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# **(Re) Actualizing Culturally Sustaining Read Aloud Practices: Enriching Latinx Bilingual Learners' Literacy Development**

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## **Abstract**

Focusing on culturally sustaining literacy practices, I sought to conceptualize the integration of culturally rich literature as inclusionary practices for the reading and literacy development of Latinx bilingual learners. It is forecasted that by 2036, Latinx students will make up a third of the nation's 3 to 17 year old learners - our school age population (US Census Bureau, 2010). Recognizing the importance of engaging with culturally sustaining read alouds and the value in learners seeing themselves reflected in the stories allows for increased opportunities for engagement in the literature used in the read alouds. I steadfastly advocate for asset-based perspectives that validate and respect students' funds of knowledge and cultural capital and use this to counter deficit perspectives and discriminatory narratives. I capitalize on the importance of embracing the power of culturally relevant literacy practices, including read alouds to support language and literacy development. Equivalently validating cultural identity by recognizing the power anchored in our culture that harnesses contextualized spaces which are grounded in culturally relevant literature and pedagogical practices to catapult Latinx bilingual learners as global scholars.

*Keywords: Literacy, Reading, Culturally Rich Literature, Bilingual Learners, Read Alouds*

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## **Introduction**

Frederick Douglass learned to read and write as a child in slavery and spent his lifetime advocating for social justice counseling others "once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Fast forward to present time where learning to read still maintains utmost status and is often considered synonymous to success in school. As such, reading aloud to students has been recognized as one of the single most significantly influential literacy activities for building the knowledge required for success in reading. Reading aloud, with students actively engaged, helps students learn new words and vocabulary in context, learn about written language and ultimately learn more about the world through books. Reading pages in a book opens new worlds of possibilities. Experiences with books foster early literacy for students that propels them to become successful readers and writers. Reading is an essential building block in student's literacy development and is extremely consequential for student success in schools. As such, reading is unequivocally tied to literacy development. Consequently, if students fall behind in learning to read, they often remain

behind their peers and their reading achievement gap increases. The disparity in the reading skills of students of varying degrees may have additional consequences for their future reading and cognitive development. Overwhelmingly, the field of reading and literacy has experienced a shift toward concern about students who historically have been left behind or who have 'slipped through the cracks' many of whom are Latinx English learners.

## **Latinx Demographics**

Increasingly, our nation is rapidly becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse as an estimated one in five children now live in homes in which a language other than English is spoken. Latinx students make up an overwhelming majority of all emergent bilinguals and represent many national origin groups with two-thirds or 64% being Mexican (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2018). Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) also referred to as English Learners (ELs), English Language Learners (ELLs) or Bilingual Learners (BLs) represent a steadily and increasingly growing demographic of school age population enrolled in schools in

the United States. The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners (ELs) was higher in fall 2017 (10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students). Additionally, the percentage of students who were Hispanic is projected to be higher in fall 2029 than in fall 2017 (U.S. Census, 2010).

In fact, a major shift in public school enrollment has been in the number of Hispanic or Latinx students enrolled. Enrollment of Hispanic or Latinx students has grown from 6.0 million in 1995 to 13.6 million in fall 2017. During that time period, Hispanic or Latinx students went from making up 13.5 percent of public school enrollment to 26.8 percent of public school enrollment (NCES, 2020). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) projects that Hispanic or Latinx enrollment will continue to grow, reaching 14.0 million and 27.5 percent of public school enrollment by fall 2029 (2020). Hispanic or Latinx growth makes Spanish the most common language encountered in non-English speaking populations such as Texas with a percentage of 29.5% of the total population (American Community Survey 2015; Statistical Atlas 2018). Spanish was the home language of 3.7 million Latinx English language learners (ELLs) public school students in fall 2017, representing 74.8 percent of all Latinx English language learners (ELLs) students and 7.6 percent of all public K–12 students. Additionally, it is forecasted that by 2036, Latinx students will make up a third of the nation's 3 to 17 year old learners - our school age population (US Census Bureau, 2010).

Accordingly, the increase in ethnic diversity in the US population is linked to growing educational challenges. Specifically, barriers such as poverty, language and limited vocabulary negatively affect Latinx bilingual learners. Consequently, a large number of children live in poverty and this elevates the risk of low achievement (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). Gandara and Contreras assert that due to the education system's lack of attention to Latinx students' socio-historical context, these students are not performing well in U.S. schools (Gandara and Contreras, 2009). The risk of school failure can be attributed to the inconsistency of effective instructional strategies (Waxman & Padrón, 2004). Fortunately, teachers of second language learners are especially eager to learn ways to adapt their rapidly changing classrooms to accommodate linguistic diversity and support reading achievement (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). As such, culturally relevant pedagogy has transpired as an effective way of focusing on the intersectionality of cultures, languages and experiences that diverse students bring to classrooms so as to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

### **Culturally Rich Read Alouds Fostering Literacy Development of Latinx bilingual students**

Paulo Freire (1972) stated "Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them." As a former bilingual elementary school teacher, I documented the importance of integrating culturally rich literature for read alouds for the twofold purpose of increasing their engagement during reading and increasing their literacy development. During my daily read alouds in which I integrated culturally relevant texts, I saw my students' faces light up and the energy and motivation to participate in the read aloud was quite impactful. I capitalized on the use of culturally rich literature to maximize my students' engagement and participation in the lesson. Initially, I recognized the power of using culturally rich books during my Reading Language Arts lesson as I conducted a read aloud of the book *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* by Duncan Tonatiuh. The storyline consists of two cousins who have distinct experiences, yet similar as one cousin lives in Mexico and another lives in America. My students immediately connected to the storyline and to the characters. In fact, they began sharing stories with each other about their experiences in America and the commonalities they shared with their family in Mexico. They realized that just like in the story, although they live far apart, their Mexican heritage tied them together. According to Freire when students exchange life experiences, it allows for a deeper understanding of our culture and the similarities and differences between cultures (Freire, 1973). Their engagement with the story and the connections that my bilingual students made with each other and to the story made me realize the power of integrating culturally rich literature into lessons to further validate their cultural experiences, their funds of knowledge and their cultural identity. I proactively sought to continuously integrate culturally rich literature during my daily read alouds and was cognizant of the impact that culturally rich literature had on my bilingual students. I clearly recall my student, Monserat, who turned to me and exclaimed in Spanish and English "*!Yo quiero que lea mas libros como Dear Primo!*" "*I want you to read more books like Dear Primo!*" The rest of my students chimed in exclaiming, "*!Si! !Si! !Si! !Nos encanta!*" "*Yes! Yes! Yes! We love it!*" From that moment on, I knew that this could further develop my students' reading and literacy interest and motivation by tapping into their affective and cultural domains as well as support their literacy development. This significantly impacted the way I engaged my bilingual students. I followed my read alouds of culturally rich literature by inviting my students' parents to be guest speakers for my class and to share their rich cultural experiences that my bilingual students immediately could connect with. This authentic exchange was organic and shared. I referred to this time as *nuestras platicas* or *nuestras charlas* (Spanish for *our talks*) which are intimate conversations rooted in Latinx cultural ways of knowing that are recognized as a

relaxed, comfortable pace to interactions and exchanges (Chabram-Dernersesian & De la Torre, 2008; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006).

Some of my parents were bakers, farmers, mariachi musicians, waiters, cooks, or seamstresses by trade. Prior to their *platica*, I selected a book that tied into their particular skill or trade. After speaking with the class and sharing their experiences, they conducted a read aloud of selected culturally rich literature. We capitalized on the guest speaker's trade or skill to follow with a hands-on experience so if they were cooks or bakers for example, we participated in cooking together and sharing culturally rich recipes that have been passed down through generations. My students responded with their own experience of how their parent or grandparent also cooked some of the same recipes. The connections were instantaneous. We also sang familiar songs that my students related to with our mariachi musician parents or discussed how crops are harvested throughout different seasons with our parents who were farmers or crop workers. My students partook in these powerful culturally relevant experiences. These are literacy practices strongly anchored to my bilingual students' cultural identity, agency and these instances provided validation of the significance of their individual and collective cultural wealth.

We took part in deep discussions after the hands-on experience coupled with opportunities to write our journal reflections. We consistently wrote about our experiences in our journals. My bilingual students could choose to write in Spanish or English for these experiences. Some of the most critical and creative writing came when my bilingual students wrote about the associations they made with our guest speakers and the familiarities they engaged with during the *platicas*. They were also very proud and eager for their turn to invite their own parents or grandparents to share their cultural experiences, talents and skills with the class. This emphasized the true power in familial connections and the pride in one's culture, heritage, traditions and experiences. I was pleased that I recognized the value of these reading and literacy development opportunities that stemmed from our interaction with culturally relevant literature.

Paulo Freire (1972) said "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning." As a professor of bilingual and literacy studies, I share these experiences with my pre-service teacher candidates and with my in-service teachers to help best equip them with first-hand experience and knowledge of important culturally relevant pedagogical practices that foster student engagement and increase authentic reading and writing opportunities. My steadfast and unwavering commitment to integrate culturally rich literature for read alouds coupled with authentic culturally relevant pedagogical literacy practices is underpinned in my advocacy for social justice. I bridged their home experiences to school. For example, my bilingual students viewed Mexican soap

operas referred to as *novelas* and celebrated *Dia de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead which is a tribute to the legacy of ancestors who have passed. We selected culturally rich literature that students identified with and in which they saw themselves represented to have deep dialogue and discussion followed by reflecting upon the experiences and writing in their journals. The common denominator in all of these exchanges was the power of culturally relevant books that often mirrored their life and their home experiences. These experiences resonate with me as I am a testament to the positive impact it had on my bilingual students' literacy development along with the validation of their cultural experiences as powerfully authentic and organic learning experiences that helped solidify their cultural identity. As scholar Darling-Hammond (1997) acknowledges, "Learning to teach for social justice is a lifelong undertaking" (p. 201). Despite the long road we may face, it is crucial to recognize and celebrate each step that we make toward the goal of social justice. I am confident that my bilingual students will forever maintain vivid memories of the pride in their cultural background that these culturally rich experiences from their bilingual class instilled in them.

As Ladson-Billings positions, the notion of cultural relevance includes the struggle for culturally diverse students to achieve and maintain power over their own educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is evident that more than ever, current focus should be on the integration of effect pedagogical practices that support Latinx bilingual learners' continued literacy development. In the same vein, we recognize and acknowledge that language and literacy blossom in culturally rich spaces and through the use of culturally rich literature. Culturally rich literature validates bilingual students' home experiences and funds of knowledge. Research authenticated literacy practices that integrate this aspect are transformational for students and serves as a counternarrative to cultural inequity in our schools that disproportionately affects Latinx students. It is with resolve that we can highlight the cultural beliefs, traditions, heritage, and affective nontraditional needs of bilingual students.

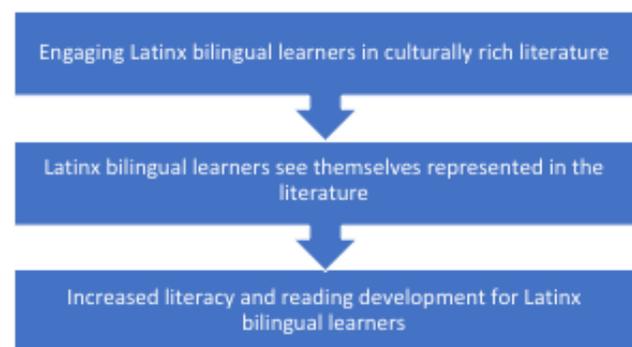


Fig. 1. Impact of engaging Latinx bilingual learners in culturally relevant literature

### Negotiating Cross Language Literacy

Recognizing the importance of being culturally responsive to students' needs is the first step for self-reflective practitioners and researchers. Accordingly, there is increased support for implementing culturally sustaining pedagogical practices, including integrating books that are culturally relevant for students. As Ladson-Billings posits, culturally relevant pedagogy describes the "kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students' culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 1992a, p. 314). Weaving culturally relevant books into the curriculum is integral to uphold culturally relevant literacy instruction that connects the curriculum to the students' world by aiming to adapt practices to best meet the needs of all students. Engaging students in culturally relevant books is key in building a lifetime of literacy development and a love for reading.

Consequently, engagement will increase when students can authentically relate and bond to the literature. Freeman and Freeman (2003) acknowledge that culturally relevant texts are those that readers can connect to (Freeman, Freeman & Freeman, 2003). Using culturally rich literature positively supports the reading development of Latinx bilingual learners. Read alouds that reflect culturally responsive text provide students with a view of their own culture and experiences, and provide context from which to garner the feeling of presence and representation with the characters portrayed in the book and with the plot of the story. Subsequently, when read alouds are conducted in the heritage language, metacognitive awareness is amplified through bilingual learners cross linguistic connections to culturally rich literature. Latinx bilingual learners make strong connections to their native or heritage language.

Research supports this as evidenced in a meta-analysis of studies conducted to investigate teaching bilingual students to learn to read, no studies found English-language only literacy education to be superior and the majority saw greater gains of bilingual texts used in bilingual classrooms (Barac & Bialystok, 2014). A study conducted by Pollard-Durodola, et. al. recognized that English and Spanish are orthographically and typologically comparable and resemble one another in terms of the developmental reading skills that predict comprehension (Pollard-Durodola, Mathes, Cárdenas-Hagan, Linan-Thompson, & Vaughn, 2006), which augurs for the increased likelihood of cross-linguistic transfer, especially when instruction in both languages is present (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). Genessee and Geva (2006) also found evidence for associations between L1 oral language and L2 reading comprehension.

In terms of affective domain, a study conducted by Herero (2006) focused on integrating culturally relevant liter-

ature to raise skill levels of low-achieving minority students and found that the "use of cultural literature and practices fostered pride, participation, commitment and success" in the students (p. 222). Similarly, a study by Stuart and Volk (2002) found that reading engagement for English learners increased with the use of culturally relevant books. When used for read alouds, students engage with the literature that they connect with most. This engagement may propel them to increase their literacy development. Hence, schema theory, or previous experiences and knowledge (Weaver, 2002) when applied to reading, suggests that readers draw on culturally acquired knowledge to guide their comprehension of text (Gibbons, 2009). Clark and Silberstein (1977) further explain schema theory:

*Research has shown that reading is only incidentally visual. More information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories. (p. 136-137)*

Goodman further contends that "the sense you make of a text depends on the sense you bring to it" (Goodman, 1996, p. 2). This is catapulted as bilingual learners engage with texts where they see themselves represented and belonging. This has the potential to increase their comprehension of the text that will positively impact their reading and literacy development.

### Culturally Sustaining Pedagogical Reading Practices

The term interactive read-aloud is used in a broad sense to "describe the context in which a teacher genuinely shares, not abandons, authority with the children" (Smolkin and Donovan 2002, p. 28). An interactive read aloud consists of a teacher selecting books that meet students' interests as well as their social and developmental levels, modeling fluent reading, and encouraging students to contribute in active ways (Barrentine 1996; Fisher et al. 2004; Pantaleo 2007). Researcher Ebe (2010) notes that cultural responsiveness in English language teaching, especially in reading assessment activities, is illustrated through the selection of culturally relevant texts, which are defined as texts that "readers can connect to and can draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning" (p.194; Perez, 2004). Ebe designed a text selection tool teachers can follow when selecting books. The culturally relevant rubric draws from eight factors inspired by Goodman (1982): (1) the ethnicity of the characters, (2) the setting, (3) the year the story takes place, (4) age of the characters, (5) gender of the characters, (6) the language or dialect used in the story, (7) the genre and exposure to this type of text; and (8) the reader's background experiences (Ebe, 2010, p.197). Ebe proposes exploring students' background. This background contains students' "sche-

mata,” in other words, the interconnected clusters of students’ previous experiences and ideas about the world that will affect how students’ comprehend the texts. Ebe acknowledges that the alignment of the student’s background with the utilization of the culturally relevant rubric ensures reading proficiency (Ebe, 2012). Additionally, Lopez (2011) says that “culturally relevant teaching compares to teacher’s agency and activism in critically re-conceptualizing the curriculum to build student’s cross-cultural understanding and criticality”... [it] “does not happen by chance and requires teachers to be critically aware and agentive in their classrooms, drawing on relevant socio-cultural theories and creating their own purposeful praxis” (p. 76).

(p.76). This positions students to begin to critically question their representation or presence in the text.

It is purported that literacy begins with the young child’s first utterances as language miraculously begins to support the child’s ability to think (Cecil, Baker, and Lozano 2015). By listening and thinking, we accelerate students’ ability to read and write as recognized language domains. They begin to see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written. By engaging students with culturally relevant books, literacy is catapulted as bilingual learners see themselves represented in the storyline and in the characters portrayed in the books. This is also significant as it builds students identity, especially validating bilingual learners’ cultural identity through books. Books may be mirrors for students to see and appreciate images and representations that they can relate to that are based on their own lives and cultural experiences. As such, books may also serve as windows in which children may begin to gain cultural perspectives by looking into others’ worlds (Bishop 1990; Botelho & Rudman 2009).

### **Culture and Social Justice**

Integrating culturally relevant books in which students see themselves, their culture, as well as other cultures portrayed through a positive lens in the stories being read is essential so that literacy practices form part of a culturally sustaining pedagogy. Teachers can achieve this by incorporating students’ cultural strengths, experiences, and knowledge in the learning experience (Almaguer, 2019). Mindful selection and culturally responsive teaching, paired with culturally relevant literature that reflects the cultural heritages of various ethnic groups, and that enables students to connect and reflect upon their lived experiences, is critical in promoting connection and engagement (Conrad et al. 2004; Wiseman 2012) and also challenges and re-conceptualizes ideologies that perpetuate the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1992a).

Hofstede and Hofstede state that “culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 4). Subsequently, Critical Race Theory (CRT) uses an asset-based perspective instead of a deficit perspective of culture, race and ethnicity (Yosso, 2005). CRT attempts to acknowledge, highlight and recognize the cultural capital, skills, talents, and abilities of otherwise marginalized people in an attempt for social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2006). “Looking through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by its omission of the voices of people of color...[it] ‘sees’ deprivation in communities of color and recognizes deficit thinking as one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

Paulo Friere (1972) situated that “The teacher is of course an artist but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.” As such, using students’ Funds of Knowledge (FOK) allows students to incorporate and connect their lived experiences, skills and talents with the learning experience. Those funds of knowledge that have allowed bilingual learners to continue to expand their understanding of the world by making stronger connections with learning experiences. The concept of *funds of knowledge* draws from people’s experiences, stating that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Moll, 2005, p. ix-x). Recognizing the cultural capital and funds of knowledge that students bring into the learning experience is important to engage students with culturally relevant books that support literacy development. Additionally, researchers Derman-Sparks and Edwards contend that research shows that ignoring race in early childhood classrooms is not prudent and that educators must take a more active, anti-bias approach to addressing issues of culture and race if they are to enact positive change (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). This positive change also signifies validating bilingual students’ lived experiences by teaching for social justice. Hence, culturally rich literature is pivotal in developing positive cultural, racial and ethnic identities. Culturally rich literature present organic and authentic teachable moments that serve as entry for deep and meaningful dialogue related to culture and identity through a social justice lens. In the words of Paulo Freire (1972) “Without a sense of identity there can be no real struggle.”

Embracing this reality catapults the importance of providing students with culturally relevant text as a way to engage with and connect to reading experiences ultimately

leading to increased opportunities for literacy development. Through read alouds students find connections in books that help them develop a love for reading. Subsequently, students will begin to thirst for books that they can relate to and that are meaningful to them. If mindfully selected, culturally relevant read alouds provide increased opportunities for bonding through representation of a students' culture and ethnicity. Also, exposing students to books that represent various other cultures and ethnicities as a view into others' experiences is key to biculturalism and multiculturalism for bilingual learners. As students connect their learning to books that represent their and others' culture and heritage, the depth of learning increases and their literacy development is positively impacted.

### Read Alouds in Early Childhood Settings

When conducting read alouds, it is important to consider making reading a pleasure by reading to your students in a comfortable place. Depending on the age of the students, have them in close proximity to you and the book so they can see and point to the print and the pictures. Demonstrate by modeling to them that reading is fun and rewarding. Interact with students as you read and engage them in the world of books. Show enthusiasm as you read aloud and read the story with expression. Important to note that the teacher is the model of correct pronunciation, tone, intonation, rate of reading, prosody, and many more characteristics that are evident during the read aloud or shared reading (Almaguer, 2018). Ask questions as you continue through the read aloud challenging students to think critically and creatively about the story and the characters. Captivate students' interests by mimicking the characters and talking as the characters talk. Make sound effects during the read aloud and make face gestures and expressions with your face and hands. When students enjoy being read to, a love for reading will flourish and they will be eager to mimic the reading that has been modeled and to learn to read. Designate consistent times each day for read alouds so students may anticipate the reading time. Connecting curriculum to culturally rich literature will engage students in the lessons. Additionally, reading aloud to students piques students' interest in books, boosts their reading and writing skills and develops a love for reading. Culturally rich literature is instrumental to literacy development.

### Concluding Reflections

We hold the ability to foster Latinx bilingual learners' literacy development by (re) actualizing culturally sustaining read aloud practices. This is surmised through Myles Horton and Paulo Freire metaphoric interpretation:

*The teacher is of course an artist but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.* The educator has the grand responsibility of bringing out the best in each student by focusing on their inherent strengths and maximizing the learning opportunities. Many Latinx bilingual students have endured historic racial trauma which can be reconciled by validating students' cultural identity which is amplified by seeing themselves in the stories and narratives that surround them. Within a context of immigration, globalisation [sic] and colonization [sic], students' identities are transnational, fluid and emerging (Au, 2009). Validating cultural and racial funds of knowledge through culturally relevant books that are reflective of bilingual learners' cultural identity, heritage, language, and history that presents students' lives in a positive scope. Recognizing culturally rich literature as a powerful and integral piece of literacy education is fundamental. This unequivocally serves to counter the often racial and cultural inequity and perpetuation of bias that Latinx bilingual students grapple with in educational contexts. As the number of Latinx bilingual learners continue to expand by leaps and bounds, it is of utmost importance that educators focus on their needs holding steadfastly to integrating culturally rich literature that validates and upholds bilingual learners' cultural assets, values, talents, and beliefs to empower them as global scholars that challenge the status quo.

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