the course, I aspire to bring bilingual books to my fellow teacher candidates so that they will be motivated themselves to write a bilingual book. Not only would it benefit the teacher candidates, but it would also benefit multiple children in the classroom setting to see a book that is relevant to their own lives. The students will be motivated to learn, and because of this, the environment will become welcoming and full of encouragement. What I learned during my first observations is that classroom management is very important. The way that Dr. Shine kept the students engaged in the lesson was very intriguing, as it meant that they were ready to learn. I learned that being in front of a classroom and explaining the expectations helps with management, and eventually I felt comfortable doing this. I knew that this was a lifelong skill that would ultimately make me a better educator now and in the future. I thank Dr. Shine for this skill.

## **Second week: Discussion of Bilingual and Translingual Books**

### ***Faculty Partner Perspective***

I started this class with a discussion of picture books, and I invited Fabiola to share hers (which she discusses in the next section). I did this both to model a pedagogical approach and to expose student teachers to a variety of books. I read the books aloud or had the student teachers view a video of a read aloud since the illustrations can be seen better. The books depicted different cultures. For example, I shared a book called *We are Grateful*, written by Traci Sorell and illustrated by Frane Lessac, which is a Cherokee tale about being grateful. Cherokee culture

places a great amount of gratitude in the one who promotes all, whom they refer to as Unelanvhi or god. Gratitude is given towards animals, plants, trees, water, fish, and land.

The second book that I introduced was by Ed Young, a Chinese-American author, called *Should You Be a River*. The story is a poem about love that is accompanied by beautiful illustrations. The text flows on the pages, which resembles a river. I explained to the students about insider and outsider authors for multicultural books. An insider refers to a person who is from the culture depicted in the text, and an outsider is not from the culture depicted. I had students break up in groups and discuss the books and the illustrations and how they were culturally relevant. The students took on Literature Circle roles. The roles were leader, storyteller, artist, bookworm, question master, connector, word whiz, actor, predictor, and favorite passage finder. My purpose was to engage the students in discussions and enjoy being in groups and taking various roles. This activity accomplished two goals. First, I wanted the students to know and see different ways of interacting with the text that could pique the interest of children with stories. Second, I wanted them to be exposed to multicultural literature and have the authors be insiders from that particular culture that they were writing about. I wanted the student teachers to be exposed to different genres and see many ways that culture can be interwoven into the story.

Again, I was saddened that the students had not heard of these books, which made me realize that they need more exposure to additional books. Sharing with my student partner helped me to realize that what I thought that was happening in the classroom was happening and has served as a check and confirmation. I was happy to learn from Fabiola that the students were highly engaged and enjoyed the class tremendously. What I learned is that exposure to children's literature is crucial during the time when most teachers are teaching to the test, having students read random passages and answering the questions. Teaching to the test does not provide students with authentic literacy events that support the enjoyment of reading. If they are not exposed to quality literature, then they don't have a starting place to construct their own stories. The students deeply appreciated the exposure to children's literature because they had very little exposure to quality children's literature. This type of sharing with me and Fabiola encouraged and motivated them to write their own stories.

### ***Student Partner Perspective***

As Dr. Shine explains above, we always began the class with a picture book to serve as inspiration for the students and to help them get an idea of what we expect for the picture book project. I had brought my own picture book, written the semester I had taken this course with Dr. Shine, to serve as a model. When I brought in my own picture book to share in the classroom, I felt accomplished and proud of my work. I knew I had begun to shift in the space of being a former student and moving towards being an instructor. As a prospective teacher, I knew that this experience would inspire me to have my own students create their own stories. As a pedagogical partner with Dr. Shine, I began to see Dr. Shine as an equal partner rather than my professor. It formed a relationship where I felt comfortable enough to share feedback with her, and her with me.

From my perspective as a student partner, it seemed to me that the students enjoyed having a conversation on what is cultural rather than a book and how these books can be used in the classroom. Based on their animated conversation, I concluded that the students were very engaged and enjoyed being in the classroom while communicating with their classmates. Communicating in groups allowed the students to open up about what they think a culturally relevant book is and how we could use it in the classroom, and I was struck that they noticed that the books that were mentioned had different ways of connecting readers with the themes of the books. This experience may have inspired the students for their own book project, which was a goal that Dr. Shine and I had discussed. My past experiences of trying something and failing was valuable advice for the students. I made a point to discuss the error with the students and Dr. Shine so that the students would not repeat the same error.

I've learned that there are many techniques for getting students involved in the classroom, especially with communication skills and allowing them to communicate with their group mates. My role as a co-facilitator was greatly enhanced due to having written a picture book before in Dr. Shine's class. All of the knowledge that I had gained in my previous experience I was able to share with the students and Dr. Shine. This allowed me to facilitate this type of learning and give feedback with ease.

### **Third Week: Translingual Book**

#### ***Faculty Partner Perspective***

During the third week, I shared with the students a translingual book—a book written in more than one language—titled *Abuela*, written by Arthur Dorros and illustrated by Elisa Kleven. By sharing this book, my thought was that my students might be inclined to write a translingual book as well. I believe that I was intentionally invitational to my students regarding them writing their own translingual books. Students loved *Abuela* and had not heard of this book either. They were highly motivated to share their own stories of their grandparents, and they shared personal stories with me and their classmates. This experience made me understand that the students felt comfortable enough to share personal stories. Language is such a big part of self-identity.

Fabiola and I both realized how having these types of activities gives the students the opportunity to sustain their bilingualism and to understand that what they speak at home is important and is valued at the school or university level. An environment that is comfortable and nurturing helps to foster relationships and collaboration. The students began to talk bilingually in class, and Fabiola observed how the talk had changed from only English to Spanish and English. So, both of us realized we had opened the door and invited the student teachers to do this in the classroom space. This especially was demonstrated in their picture books because the books they wrote were either bilingual or translingual. I talked about this with Fabiola, and we came to the realization that although I had shared many translingual and bilingual books, the student teachers still had the choice to write a monolingual book if they wanted to do so. The insight we had was that we had created a space where they could choose to write bilingually.

### ***Student Partner Perspective***

Our sharing of the book *Abuela* allowed student teachers to see the relationship between the grandparent and their grandchild. The students talked to their peers about how important their own relationships with grandparents are. Seeing these types of stories being shown in the classroom made me feel included and the other students appreciated it as well. I knew that seeing diverse stories in the classroom would make us feel included and respected in the classroom. Once the student teachers were done discussing *Abuela* and their own experiences, we went over some housekeeping material, such as reminding the students of the deadlines of the picture books they were going to have to write on their own. We mentioned that because the publisher has a specific publishing date, the books must be finished prior to this date. Both Dr Shine and I stated that we would be giving the students feedback and advice on their picture book.

The student teachers were excited to create their own picture book and hopefully were motivated by the stories that we shared throughout the semester. I believe that our effort to be invitational and to motivate the students to create a bilingual book was effective, since during their group discussions, the students were talking about creating a bilingual book of their own. When reading the *abuela* story, the students talked about their relationships with their grandparents and how this picture book included the language of Spanish. There were some students who even spoke about their own experiences with their grandparents speaking in Spanish and how the little girl's imagination compared to their own when they were younger. I was happy to hear that some students were very comfortable with our group setting and decided to open up about their own relationship with their grandparents. Sometimes when students open up about personal topics, it makes us aware that they feel comfortable in the environment they are in. The students were able to describe their own experiences in both English and Spanish, which culturally enhances the university setting.

Through this partnership, which built on my own experiences and the teaching approaches Dr. Shine used, I learned that the classroom environment is very important to the students. For students to feel comfortable in this classroom environment, the educator needs to be nurturing and welcoming. Students must be engaged in what they are learning, and for this reason we separated the students into different groups to promote communication. Overall, Dr. Shine and I used this and other techniques to make the environment a welcoming one where the students can feel comfortable. The environment seemed to make the students feel excited to learn and ready to pursue the writing of their own picture book.

### **Fourth Week: Writing Workshop**

#### ***Faculty Partner Perspective***

This next week we conducted a writing workshop, and the insights we gained from this week were that the students had developed strong relationships with us and with each other. I realized that by this time my relationship with my student partner had become much stronger, and we had developed trust between us. The student teachers shared very personal stories, which led us to believe that they felt comfortable enough to share stories that were close to the heart and



personal. They also communicated with Fabiola in Spanish to ask questions and share stories of their life. This is how we knew that we had gained their trust.

The student teachers were eager to share their stories with each other and with us. They very much enjoyed the writing workshop framework as they shared their bilingual and translingual stories with each other. Both Fabiola and I conferenced with them in multiple writing workshop sessions. In these sessions we provided them with feedback, and during our meetings we talked about the feedback we had given the students. We both tried to create a positive, nurturing atmosphere that was invitational and welcoming for the students. We allowed the students to meet in groups, share their stories, give each other feedback, as well as come to either of us for feedback. They provided each other with crucial feedback that helped them to refine and revise their writing. We were positive in the way we gave our feedback. We were encouraging and deeply touched by their excitement and engagement in producing their book.

What I learned during this phase of the course is that having a student-centered classroom is important at all levels of education. Students need to experience authentic writing opportunities along with choice so that literacy can be meaningful for them. Of course, allowing the students to be experts and to step back is not always easy, but it is effective and allows students to be empowered. Both Fabiola and I also felt the time crunch as we had a set publishing date for students so that they could have their books before they left the class for the semester. Both Fabiola and I also realized that schools need to do much more of this type of teaching. This also meant I needed to be doing more of this type of teaching. Fabiola gave me positive feedback, which encouraged me to focus on a student-centered classroom. Her role began to shift much more to one of equal partner as we began to discuss future classes and future projects.

### ***Student Partner Perspective***

The process of this writing workshop was that the student teachers would come to us when ready to receive feedback on their picture book, and they would implement this feedback during the editing portion while writing their picture book. We did not separate the student teachers into groups; rather, they formed their own groups and decided to collaborate and share with each other the process of writing their book and reading each other's stories. We started off with this sharing time, so the students were able to communicate with their classmates and share their own stories with each other. Not only were they reading each other's stories, but they were also receiving feedback from each other, which I think is essential in a classroom setting.

Based on my observations, I believe this classroom time served as a successful writing workshop where the student teachers were able to not only get feedback from Dr. Shine and me but also from their classmates as well. The classroom time was focused on the students interacting with each other and sharing the excellent work that they had done so far with their picture books. The student teachers seemed to appreciate this time, as it allowed them to encourage each other to write passionate books. The only downfall from this day was that the class only lasts an hour and twenty minutes. Because of this, we were not able to give feedback to all the students about the picture books. With more time, we would have been able to give all the students feedback and constructive criticism on their work.

## **Fifth Week: Confirmation of Our Own Culture**

### ***Faculty Partner Perspective***

In this class I shared *Dreamers*. This book is written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales and was one of the favorites of my student teachers. This book, which explains the immigrant experience and how immigrants enrich our population, also places importance on literacy and libraries. So many of my students connected with this book as it mirrored some of their experiences. Once again, they were not familiar with this book, which won the Pura Belpre award—an award given to Latina/Latino writers and illustrators whose work best portrays the Latina/Latino experience.

After we discussed the book, we had to move on to midterm review. What I found very interesting was that when we came to the chapter that discusses the writing process, the student teachers stated they knew that very well from the writing workshops that they had and because of creating their own stories. They stated they did not need a review on this topic. What I learned is that my students were able to understand the writing process at a much deeper level because of their own experiences of writing workshop. Being authors and illustrators themselves in the workshop empowered my students to think of themselves as authors and illustrators. I realized once again how important it is to ground our students in student-centered, authentic, meaningful experiences. Some of my students talked about sending their own stories to the publishers to be published. Fabiola and I talked about this, and we were very happy that they were now thinking of themselves as authors of children's literature. The students also told us that they would do this in their own classroom. Fabiola and I discussed how this demonstrated their deeper understanding of the writing process and of pedagogical practice within the classroom. We both felt very accomplished.

### ***Student Partner Perspective***

This picture book adds to the reading dynamic of how we introduced a book at the very beginning of each class. We tried to incorporate these reading books because the student teachers should be exposed to bilingual and translingual books and because the picture books served as inspiration to the student teachers as they were almost done writing their own books. They know what exactly a children's book entails, and we tried to incorporate as many examples as possible.

Through supporting this project and my dialogue with Dr. Shine, it dawned on me how important it is to receive feedback. The student teachers appreciated the feedback as it gave them a sense of reassurance that they were on the right track with their book projects. Many children are not being exposed to quality children's books, and this has impacted the way student teachers see children's literacy. They can become unmotivated and uninterested. Because of that, it is essential to incorporate children's books that offer a sense of relevance to students, as representation matters. During our meetings, we discussed the students' high engagement levels and shared the comments the students made with us regarding how much they liked this assignment. They also were very happy to hear the children's literature stories because they told us how much they loved listening to them. We concluded together that their exposure was very

limited, and we noted how important it was to them that they engaged with these stories. All this was shared during our meetings which allowed us to gain insights of what was happening in the classroom.

## Conclusion

We gained many insights through our partnership. Student-centered classrooms, authentic assignments, reflective practice with a student partner, collaboration, and teamwork helped us to gain insights that either supported what we were doing or could have alerted us to change if need be. We are going to continue this partnership journey with other classes as well. We were very proud of our culturally relevant literacy activity and knew that our students were empowered as they shared their comments about becoming children's authors. As we continue this journey together, we will continue to learn and adapt our classroom according to the insights we gained.

Our partnership journey was beneficial to the student teachers in the class and to both of us. We experienced the benefits of collaboration and meaningful authentic culturally relevant literacy activities. This type of activity empowered our students as they became authors and illustrators. We also were reminded of lifelong learning and how grateful we both were for this opportunity.

We strengthened our own relationship and our relationship with the teacher candidates. Through sharing stories and giving feedback, we believed that having an inviting, nurturing, and positive environment played an important role in strengthening our relationships. The reflective practices, observations, and meetings helped us to grow and change in our pedagogical partnership. Our pedagogical partnership was dynamic as our roles shifted and we realized that is going to be an ongoing process for the both of us.

This journey was a challenge but also a very rewarding journey because we had logistic issues. The computers we used crashed and we had time issues. We faced health issues during this time. All these challenges were difficult, but we gained so much from this partnership as did our students. We will continue to work together.

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