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Interrupting Teachers' Assumptions and Beliefs About English Learners Using Culturally Relevant Literature and Poetry Circles

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Interrupting Teachers' Assumptions about English Learners through Literature Discussion

Abstract

Although classrooms across the United States continue to become more diverse, teachers are often underprepared to support the learning of immigrant students and students labeled as English learners. In the current investigation, we turn toward literature discussion using bilingual poetry with teachers to learn how participants recognize their assumptions and beliefs related to language and culture. In this phenomenological study framed with sociocultural and transactional theories, we present data related to teachers' discussions of one bilingual poetry picture book. We share findings related to teachers' understandings about their own assumptions, as well as personal connections to challenge those assumptions. We contend that teachers' individual transactions and connections with literature led to interruptions in their assumptions and beliefs about students.

Interrupting Teachers' Assumptions about English Learners through Literature

Discussion

"This is a really awesome book because...all of [the poems] can stand alone, but they're better

when they fit together... then you start to say, Oh wait. They're going to school. Every day going

to school is like crossing the border."--Kara (pseudonym), a White, monolingual urban

elementary teacher's response to My Name is Jorge

As globalization and immigration transform populations across the world, more students

from diverse backgrounds enter Kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade (K-12) classrooms. In the

United States, approximately 10 million students speak a language other than English, making up

20% of school-aged children nationwide (American Community Survey, 2015). Whereas half of

these students enter school with proficiency in English, the other half are still learning English

and subsequently labeled as English learners (ELs) based on standardized tests of listening,

speaking, reading, and writing (Linquanti & Cook, 2013; National Center for Educational

Statistics [NCES], 2015). While the majority are born in the United States to immigrant parents,

approximately 20% of ELs are foreign-born and confront additional obstacles to maneuver

mainstream expectations, often encountering myriad social, emotional, cultural, linguistic, and

academic challenges (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova,

2008). The opening statement of this article, from a teacher of immigrant ELs in the suburban

Midwest, captures an important reflection on the realities many students face each day in

schools.

These challenges faced by ELs are often exacerbated by the fact that while classrooms

continue to diversify, the mismatch in cultural and linguistic backgrounds between students and

teachers persists, often resulting in lack of understanding and empathy with students' unique and

complex experiences (Cohen & Clewell, 2007; Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003). Further, teachers are frequently underprepared to support diverse students, including those from immigrant backgrounds and labeled as ELs (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-González, 2008). In the current political climate, where immigrants and particular demographic groups are often framed with negative discourse, insufficient teacher preparation can result in unchecked assumptions that teachers unknowingly use when making decisions in their practice in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Costello, 2017).

While scholars have called on teacher preparation programs to address this issue of under preparedness, many teachers have long exited these programs and are actively teaching in schools where the population has diversified (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). In this way, the responsibility typically falls on school stakeholders to provide professional development opportunities for teachers of ELs (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Additionally, politics and media often portray immigrants and bilingual individuals in a deficit manner, leading to a deficit-based way of thinking about certain groups and individuals.

Although prior research has indicated that teachers require opportunities for self-reflection on assumptions and beliefs related to culture, as well as professional development related to instruction for ELs (Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Li, 2013), schools are often overburdened with high-stakes policies and mandated initiatives and tend to provide short-term professional development focused on easily implementable, one-size-fits-all strategies (Day & Sachs, 2004; Henson, 2001). In this paper, we investigate how reading and discussing a culturally relevant text might impact teachers' recognition of assumptions and beliefs, especially ones related to language and culture. In the following sections, we review literature on efforts to

prepare teachers for ELs, including foci on literature circles and culturally relevant texts, and then share the study's methods, findings, and implications for teacher education.

Literature Review

Because of the growing diversity in classrooms, attention is increasing on preparing effective teachers for ELs in a range of educational settings, including English as a second language (ESL), bilingual, general education, and disciplinary classrooms (Kibler, Walqui, & Bunch, 2015). Effective teachers of ELs require understandings of second language acquisition, including knowledge of language acquisition and pedagogical applications related to instruction, assessment, and environments (Lucas et al., 2008). Additionally, Helfrich and Bosh (2011) assert critical understandings for EL instruction, including preserving cultural values in literacy development, actively engaging ELs in instruction, using peers to scaffold language, and designing meaningful assessments. Though still not widely addressed across the United States, teacher preparation programs have initiated efforts to target these understandings through field experiences (e.g., García, Arias, Harris-Murri, & Serna, 2010; Heineke, Kennedy, & Lees, 2013) and courses on multicultural education (e.g., Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008) in an effort to influence beliefs and assumptions about ELs and build a professional knowledge base for instruction.

Beliefs and Assumptions about English Learners

Due to inconsistent efforts in teacher education, underprepared classroom teachers often espouse deficit-based beliefs and assumptions about ELs (Clair, 1995; Sugimoto, Carter, & Stoehr, 2017; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004). For instance, Sugimoto, Carter, and Stoehr (2017) found that the teachers in classrooms with a large population of ELs held deficit-based beliefs toward ELs, which led to insecurities in their abilities to effectively teach ELs. Walker, Shafer, and Iiams (2004) explored beliefs of teachers working with ELs and found many believed ELs

should be fluent in English after one year in the classroom, despite research indicating a span of 4 to 10 years to achieve proficiency (Collier, 1989; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Additionally, Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, and Portes (2018) uncovered a range of deficit-based beliefs and attitudes regarding ELs held by teachers, particularly related to the use of home languages in the classroom.

Inaccurate assumptions and beliefs, particularly those grounded in deficit-based perspectives, can negatively influence how teachers approach instruction in the classroom with ELs (Harrison & Lakin, 2018; Lyon, 2009). For example, existing knowledge and beliefs about language learners and language acquisition may impact a teacher's willingness to incorporate texts and instructional materials in languages other than English (Harrison & Lakin, 2018). Lyon (2009) investigated preservice teachers' beliefs about issues of diversity, finding a lack of cultural awareness, misconceptions related to culture and diversity, and low engagement in reflective activities related to diversity. In this way, interrupting these deficit-based beliefs and assumptions is integral to shifting teachers to positive attitudes regarding ELs (Clair, 1995).

On the other hand, teachers can espouse positive perceptions of ELs that positively influence practice. Reeves (2006) examined secondary teachers' attitudes toward ELs, finding contradictory results; whereas most teachers welcomed linguistically diverse students in their classrooms, they indicated some reluctance to teach ELs due to lack of experience and confidence to support their needs. Harrison and Lakin (2018) conducted a survey with preservice teachers related to their beliefs regarding ELs. They found strong positive associations and preferences for working with ELs, noting that preservice teachers with a stronger knowledge base about language acquisition had more accurate knowledge about teaching ELs. This work

suggests that beliefs and background knowledge both play a significant role in the kind of instructional decisions teachers make regarding ELs.

Professional Development about English Learners

Existing literature suggests that professional development focused on culturally responsive pedagogy could lessen the degree of these deficit-based beliefs (Bowers, Fitts, Quirk, & Jung, 2010; Fitts & Gross, 2012; Katz, Scott, & Hadjioannou, 2009; Kibler & Roman, 2013; Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, & Portes, 2018; Nieto, 2017; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). Kibler and Roman (2013) indicated the efficacy of professional development in influencing teachers' beliefs related to students' home language use in classrooms, finding that teachers require support on how to incorporate students' languages into daily instruction. Youngs and Youngs (2001) suggested that teachers were more likely to exhibit positive attitudes toward ELs if they had experiences with specific predictors, including: (a) coursework on multicultural education or foreign language, (b) professional development on teaching ESL, (c) experience living or teaching abroad, or (d) interactions with diverse populations of ELs. Hutchinson and Hadjioannou (2011) implemented and investigated professional development for teachers of diverse ELs, which indicated opportunities for teachers to consider their beliefs and practices, as well as develop support systems of colleagues with common experiences and challenges.

Literature Discussions using Culturally Relevant Texts

Providing spaces for teachers to learn, co-construct knowledge, and challenge beliefs and assumptions about ELs is essential for teachers to grow and create positive climates for all students (Palmer & Martinez, 2013). Literature discussions, also sometimes referred to as literature circles or book clubs, are one such context (Heineke, 2014; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Martínez-Roldán & Heineke, 2011). Literature circles have long been used in classrooms to

engage students with authentic texts and foster meaningful dialogue about literacy (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 2001; Graves, 1991). Daniels (2002) described literature circles as small discussion groups comprised of individuals reading the same text, with group members taking on specific responsibilities and participating in dialogue to share thoughts. This approach to discussing texts offers opportunities for readers to explore and discuss authentic texts and collaboratively construct meaning from stories (Daniels, 2002), resulting in enhanced comprehension and literacy skills among K-12 students (Barone & Barone, 2012; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Fredericks, 2012; McElvain, 2010; Wilfong, 2009).

While literature circles lend themselves to readers interacting and reflecting upon texts, they are not organically culturally responsive or critical (Fredericks, 2012). However, within these collaborative contexts, intentionally using culturally relevant texts can mediate readers' understandings and dialogue, including EL students and teachers. Osorio (2018) discovered second-grade ELs had rich discussions and connections to a bilingual, culturally relevant text that reflected their lived experiences, as compared to connections they made to stories from the basal anthology. Roser and colleagues investigated fourth graders' use of culturally relevant, bilingual texts—including the text in the current study—as readers' theater, and found using the texts in this way increased students' fluency and overall reading level (Roser, May, Martinez, Keehn, Harmon, & O'Neal, 2003). Additionally, culturally relevant literature circles have proven effective to mediate the discussions of preservice teachers (Bull, 2011; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Gregor & Green, 2011; Lohfink & Curtis, 2011; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Lohfink and Curtis (2011) found that culturally relevant texts in coursework increased preservice teachers' abilities to evaluate and use texts to broaden cultural awareness and connect to children, as well as learn more about other cultures. Similarly, Gregor and Green (2011) discerned that

immigration-related chapter books supported preservice teachers' development of knowledge about the process of immigration, as well as empathy for immigrant students. Nathenson-Mejía and Escamilla (2003) found that using Latinx children's literature supported preservice teachers in growing more knowledgeable about students' communities, helped foster connections to the students, and increased their ability to connect multicultural literature to their instruction.

With this study, we build from previous research that has demonstrated the efficacy of reading and discussing culturally relevant texts as a means to experience different cultural settings, value diversity, and gain deeper understandings of diverse students (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993), as well as make connections between the text and their lives, leading to broader cultural understandings (Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001). The existing literature in the field surrounding the use of literature circles more heavily focuses on (a) preservice teachers' interactions with culturally relevant texts (Bull, 2011; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Gregor & Green, 2011; Lohfink & Curtis, 2011; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014), and (b) the use of chapter books to mediate culturally relevant literature discussions (Barone & Barone, 2012; Fredericks, 2012; Latendresse, 2004). With a large population of inservice teachers who are underprepared to teach ELs, we focus our investigation on this understudied group. Building from the second author's recent study demonstrating the value of using picture books in culturally relevant literature circles (Heineke, 2014), we hone in to study teachers' transactions and interactions with one text-- *My Name is Jorge: On Both Sides of the River* by Jane Medina--as a means to understand how these poems can serve to mediate teachers' beliefs about ELs. In this article, we share how these poems about the experiences of a school-aged child and his family can serve to interrupt and challenge existing assumptions and beliefs espoused by teachers working in classrooms with ELs.

Conceptual Framework

We situate this study within the sociocultural paradigm, specifically recognizing that individuals co-construct knowledge through social interactions and dialogue with others in various cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theorists assert that individuals utilize cultural artifacts to make meaning of activities, interact with one another, and establish connections between themselves and the world (Cole, 1996; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, artifacts—such as texts and talk—mediate learning as individuals co-construct knowledge and challenge existing beliefs and ideas (Argyris, 1993 Holland et al., 1998; Moje et al., 2004). When applying these theoretical principles to teacher education, we see interactive contexts where novice and expert educators interact with another around common texts and artifacts to promote thinking, learning, and understanding (Heineke, 2014; Moje et al., 2004).

In addition to sociocultural theory, we draw from transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), which emphasizes the importance of the reader's connection to a text. When viewed through transactional theory, each act of reading is an event that involves a reader and a text at a particular moment in time, and in a particular social or cultural context (Rosenblatt, 1988). In other words, readers bring with them their own background knowledge and experiences, which influences the unique negotiation between reader and text. Readers can transact with texts in a variety of ways, such as connecting to their own experiences and seeing themselves in the text or taking perspective and empathizing by looking into the experiences of others (Bishop, 1990). When teachers interact with texts with characters, settings, and plots similar to those in the sociocultural contexts in which their students live, they draw upon their previous experiences inside and outside of the classroom to interpret and negotiate the text (Heineke, 2014).

The intersection of sociocultural theory and transactional theory frames learning as occurring when individuals interact with others in social and cultural contexts that become central to the ways that meaning is constructed between the text and reader (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2004; Wiseman, 2011). Through participation in literature circles, readers first individually transact in unique ways with a text, and then come together to discuss and make meaning of the text and their transactions (McElvain, 2010). As a part of these interactions, individuals utilize and draw upon diverse cultural artifacts and linguistic resources; with the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives, diversity and conflict are inherent and thus promote disruption and change among participants (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999).

In this study, we consider the ways in which readers interact with the text and with one another in literature circles mediated by one culturally relevant text comprised of bilingual poetry about the experiences of an elementary student who is an immigrant and EL (Medina, 1999). To provide teachers with the time and space to build cultural awareness, empathize with the experiences of students, and self-reflect on potential assumptions related to ELs, literature circles using culturally relevant texts provide valuable spaces and tools to mediate dialogue about the diverse experiences of learners (Heineke, 2014). We refer to *culturally relevant literature* as texts that include voices and experiences of people that are historically underrepresented in mainstream classrooms. Aiming to use these texts in meaningful ways to prepare teachers, *literature circles using culturally relevant texts* are structured conversations that engage participants in interactive reading, reflecting, and discussing texts in connection with students in classrooms. When used with teachers, these literature circles can foster cultural awareness, prepare for work with diverse students in inclusive environments, and increase

understandings of ELs (Freeman, Feeney, & Moravcik, 2011; Heineke, 2014; Hopkins & Heineke, 2017; Martínez-Roldán & Heineke, 2011). We use the following questions to guide the investigation: How does reading and discussing *My Name is Jorge* influence teachers' recognition and negotiation of assumptions related to ELs? How do teachers connect to the text as a means to shift existing beliefs about ELs? In the following sections, we outline the study methods, share findings, and discuss implications of these findings for a range of educators.

Methods

The current study used a qualitative phenomenological approach, which allowed the opportunity to better understand the participants' perspectives and lived experiences related to their understandings of the phenomenon. It also allowed for exploration of shared elements of those experiences across participants (Creswell, 2007). This study was situated in an EL-focused graduate course, entitled *Culturally Relevant Literature for Children and Adolescents,* taught by one of the researchers at a mid-size, private, urban university in the Midwestern United States.

Data were collected across eight semesters spanning 2011 to 2016. Across these semesters, the course maintained three overarching themes: (a) analyzing texts for cultural and linguistic relevance and authenticity, (b) using texts as windows into the lived experiences of ELs, and (c) integrating literature into classroom practice to support ELs' learning and language development. To begin each semester, participants explored texts and materials to develop understandings related to relevance (e.g., texts as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors; Bishop, 1990) and authenticity (e.g., authors as insiders or outsiders to the target culture; Cai, 2003). This exploration then led into using culturally relevant and authentic texts to mediate teachers' literature circles focused on the experiences of immigrant and EL students (Heineke, 2014).

Participants and Setting

      The study utilized convenience sampling (Patton, 2002). One of the researchers regularly collected data as students participated in literature circles discussing the texts assigned for the course. At the onset of each semester, all students were invited to participate in this study. Across eight semesters, all students enrolled provided consent for the literature discussion to be recorded, aware that participation was not connected to course grades. They also were notified by the instructor at the time of consent that they could turn the recorder off at any time, as well as opt out of participation at any point. Participants were primarily inservice teachers at urban or suburban schools, enrolled in an EL-focused graduate program. The participants consisted of 31 female and 6 male participants, comprised of predominantly White individuals (23), as well as 8 Latinx, 5 Asian, and 1 African-American. Twelve of the participants were teaching at an urban school at the time of the study, 13 were teaching at a suburban school, and the remaining 12 were enrolled as full-time graduate students with prior experience in education. In-service teachers worked at 18 different schools in the city and suburbs, including 11 elementary and 7 secondary sites, with an average of 34% Latinx students and 26% labeled as ELs; 12 of the 18 schools welcomed large populations of recent immigrants and refugees.

Data Sources

      While participants read multiple texts throughout the course representing a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this study focused on literature discussions of *My Name is Jorge* (Medina, 1999). This collection of bilingual (English-Spanish) poetry in picture book format provides the perspective of a young boy who has come to the United States from Mexico. The poems capture his experiences in learning a new language and cultural norms, as well as the discrimination, bias, and intolerance he faces both in school and with peers. The transcriptions of

these literature discussions and related artifacts were pulled from the larger data corpus for analysis by the two authors. In a previous study by the second author, which looked at literature discussions across picture books, this book emerged as poignant in mediating discussions (Heineke, 2014). Additionally, course participants regularly commented – both anecdotally and in culminating reflections on literature circles at the end of the semester – that *My Name is Jorge* stood out as a text that shifted their thinking or practice in meaningful ways. This text was typically used to mediate the final literature discussion of the semester.

Discussions of cultural authenticity as related to culturally relevant children's literature were an important part of the course. Jane Medina, the author of our focus text, is a White, bilingual (English-Spanish) woman writing about experiences of a Mexican immigrant. To some in the debate about authenticity, she may be considered an outsider. However, as Bishop (2003) notes, authenticity often has more to do with the ways in which an author can reflect the perspectives of the group about whom he or she is writing, rather than simply their own ethnicity. The researchers considered these factors carefully and agreed that this text, which was honored for several awards in the field of children's literature, captured important elements of a Mexican immigrant child's experiences, based on their own research and teaching backgrounds.

Data collection centered on audio files and related transcriptions of participants engaging in a literature discussion about *My Name is Jorge*. As participants began literature circles, they turned on the audio devices to capture dialogue; these recordings were later transcribed. Literature circles were not only mediated by the focal text, but also a particular literature discussion strategy or procedure. In the case of *My Name is Jorge*, participants used the *Save the Last Word for Me* strategy, where they selected poems that stood out to them. They put a post-it note on the page of the selected poem and wrote why they found it particularly poignant, such as

a personal connection or a-ha moment for teaching and learning. In class, each participant took turns reading one selected poem aloud to the literature circle; others responded to the poem meant to provoke discussion, which closed with the focal participant's last word on why s/he selected the poem. In addition to discursive data from literature discussions, we collected secondary data in the form of participants' written reflections at the close of each literature circle, as well as at the end of the semester.

Researcher Positionality

We acknowledge that our own backgrounds also played a part in the study. The first author, who did not teach the class in which the data was collected, is a White, monolingual (English) female who regularly teaches children's literature with an emphasis on culturally relevant texts. She also has over ten years of teaching experience in classrooms with large numbers of EL and immigrant students. The second author, the instructor of the course, is a White, bilingual (English-Spanish), female professor who regularly teaches this Culturally Relevant Literature course, as well as many other courses that focus on supporting ELs in the classroom. She also has five years of experience teaching EL and immigrant elementary age students, as well as conducting extensive research related to the field of language and culture. Both authors carry positive dispositions related to the instruction of ELs and the value of bilingualism and use of students' funds of knowledge. These prior experiences and beliefs influenced the positionality of authors as they collected, analyzed, and interpreted data.

Data Analysis

We utilized an interpretive approach to qualitative data analysis (Erickson, 1986), specifically aiming to discern themes that emerged from participants' discourse in literature discussions in response to the research questions and our theoretical framework. To begin, each

researcher read through the eight transcriptions and related data multiple times, drafting memos

of evolving understandings of participants' interactions with the text and one another. We noted

multiple codes, such as assumptions related specifically to language, or personal connection to

family. We then met to discuss emergent themes in the data, looking at ways these codes blended

together into larger themes. These included teachers' (a) personal connections to the text, (b)

assumptions and biases, (c) shifts in perspective and understandings, and (d) the role of poetry in

mediating discourse. We organized emergent themes into a coding scheme (see Table 1), which

was inputted into N-Vivo and used by each researcher to engage in iterative analyses of the

corpus of discursive data. After independently coding and drafting assertions responding to the

research questions, we merged N-Vivo projects to confirm a high level of inter-rater reliability.

We met to discuss and negotiate the slight variances in coding, as well as discuss, compare, and

merge assertions to serve as the basis for our findings, which are presented below.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Findings

In this section, we share findings from this qualitative study of teachers engaged in

reading and discussing bilingual, culturally relevant poetry from *My Name is Jorge*. In the first

sub-section, we share results corresponding to the first research question, specifically the various

ways that both reading and discussing the text interrupted teachers' assumptions and beliefs

about teaching immigrants and students labeled as ELs. In the second sub-section, we explore the

second research question by specifically probing the types of personal connections teachers made

to the poetry, as well as how these connections allowed teachers the opportunity to recognize,

negotiate, and reflect upon these assumptions and corresponding interruptions regarding their

students. Finally, in the concluding subsection, we share evidence related specifically to the

genre of poetry. We share the impact of the poems' structure, length, and perspective on the teachers' interactions with the text and with one another.

Interruptions of Teachers' Assumptions and Beliefs

In all eight literature discussions, teachers showed evidence of interruptions to prior assumptions and beliefs related to ELs. One poem in particular, entitled *T-Shirt*, fostered these interruptions in assumptions related to language (see Figure 1). All eight groups discussed this poem in particular in some capacity during their discussion. Following teachers' individual transactions with the text, discussing the poem created opportunities for teachers to unpack the connection between name and identity, as well as the concomitant cultural assumptions and beliefs they or others espoused. After her small group shared experiences surrounding language, culture, and names, Diana (all names are pseudonyms), a White, monolingual full-time graduate student seeking her Masters degree and certification in secondary education and ESL, showed an interruption in her beliefs as she reacted to this poem as related to power in language.

It's really interesting, the question of who controls language in a classroom and the idea that, what's really interesting about the T-shirt poem is that the teacher is assuming that she controls the language. "Will you please call me this" and she doesn't think in her head, "What am I calling you?" The teacher immediately owns the language, owns dominant control of the classroom, has the master narrative. And the students have, you know, aren't supposed to have opinions. It's not a matter of, it's not an asking of, "Why are you calling me teacher? What makes you comfortable? What does it mean to call me teacher?" Those sort of cultural questions aren't brought up instead it's like, "No, I'd prefer for you to call me this. This is the language in our classroom and this is how I'm going to control it.

Diana directly referenced the poem as she grappled with the deficit-based beliefs she recognized in classrooms. Reading the poem interrupted her prior beliefs about the use of language in schools, leading her to negotiate the relationship between language and power. Sharing her thoughts in the literature circle allowed Diana and her colleagues to begin to discuss and question existing structures within schools that contributed to issues of language and power.

[Insert Figure 1 around here.]

In four of eight groups, teachers referenced the poem entitled *The Library Card*, which showcased Jorge and his mother at the public library: feeling confused about the process of checking out books, experiencing embarrassment when the librarian laughed at Jorge's mother's child-like signature, wanting to leave without any books, and feeling as those the books were available for "anybody, but Mama and me" (Medina, 1999, p. 17). Teachers spoke about the seemingly simple act of going to a library, getting a card, and checking out books, noting how they had not previously considered the background knowledge, language and literacy, and social and cultural capital required to participate in this activity. Diana reflected on her prior assumptions that getting a library card was something *anyone* could do. She began:

> The first thing I was thinking about was that it requires literacy to have access to literacy….And that's what [another student] and I were talking about before class and how it's really, what a difficult thing, that in order to have access to understanding and learning about literacy you actually need to be literate on this form. In order to learn through these books and have access to a public library, if you don't have access to schools in a real way then libraries are supposed to bring this equality. But, wait a second, when you go into a library you need that literacy and you need that know-how.

Diana used the poem to challenge her existing assumptions regarding issues of equity that influenced students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. She attributed this directly to her transactions with the poem, stating that it would be "really good for a lot of people probably to read so that they understand that little simple tasks are very challenging and emotional for people who don't always understand what they're supposed to be doing". Reading this poem allowed Diana to interrupt previous assumptions and learn about the challenge of learning new cultural norms attached to "everyday experiences" within the dominant culture.

Reading *The Library Card* also interrupted assumptions about common daily tasks for Natasha, a White, monolingual full-time graduate student with secondary English and ESL teaching experience. She had not previously considered the requisite cultural and linguistic knowledge necessary for an action like getting a library card. Being told from a child's perspective, the poem influenced her emotionally as she empathized with Jorge.

> This poem shows, you know like from a kid perspective, so many emotions of one experience that he put into his poem. The nervousness of going into a new place--the library--and not knowing what you're supposed to do and not fitting in almost and then the realization that, okay, we have to fill out this form and write, and the embarrassment of "oh my mom wrote her name and he thinks it was a child writing." Just, I feel, so many emotions in a very simple activity, for maybe someone else. Where it's like "go get a library card no big deal." You just sign your name, you're done. But, for him, it was so challenging, embarrassing, shameful, for him and his mother.

Natasha grappled with her assumptions about issues of access connected to language and culture while discussing the emotions at play in this poem. She continued,

I thought of things that you might think of just being so easy. Book, library card, go on the internet, go to the store and bring this for tomorrow, or whatever it may be, and that can be very complicated at times. Those perspectives or things that you wouldn't have thought would be an obstacle, but it turns out they could be.

Imelda, an Asian bilingual (English-Tagalog) urban public elementary teacher, made similar remarks regarding issues of access after reading *The Library Card*. She said,

Well, there were a lot of things that I took from this poem, but I guess the most important and related to us as teachers is the fact that we assume kids have access to things and sometimes they don't. So as a teacher, we have to be either willing to provide those resources to them or work around that, because the matter of the fact is not a lot of kids have access to going to the museums or going to enrichment programs. Now-a-days, enrichment programs for after school are expensive for a lot of families."

Teachers like Natasha, Diana, and Imelda used their transactions with the poems to negotiate beliefs about cultural capital and related assumptions with regard to the expectations that teachers regularly place on students.

After reading and personally interacting with these poems, teachers explored their assumptions and beliefs related to ELs and immigrant students, particularly probing the social, emotional, and cultural challenges of maneuvering mainstream American society. By participating in literature discussions, teachers' individual responses to the text were subsequently strengthened through social interactions. The transactions teachers had between the poems and themselves led to various interruptions in existing assumptions and beliefs.

Personal Connections Fostering Interruptions

As evidenced from discursive data in all eight literature circle discussions, teachers frequently made personal and professional connections to the different poems within the focal text. Twenty-seven of 37 participants made personal or professional connections to multiple poems in *My Name is Jorge*, with the type of connection varying based on the participants' cultural backgrounds and experiences with diverse students. These connections led to constructive, text-based discussions with colleagues and enabled teachers to examine and interrupt their beliefs and assumptions about ELs—both broadly in society and specific to classroom practice.

Fifteen of 37 teachers, including 10 of 15 from immigrant backgrounds, made personal connections to the text by considering personal or familial experiences learning English. Ana, an Asian bilingual (English-Vietnamese) elementary teacher in a linguistically diverse, urban public school, shared a connection to the text related to her father having difficulty during a traffic stop because of his limited English. She related to the idea that tasks that seem simple to some people are much more difficult when there are linguistic and cultural obstacles involved. Janine, a White bilingual (English-Serbian) full-time graduate student who came to the United States with her family as a child to escape the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe, spoke about her experiences needing to learn not just a new language, but also a new culture and way to interact in daily activities. Sharing these personal experiences in literature circles also allowed others to gain deeper perspective on some aspects of daily lives of ELs and immigrants.

Referenced in three of eight literature circles, the poem *Mexican Dummy Time* focused on Jorge's feelings about being pulled out of class to work with the ESL teacher. In this poem, Jorge described looking forward to this time to speak Spanish and get relief from pressures in the classroom. One day, a classmate referred to the pull-out time as "Mexican dummy time,"

resulting in heartbreak for Jorge. Alison, a Latinx bilingual (English-Spanish) school psychologist in an urban public school district, indicated strong emotional reactions and personal connections to the poem. She said,

> This is the one poem for me where at the end, like I really, literally felt like my stomach dropped. Because it just made me think of a lot of different things. My own personal experiences with being comfortable using my language outside of the home and just seeing how kids kind of grapple with that and having my own kids and seeing how my oldest is three, and….she is refusing to speak Spanish now, and it's killing me. It's like the same way we think about, even just the way that the kids react, how it's become like institutionalized racism and it's like microaggressions when like people don't even realize it's racist what they are doing because it's just so embedded in the way that schools function and like the message, like even they may just not having things in different languages displayed your sending that message that it's English only. And not accepting other things. It was a very strong poem. It just made me think of a lot things.

Alison connected her personal experiences to the poem in a way that made her reconsider her thoughts about linguistic diversity and educational systems in general. She used the text to think about her own children, as well as to challenge beliefs in place at a systemic level in education, noting "the way that schools function." This demonstrated how using a culturally relevant text led to an interruption in the way Alison thought about issues of language, power, and the need to disrupt the status quo.

In addition to personal connections to their own lives, 23 of 37 teachers drew parallels between the experiences of Jorge and those of students in their classrooms. Serena, an Asian bilingual (English-Vietnamese) teaching science to ELs at an urban public school, spoke about

the poem *Why am I Dumb?*, which highlights Jorge dealing with decreasing grades in his US

school, codified in a different grading system than in his native Mexico. Serena shared her

connection.

> A lot of my students are ESL, and I have some of my students come up to me saying, oh,
>
> you know, "I try so hard! I study every night when I come home. In my country this was
>
> easy to me. Like I learned this--It's biology, it was easy to me. But I think kind of
>
> walking through it with them, reassuring them that you do understand their situation and
>
> you know, they *can* do this. It's just getting that English proficiency, taking it slowly, that
>
> language barrier is what's difficult for them, but they could do this. So actually kind of
>
> just reassuring them that this is similar in a lot of ways and that it just takes time. I think I
>
> can relate a lot to this.

By connecting the experiences of her students to those of Jorge, Serena interrupted her

assumptions and beliefs surrounding language development in her content-area classroom.

Having the opportunity to discuss the poem with her literature circle provided the space to

further question her assumptions about the learners in her classroom.

Described in the sub-section above, *T-Shirt* prompted many teachers' connections to their

classroom practice. While 10 of 37 teachers made connections related to the names of their

students, 5 of them, all being White and monolingual in English, admitted that they had reacted

in similar ways to students calling them "teacher." Steven, a White monolingual middle-school

teacher at an urban Catholic school with predominantly Latinx students, reflected on his first

year of teaching in connection to this poem.

> And this one actually kind of hits close to home… I had a student had just come from
>
> Mexico and she would always come over to my desk and she'd call me, "Teacher,

Teacher." And I thought, I just assumed, Oh, she's not even bothering to learn my name, so I respond, "Yes, student. Like, how's it going student?" And I had no idea that that was like, until, I talked to [my professor]. Like, no, like that's like a sign of respect. And I was just like, "Oh, I feel like such a jerk," basically.

Coming from a monolingual (English) home and community, Steven had not previously understood the complexity of cultural norms for respect and communication. By reading and discussing this poem, he reflected on his teaching experience to admit the ways in which his assumptions related to culture and language were reflected in this poem. He continued:

There is this whole, we expect [our students] to get our names so perfectly right, and then there are so many times when we absolutely butcher their names and it's like if we get that upset about...them trying to be respectful how can they feel, like we can't even take the time to get to actually know their names, like the correct way to say it. So, yeah, this one definitely hit close, it hit close to home. It made me, it was definitely a smack in the forehead moment.

Through his transactions with the text, as well as additional interaction with the instructor and his colleagues, Steven and others recognized and interrupted assumptions that unknowingly guided daily interactions with ELs.

The poems in *My Name is Jorge* served as a catalyst for numerous personal and professional connections for the teachers, which led them to interrupt some of their previously held assumptions and bias about students, especially ELs and immigrants. Having a space to individually make these connections, then share them with a group, allowed the teachers to further interrupt their thinking through dialogue and hearing others' connections.

Using Poetry to Foster Interruptions

In addition to looking at how culturally relevant texts created moments of interruptions to teachers' assumptions and beliefs about ELs, we also looked specifically at how the genre of poetry had an impact and fostered these interruptions. The other texts read during the course were novels and picture books; this was the only poetry book used in a literature circle.

The structure of the poems being short and from the perspective of a child had an impact on several participants. Claudia, a White monolingual urban public preschool teacher, said this in response to reading *The Library Card*,

> I think it's interesting because I feel like this poem shows, you know like from a kid
> perspective, like so many emotions of one experience that he put into his poem…..But I
> think it's really good for a lot of people probably to read so that they understand so that
> little simple tasks are very challenging and emotional for people who don't always
> understand what they're supposed to be doing.

Claudia's focus on the child's perspective led her to feel like many people should read these poems as a way to interrupt their own thinking and understanding about individuals from another cultural background or experience. Her comment about myriad emotions being represented in this short text showed how she was able to gain a wide perspective of the narrator from a relatively small piece of literature.

This conversation between Steven and Lina, a White monolingual suburban special education teacher, also showed the way the structure of poetry shaped their discussions and thinking:

> Steven: I think one thing, especially about this that is really good is that you kind of are
> able to hear the students voice instead of reading about it in a textbook or in a journal
> article. It's just like, straight from the student. Cause I feel like so many times in a school,

unless you really put forth effort, it's all just academic back and forth and talking about the next assignment or the next work that you have to do. And you never actually have that much time to actually hear how they are feeling or anything and a lot of times students aren't actually going to come up to you like this and tell you, this is what I feel like because they are either scared or intimidated. It just gives you a chance to step back and think about it.

Lina: Well, I think is just like real life. You know, you can really relate it and when you read that textbook...Yes it's good facts but it's like, you have to find it, you know the connections in your head where this is like you read it and it just comes right to you. Short, sweet, and to the point.

Lina's remark about "short, sweet, and to the point" demonstrates how the format of a poem enabled her to make a personal connection quickly, rather than needing to extend the process over a much longer text.

The format of having short poems bound together into one cohesive book had an impact on the way teachers interacted with the content as well. There were moments where participants needed to read or hear the poem again and let it sink in further to impact their thinking, which is not possible with a novel or lengthy picture book in the context of a literature discussion. Poems are short enough to reread multiple times and apply layers of analysis and interpretation to them in a single sitting. Several participants reread poems after hearing their colleagues' comments during their literature circle. For example, Courtney, a White monolingual suburban public elementary teacher, said, "So, I reread this one a few times and I'm like, "Wait, wait, wait. She's scared?" I had to just reread it" to be able to clarify her own connection as well as better understand the perspective of her colleague.

At times, the physical format of a poem itself fostered deeper thinking about the content. Diana remarked on the physical structure of the bilingual poem *The Library Card*, and its uniqueness as compared to prose,

> ...I find it really interesting because this is such a long poem. It's on two different pages completely. So, the Spanish and the English is so separated and I think it's exactly how the poem was as well, so the format sort of reflects that as well. Like, there's this incredible border between these two.

Having side-by-side translations of the poem, and being able to spread those out on two pages led Diana to consider the idea of a border between two worlds as she reflected on this poem and considered her own thinking. This is not often possible with a picture book or novel.

Finally, the teachers also debated on whether they should read the poems as individual, isolated pieces of text, or have their interpretations and thoughts be impacted by the poems that preceded each. Larisa, a White monolingual elementary teacher at a suburban public school, spoke about reading the poem *The Test*, in which Jorge is very emotional during a test at school. Within the entire book, this poem shortly follows one where the reader learns that Jorge's grandmother has passed away. Larisa said,

> My interpretation of this poem was definitely different if you read it as a stand-alone versus if you read through the couple that are previous to it really carefully. I think on one hand, you can definitely interpret it as it's the test that's creating these emotions and it is the test that's too hard that's creating this sense of loss. But if you connect it to the previous poem, I think it's really the memory of his dead grandmother and the way in which he's carrying so much weight, emotional weight, that it's making something that maybe he'd ordinarily be able to do an impossible task. And I think that's a feeling that

we can all identify with, whether you- regardless of your level of English proficiency, or even your overall intelligence, we've all had things we know we can do, that become nearly impossible because of what else you're carrying around.

Shyla, another White monolingual suburban public elementary teacher in Larisa's discussion group, also talked about the overall structure of a book of poetry. After reflecting and discussing the order of several poems with her colleagues, she said,

I was looking at the whole thing as a big picture, and I felt like this poem was a transition, like the first transition poem, from feeling alone and just alienated, just very alone, and then after this, like this was the poem where he, you know, someone, a friend, talked to him in a positive light and recognized him, and then later on in the story, kind of like the story of the teacher reading his writing out- to the class out loud, was another big moment. But I felt like this was the first one that he felt included, in a way, which I thought was a really neat point in the book.

In this statement, Larisa is able to look at changes to the narrator of the poems across the full text, as you would in a longer piece like a novel or picture book. However, she can isolate specific poems as character changes, allowing her discussion group members to go back and reread the exact moments she is referencing. In her reflection, she uses the poems individually and cohesively to foster her reflections and interruptions in thinking.

In summary, teachers made personal and professional connections when reading the poems in *My Name is Jorge*, which prompted both individual and collaborative interruptions and negotiations of beliefs and assumptions within literature circles with colleagues. The format of the poetry-based text facilitated teachers' connections. The poems—each vividly recounting Jorge's experiences as a student learning English and maneuvering the American school

system—allowed participants with different opportunities to connect and transact with the text, based on their own personal, familial, or professional experiences. Further, the short-form poems written from a child's perspective facilitated teachers in directly connecting to the realities and experiences of their own students. The social interactions they had with one another, mediated by each teachers' individual transactions with the text, prompted the negotiation of previously espoused beliefs and assumptions, as well as developing and deepening awareness of the social, emotional, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of various ELs.

Discussion

As teachers seek to respond to the growing diversity of students within classrooms, culturally relevant literature can serve as a tool for interrupting and challenging existing assumptions and beliefs. In this study, we sought to explore the following questions: How does reading and discussing *My Name is Jorge* influence teachers' recognition and negotiation of assumptions related to ELs? How do teachers connect to the text as a means to shift existing beliefs about ELs? Findings suggest that as teachers individually read poems and transacted with the text, these transactions often interrupted existing beliefs and assumptions related to culture and language. Further, personal and professional connections between the poems and teachers' lived experiences as students, parents, and teachers supported these interruptions.

The particular text used in this study served as a critical mediator resulting in these interruptions of teachers' beliefs and assumptions. Numerous texts can serve as windows and mirrors into diverse cultures and represent the students with whom our teachers work (Bishop, 1990), serving as a starting place for educators' learning and collaborative reflection (Gregor & Green, 2011; Martínez-Roldán & Heineke, 2011;Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001). Adding to extant literature in the field, *My Name is Jorge* (Medina, 1999) was a unique choice as a

bilingual picture book with poems written from a child's perspective, particularly an immigrant student maneuvering the American school system with the EL label. The poems served to capture the child's voice and perspective with myriad connections to the linguistically diverse students in teachers' urban and suburban classrooms, which subsequently offered perspective that felt authentic to teachers. Several teachers commented on the difference between this medium and a textbook or other academic text, noting that while textbooks provide important information and facts, reading shorter poems allowed for connections to be made more easily.

Another important element that contributed to an interruption in assumptions and beliefs was the use of dialogue with colleagues through literature circles. Through a sociocultural perspective, individuals learn by participating in social interactions and dialogue with others. In this study, the literature circle served as a space where teachers shared experiences, reflections, and meaning connected to the text. These literature circles allowed teachers to create bridges between existing and new knowledge, serving as a space for changes in perspective (Moje, et al., 2004). Additionally, individuals brought their stories and histories into each moment of participation in the literature discussion (Moje & Lewis, 2007). This type of interaction happened frequently, as group members offered personal connections to the text from their lives or teaching contexts which reinforced the sharing of new ideas. By participating in literature circles, all teachers—including those from linguistically diverse and monolingual backgrounds— had moments of interruptions to assumptions as a result of reading and discussing the text. For example, we noted that the majority of the monolingual teachers in the study made professional connections to the lives and experiences of their students, while teachers from linguistically diverse backgrounds shared more personal connections based on their own lived experiences. Through sharing these different connections within the social interactions of the literature circle,

however, all teachers experienced multiple perspectives through which to view the poems, contributing to an interruption in prior conceptions.

All individuals bring previous assumptions, beliefs, and experiences to a text, resulting in unique transactions between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Throughout the literature circles in this study, teachers referenced personal and professional experiences through which they could make meaning of the text. Because of this, Jorge's poems served as a springboard for conversations about occurrences within teachers' classrooms, which led to building awareness of the existing inequities and institutional racism in schools. For instance, Diana and Natasha—both White monolingual teachers—grappled with prior beliefs about the ease of which all individuals had access to a library. From another perspective, Alison, a Latinx bilingual (English-Spanish) teacher, noticed and commented on linguistic-related microaggressions that she experienced and continued to witness within school systems. Existing literature has supported an increased awareness surrounding culture in preservice teachers through the use of culturally relevant literature (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Gregor & Green, 2011). With the current study, we additionally discovered the value of providing inservice teachers with the space to recognize and negotiate assumptions as a means to embrace their role and ability to push back against these existing realities that maintain inequities in schools (García, Arias, Harris-Murri, & Serna, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Through this experience of deconstructing their previously espoused beliefs and assumptions, teachers began to realize the unique and diverse needs of ELs and immigrant students (Heineke, 2014; Heineke, Coleman, Ferrell, & Kersemeier, 2012). As evidenced in the findings above, after interrupting beliefs and assumptions regarding students' and families' experiences in mainstream American schools and society, teachers began to develop awareness

and understandings about the social, emotional, cultural, and linguistic challenges that many

students often face (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Herrera, 2016; Moll &

Gonzalez, 1997). Whereas many studies on inservice teacher professional development for ELs

focused on building knowledge and skills to support students' academic learning (e.g.,

Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Francis, 2011; Lee & Buxton, 2013; Ross, 2014), scant

research has probed how to prepare teachers for these other dimensions of student learning and

development—specifically the social and emotional needs of students as they maneuver new

experiences in classrooms and schools (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

Implications of this study center on the use of culturally relevant texts to prepare teachers

for immigrant students labeled as ELs. It is important for teachers to engage in ongoing activities

and experiences that enable them to know themselves and others more deeply (Li, 2013; Milner,

2012), allowing them to consider their assumptions, beliefs, and experiences in connection to

those in schools and communities. This self-exploration allows teachers to better understand the

lived experiences of unique and diverse students and potentially make changes in practice as a

result of these new understandings. To better understand cultural backgrounds of their students,

teachers should have opportunities through ongoing professional development to examine their

own assumptions and beliefs about ways linguistic and cultural practices have shaped their

personal and professional selves (Bowers, Fitts, Quirk, & Jung, 2010; Britzman, 2003;

McWilliams, 1994).

Reading and discussing culturally relevant literature can serve as a context for teachers to

examine, understand, and learn about ELs as a means to interrupt assumptions and beliefs.

Whether situated in professional learning in university coursework or at schools, teachers should

have access to culturally relevant texts that provide windows into the unique and diverse

experiences of their students, as well as mirrors of their classroom practice (Bishop, 1990).

Teachers in our study experienced interruptions immediately through the act of reading the

poems, and deepened those shifted beliefs through the practice of discussing the text with others.

Teacher educators and school leaders should mediate literature discussions with teachers to

promote professional learning, as well as foster awareness about how to use these texts in

classrooms with students (Heineke, 2014). By offering literature circles or book clubs where

teachers read and discuss short common texts like poetry, schools can create a climate where all

stakeholders are committed to engaging in reflective dialogue to share ideas, beliefs, and

experiences related to cultural and linguistic diversity (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Karabenick & Noda,

2004).

Limitations of the study include the small sample of participants enrolled in EL-focused

coursework at one university, possibly indicating favorable viewpoints and understandings of

ELs. Additionally, literature circles took place within graduate coursework, taught by one of the

authors, where teachers may have felt inclined to provide responses aligning with course content.

The author considered power relationships, minimized pressure to consent to the study, and

regularly reminded participants about options to turn off the recorder or decline participation.

Finally, as we previously shared, the authors' own positionalities and beliefs about ELs in the

classroom shaped the way we collected, analyzed, and interpreted data. Despite these limitations,

teachers freely shared a wide range of reflections with concomitant assumptions and beliefs

during conversations. Further research should be conducted with teachers who are not seeking

graduate degrees related to ELs to investigate how these teachers recognize and negotiate

assumptions and beliefs.

Every individual—both teachers and students—brings a lifetime of experiences, assumptions, and ideologies to social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). When given the opportunity to exchange these with others in literature discussions, mediated by texts that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of our globalizing society, there is potential to move forward as a means to achieve equity, respect, and social justice for all students.

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