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# Harnessing Cultural Epistemology in Literacy Studies: Take a Walk In My Shoes

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## Abstract

The influence of our increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse school age population is experienced throughout our educational system. Teachers diversify their pedagogical practices to best meet students' needs in their classrooms, thereby amplifying the importance of valuing culturally and linguistically diverse learners' rich and plentiful cultural knowledge. It is essential to expand our literacy lens to include multifaceted and multidimensional opportunities which acknowledge and respect the cultural and linguistic learner diversity that reverberates across cultures. Engaging students in culturally relevant pedagogy accelerates learning by helping students make connections to concepts and topics. The impact is twofold as culturally relevant pedagogy positively affects socio emotional learning by recognizing students ability to use their cultural capital in learning. Ultimately, centering cultural epistemology in literacy studies allow us to begin to see what it is to walk in someone else's shoes.

*Keywords: literacy, language, cultural epistemology, culturally relevant pedagogy, bilingual learner*

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## Literacy Lens: Multifaceted and Multidimensional

It is said that *"a tree cannot grow without roots"* hence, our roots are long, complex, and ultimately have a strong grip on our identity. We recognize that one's identity runs deep and is built on cultural and linguistic assets. These assets that have been supported through each of our lived experiences. This represents both individual and collective identities of a group of people or culture and although we may know what it is to walk in our shoes, we do not know what it is to walk in someone else's shoes. Through complex rendering of our stories and histories, we perpetuate the strength in our culture, values and beliefs. This positions us within varied contexts and spaces both academic and social that are familiar and lived and are grounded in deep histories. Thus, magnifying the need to expand our views of our literacy lens to include multifaceted and multidimensional opportunities which acknowledges and respects the cultural and linguistic diversity that reverberates across our world.

The diversity of our global population impacts our educational system. Latinx emergent bilinguals (EBs) also referred to as English learners (ELs) represents incremental growth with US Latinx population numbering 58 million in 2016 to a projected figure of 119 million by 2060. There are projections

that by 2025, emergent bilinguals will account for 25% of total K-12 school age population in the United States. By 2025 one out of four students in classrooms across the nation will be an emergent bilingual (NEA, 2020). Additionally, the Pew Research Center, finds that Native Hawaiians population is projected to reach more than half a million by 2045 and more than 675,000 by 2060 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Through years of advocacy to preserve the Hawaiian language, it has experienced a resurgence and in 1978 Hawaii became the only state with two official languages, English and Hawaiian, *Ōlelo Hawai'i*. There is pride in the Hawaiian culture, language and land that characterizes native Hawaiians. A relentless push to preserve the Hawaiian traditions and cultures is steadfast and evident through the Hawaiian renaissance. Hence, it is imperative that we recognize the changing demographics as an opportunity to learn more about the impact cultural literacy experiences have on literacy and learning. Additionally, by accentuating our changing demographics, it remains critical that we adjust pedagogical practices to best account for the multifaceted and multidimensional literacy practices that characterize our diverse population. The aim of this paper is to emphasize the importance of viewing literacy as multifaceted and multidimensional and to harness cultural epistemology within the landscape of literacy studies.

Literacy encompasses cultural values and practices that define all humanity. Specifically, looking across cultures at similarities that exist and that unite people cross-culturally. The Latinx cultural experiences, values, beliefs, and practices form part of powerful literacy practices in similar ways that the native Hawaiian cultural experiences, values, beliefs and practices form part of their powerful literacy practices. Although we may surmise what it is to take a *walk in someone's shoes*, we can never fully capture the extent of the experience without acknowledging the influence literacy practices have on cultural *ways of being* and *ways of doing*. Focusing on literacy as a way to connect with each other through our experiences, stories and histories.

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1997) views think of literacy as a social practice rather than an acquisition of skills as in dominant approaches (Street, 1995). Further viewing multiple literacies within varied contexts and spaces questioning 'whose literacies' are dominant and whose are marginalized (Street, 2003). According to Street:

*In order to build upon the richness and complexity of learners' prior knowledge, we need to treat home language not as a deficit but as affecting deep levels of identity and epistemology, and thereby the stance that learners take with respect to the new literacy practices of the educational setting (Street, 1997, p 53).*

Building upon cultural knowledge and experience as counternarratives to the deficit perspectives of literacy and language that come from non-mainstream cultural groups is integral to fully conceptualizing cultural epistemology (Almaguer, 2022). The intent is to further counter the disconnect in our educational system to cultural experiences of CLD learners in a way that allows a wider view of literacy and specifically what literacy signifies to a culture and across cultures. In a similar way resembling pride in the collective actions of lived experiences of a group of people within a culture. Recognizing culturally relevant constructs to personify literacy as one that is based on space, time and are deeply embedded in our *pockets of wealth*. Those *pockets of wealth* that are reflective of experiential and cultural knowledge. It is subject to interpretation as only the cultural entity experiencing and growing from the literacy experience truly captures the extent of its significance (Almaguer, 2022).

This draws from the concept of Funds of Knowledge (FOK) which posits that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005, ix-x). It may not align with mainstream expectations of what literacy looks like in formal school settings; however, it should resonate in the constructs used throughout curriculum in educational settings. Recognizing and validating that traditions, practices and experiences not

acknowledged in curriculum and academic settings does not devalue them. Instead, it is through the unique literacy experiences that one connects as a people and as a culture. This echo of unique cultural literacy practices and experiences should be validated in and out of formal school settings. Cultural experiences can transcend cultures. Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital emphasizes the importance of implementing culture and language into student's academics which positively affects the whole child, academically, physically and social emotionally. This allows students the opportunity to use their individual traits and experiences to connect with the learning experience and to bring their own unique and personal insight, talents, skills and reflection to the learning experience. Cultural capital refers to both formal education and informal and its embodied skills and knowledge. If cultural capital is primarily an individual's feature or capacity, social capital is shared among individuals. (Bourdieu, 1984). Hence, cultural groups align to norms, beliefs and values that impact their understanding and conceptualization of the learning experience.

To fully benefit from the experience, it is important to connect students cultural knowledge and wealth to the learning in academic settings. Dewey stated that there is much that can be learned about the relationship between formal school education and daily life. Dewey noted from the standpoint of the child

*"he observed the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school "-Dewey 1899, 1998; pp.76 -78.*

This further capitalizes the need to acknowledge cultural literacy practices in and out of formal school contexts. It underpins how literacy is developed and how it is refurbished and refined to meet the expectations of the learning experience. We counter students disconnect with the learning by anchoring it to culturally relevant pedagogy. Scholar Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as:

*A pedagogy of oppression not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the current status quo of the social order. (p.160).*

Hence, we explore opportunities to view literacy as multifaceted and multidimensional by harnessing the depth of our experiences to best interpret our learning. Literacy embodies our connections with the world. Literacy experiences and practices serve as a means to connect people

within cultures and across cultures. It is through these powerful cultural practices such as traditional rituals, faith or spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices in which literacy is founded. Although these traditions and practices are often not acknowledged in academic settings or school they nonetheless, afford students rich literacy experiences and they hold an important place in their lives that must be acknowledged and validated. However, student experiences with literacy outside of the academic setting are often not valued. Students may have faith based or spiritual beliefs and understandings that shape their way of being. Recognizing the importance of students cultural beliefs and values, and linguistic assets transform literacy practices and expand reading research to be viewed and analyzed through a wider lens. A lens aimed at inclusivity and one that does not support language hegemony and instead steadfastly posits the value and benefits of second and third language use across multiple contexts and situations.

It is noted that students become intrinsically motivated to contribute productively to a community they feel invested in, and where they know they matter. (Texas Education Agency, 2021) This underpins the importance of using culturally relevant pedagogical practices that link ways of knowing and doing with academic learning in the classroom. Culturally relevant teaching must help students to develop academically, nurture and support cultural competence, and develop a sociopolitical or critical consciousness. (Martell, 2013). This maintains and supports cultural identity and builds agency. It is critical to ground curriculum decisions on culturally and linguistically diverse learner literacy practices as these are anchored to cultural identity, agency, and validation of cultural wealth (Almaguer, 2022).

Recognizing that our *stories from the soul* serve to fully appreciate and acknowledge literacy through our pockets of cultural wealth. Retelling our stories and sharing our histories is a means by which we share our pockets of wealth that come from our personal experiences. As Paulo Freire quoted (1998):

*Why not establish an intimate connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals. – Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom*

This further capitalizes on the impact that our *pockets of wealth* characterized by our experiences, skill, talents and our ideas harness and how significant they are to new learning opportunities both in and out of formal school settings.

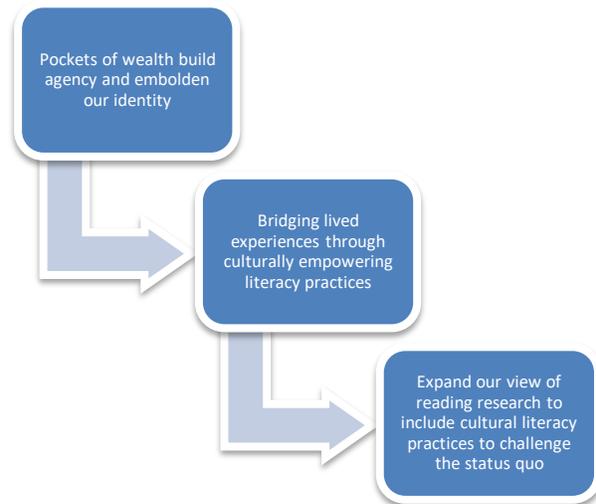


Figure 1: Pockets of Wealth through Culturally Empowering Literacy Practices to Expand and Widen Views of Reading Research

Source: Almaguer 2022, p. 14

Considering the magnitude of literacy experiences referred to in Figure 1 as ‘pockets of wealth’ and their significance in our daily lives, whereby they build agency and embolden our identity. Further, bridging our lived experiences with rich culturally empowering literacy practices that expand our view of reading research and challenge the status quo.

### Across the Latino and Native Hawaiians Cultures

Bourdieu (1984) presented the concept of cultural capital as a way in which power in society was transferred and social classes maintained. Cultural capital refers to both formal education and the experiences and knowledge gained from belonging to a social group or culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Considering the cultural knowledge and skills that students bring to the learning experiences, it behooves educators to connect those experiences, knowledge and skills in order for students to connect and conceptualize the new learning. This practice is embodied in culturally sustaining pedagogy that takes into consideration what the learner contributes to the experience. Scholar Ladson-Billings emphasizes the notion of cultural relevance to include the struggle for culturally diverse students to achieve and maintain power over their own educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006). It is also a way to give people a

vicarious opportunity to walk in our shoes by sharing experiences. This is often found through cultural and linguistic attributes as well.

Latinx and Native Hawaiian cultures have many parallels stemming from literacy practices that are unique in their own ways but similar in many regards. In and out of formal academic settings, there are cultural connections to, for instance, food and the preparation of food which are found in each culture. In the Native Hawaiian culture, *poi* which is a starch similar to a sweet potato that is ground with a volcanic polished rock in a hand crafted indigenous wooden base to make *kalo* – a Hawaiian food staple. *Pohaku ku'i 'ai* is the stone used to pound the poi and *Papa ku'i 'ai* is the wooden board used to pound the poi in. These cooking tools are significant to families and are passed down through the generations. This supports the Hawaiian belief of '*land which feeds*' the body, spirit, and soul known as *a'ina*. These strong ethnic and cultural ties to food characterize powerful literacy practices. In the Latinx culture, there is the use of a *molcajete* to grind spices and to make salsas. The *molcajete* is often a significant part of family history and is passed down through the generations as are the traditional ingredients used to make these recipes. A food staple of the Latinx culture is the *torillas* which is corn or flour *masa* that is ground or kneaded and cooked to complement a variety of Latin dishes. The corn *masa* is also often used to make tamales. It is important to harness these cross cultural similarities to teach students that we have more in common with each other than not. Our cultural practices and traditions exemplify our literacy practices and are a source of pride and honor across cultures.

These cultural practices permeate the pedagogical practices. In Hawaiian schools, educators incorporated "culturally appropriate" pedagogical practices that included aspects of students cultural backgrounds into their literacy instruction (Au and Jordan 1981, p. 139). Through the use of *talk -story*, a way of discussion and sharing stories and anecdotes among Hawaiian students, students connected deeper with the content and with their learning. In a similar way with Latino's use of their *platica* that can also be regarding something academic or anecdotal, allows students to best connect with the learning. The importance of allowing students to work together and learn together is more evident than ever. When students collaborate in a learning event, from picture walking and discussing a story to working collaboratively to write their findings in a graphic organizer, their learning is accelerated because students support each other's learning and provide a sense of safety and understanding for each other. This allows students to connect better with the learning experience. Additionally, when students work together, they become engaged and use their linguistic repertoire to discuss and share thoughts with each other. Students may translanguage for each other to provide linguistic support to each other. According to Garcia and Kleifgen, translanguageing focuses on:

*The complex language practices of bilinguals in actual communicative settings, and not on the use of language*

*codes whose distinctness is monitored by the standardizing agencies of nation-states such as language academies, grammar books and schools (2018, p. 620)*

Therefore, students are encouraged to use their entire language repertoire to discuss, elaborate and present their learning. The students' linguistic repertoire may be Spanish and English or Hawaiian and English, for instance. This represents active transformation of learning as it underscores the importance of scaffolding concepts through an active and fluid linguistic repertoire.

It is essential that students be given opportunities to listen, speak, read and write together. This level of scaffold is essential for students as they share their ideas, skills and knowledge with each other. Educators, for as loving and caring as they are of students, when they remove themselves from the equation, learners are able to engage freely with each other. This type of engagement lowers their affective filter and increases their comprehensible input. (Krashen, 1998). Students will engage with each other in discussion and explanation and use verbiage that is familiar with the student to really help conceptualize ideas and make significant connections to the learning. This also helps student build empathy for each other. By empathy meaning that they never know what it is to walk in someone else's shoes. Through this interaction, students begin to see that everyone learns differently and at different rates. Students begin to see that some students learn more easily than other students and others need further explanation or scaffolding to connect with the learning. Students begin to develop the empathy that they will carry for a lifetime as well as the opportunity to vicariously walk in someone else's shoes.

### Addressing diversity in pedagogical practices

In my years as a bilingual educator, I can vividly recall the day Hector, a recent arrival, stood in the doorway of my bilingual elementary school classroom. As I turned to see someone open my classroom door, I saw a student with a timid gaze held by the hand of our elementary school's attendance clerk. He was a recent arrival who had received formal schooling in his host country, Mexico. "His name is Hector" she said as she smiled and tugged Hector away from the doorframe and into the classroom. As I turned to welcome our new student to our class, the rest of the students called out "Welcome, Hector!" and "¡Bienvenido, Hector!" My students were delighted to welcome our new student. Hector reluctantly walked in and sat down at the carpet in the center of the classroom with the rest of the students. Hector remained silent the remainder of the day. We slowly got to know Hector better and he began to share his experiences from his school in Mexico. My students were delighted to welcome him and to learn from him. We discussed what similarities and differences between schooling in Mexico and in the US. Discussing this was an important learning opportunity for Hector and it helped my

curious students better understand him and better help him adjust to our school day.

I paired Hector with a fellow bilingual classmate to better help him navigate the classroom and the school. To my marvel, Hector quickly began to engage in classroom activities and discussions. He began to make connections with concepts he knew and experiences he had prior to coming to the US. He was knowledgeable about many concepts that we were learning but he did not have the vocabulary necessary to explain the connections he was making. We employed the use of cognates and words with similar spellings to make connections to concepts he already knew. His classmate often engaged in translanguaging to support his linguistic and academic repertoire. Hector’s vocabulary grew as he engaged in partner reading while pausing to ask his partner questions throughout the reading. By connecting his prior knowledge with the new concepts, the once timid and introverted student became confident in his learning. He actively engaged in the learning activities and often also taught his classmates concepts. I was amazed to see the impact that partnering Hector had. By allowing him to take part in small group discussions with his classmates, he developed more opportunities to actively use and develop his vocabulary across varied learning content areas and contexts throughout the school day.

During our small group time, I provided the bilingual dyads or triads scaffolding via sentence stems and sentence starters to give my emergent bilinguals a point to begin their conversations and deepen their discussions. I wrote sentence starters and sentence frames on sentence strips and index cards and glued them to popsicle sticks and tongue depressors so that students could easily manipulate them and move them around as they engaged in discussion with each other.

**Engaging students in discussion using sentence starters and sentence frames**

Using sentence starters or sentence frames to begin conversations provides students a scaffold to begin or continue the discussion. There are many variations of sentence starters and sentence frames that can be used.

Examples of sentence starters that I used for my students in English and Spanish:

Sentence Starters...	Oración de comienzo...
I agree with the author because...	Estoy de acuerdo con el autor porque...
I do not agree with the author because...	No estoy de acuerdo con el autor porque...
A question I have is....	La pregunta que tengo es...
I believe that...	Yo creo que...
Something I would change is...	Algo que cambiaría es....

I am uncertain why...	Una incertitud que tengo es...
I know that...	Yo se que....

Examples of sentence frames that I used for my students in English and Spanish:

Sentence Frames...	Los esquemas de oración...
I think ____ is similar to ____ because ____.	Pienso que ____ es similar a ____ porque ____.
I think ____ is different from ____ because ____.	Pienso que ____ es diferente a ____ porque ____.
I agree with ____ because ____.	Estoy de acuerdo con ____ porque ____.
I disagree with ____ because ____.	No estoy de acuerdo con ____ porque ____.
I infer ____ because ____.	Yo infiero ____ porque ____.
I conclude ____ because ____.	Yo concluyo ____ porque ____.
I believe ____ because ____.	Yo creo ____ porque ____.

**Engaging students in the metacognitive strategy KWL**

The KWL is a metacognitive strategy that helps students think about their metacognition or simply stated “thinking about their thinking.” It involves students getting to know themselves as learners, i.e., knowing their strengths and weaknesses as a learner. Beginning a new unit or story, students would be asked what they know about the topic to be included in the first column, K. This is followed by students including what they wish to learn about the new topic or story to be included in the second column, W. Finally, once the unit or story has been learned, students are asked what they learned from the experience to be included in the third column, L. This strategy is thought provoking and helps students to make connections using their prior knowledge and experiences to the new unit or topic being learned. It is a succinct way to scaffold students and to increase their interest in the unit or topic of study. The KWL can be completed in small groups of dyads or triads. There are many variations to the KWL. Below is an example.

Example of KWL that I used for my bilingual students in English and Spanish:

K What I know	W What I want to learn	L What I learned
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.

S Lo que se	Q Lo que quiero saber	A Lo que aprendí
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.

### Integrating Multicultural, Multilevel, Multi-genre books for learning

It is essential to make multicultural, multilevel and multi-genre books available to students. Students must see themselves represented in the literature so that they can best connect with the learning. When students see themselves represented in the storyline or plot of the story, they connect richly and deeply with the story and are able to provide their inferences and interpretations because they can begin to identify with the characters and recognize their thoughts and feelings. The more opportunities we provide students with engagement in authentic culturally relevant literature, the more opportunities we have to grow and foster students' knowledge and skills. Giving students the opportunity to engage in culturally relevant literature also provides them an opportunity to validate their own cultural identities. Cultural identity is paramount to the sense of self and how we relate to others (Almaguer, 2022). It is key to provide books that are multi genre to capture students interests whether they are fictional, historical or expository as well as multi-level so that students have access to books they can read and are able picture walk through books that may be at a level above their reading level. These books should be read independently and in small groups of dyads.

### Concluding Reflections

There is an increased need to empower all CLD learners by recognizing and acknowledging their cultural literacy

practices. Harnessing the unique ethnic and cultural richness provides a foundation for students' learning. The intent of these cultural values and beliefs is to disrupt inequities in the classroom. Thus, magnifying the need to expand our views of our literacy lens to include multifaceted and multidimensional opportunities which acknowledges and respects the cultural and linguistic diversity that reverberates within and across cultures. By centering cultural epistemology in literacy studies, we can begin to understand what it is to take a walk in some else's shoes. This multiplies the need to eliminate the perpetuation of bias in education and instead focuses on looking to each other's commonalities and similarities cross culturally as valuable resources. Acknowledging the importance of advocacy to include cultural literacy practices to challenge the status quo by recognizing the value in expanding our literacy lens to include multifaceted and multidimensional opportunities that integrate CLD learners assets, talents, skills, values, and beliefs.

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