

# Of Course She Will Learn

## A Cultural Pedagogy in Bilingual Transitional Kindergarten with Newcomer Students

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### Introduction

On 5-year-old Darya's (pseudonym) second day of her new school in the United States, Ms. Z asked her father, "Can you tell me about Darya and if she likes writing and drawing? She doesn't seem to want to get a pencil." Darya's father looked at Ms. Z with kind eyes and simply replied, "She is eager to go to school every day. She will learn, because she is eager." With an apologetic smile, Ms. Z replied, "Of course she will. You're right. Of course she will learn."

Darya was a 5-year-old girl who only spoke the Dari language and had recently immigrated from Afghanistan to a Northern California sanctuary city with her family. Ms. Z teaches transitional kindergarten (TK) at a TK-8 public school. Darya entered Ms. Z's TK class, which operates a 50-50 dual-immersion bilingual model, with only 2 months left in the school year.

Interestingly enough, the school follows an early-exit Spanish-bilingual model yet has the highest number of elementary-age students who are classified as newcomers in this urban school district. Most children who are classified as newcomers within the school immigrate from Honduras, Yemen, El Salvador, Mexico, and Guatemala. Within the past few years, many families arrived from Guatemala, where their primary language is the Mayan language of Mam.

Within this school district, a newcomer

is defined as a student who has been in the U.S. for fewer than 3 years as of January 11 and speaks a language other than English at home. For TK through Grade 2, the number of years is based on the student's U.S. entry date. In the 2016-2017 school year, approximately 2,000 students were classified as newcomers within the district. In Ms. Z's class, there are 21 students, 4 of whom are classified as newcomers, while 14 others are classified as English language learners (ELLs) in general.

Ms. Z reflected on that moment when she spoke to Darya's father and labeled it a momentary slip of the anxiety that has resulted from the increasing pressure at her school for students to perform well academically and eventually be "reclassified" from their ELL status, at which time they are given a designation indicating that they are "fluent" English speakers (based on achieving a certain score on an English-language achievement test).

Such teacher anxiety is not surprising, because U.S. policy makers show great concern about the number of years and level of support it takes for ELL students to acquire the necessary English-language skills to achieve in school and become competitive with their native-English-speaking peers (Hakuta, 2011). The attention and urgency directed toward students is to become reclassified (Valdés, 2004) as quickly as possible and thereby reduce the educational resources needed (Hakuta, 2011). Educators in turn spend a lot of their time focusing on what is going "wrong" and how they can "fix" it.

### The Role of Ideology

Schooling in the U.S. is ideological by design (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 1990; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). It can justify and further the inequitable, hierarchical,

and stratified economic, social, and cultural attitudes of a society (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Ayers, 2004; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1997). Given the way that American schools are organized, inequality and inequity are predictable. The fact that people internalize the unequal and inequitable conditions of schools as normal and natural is a logical by-product of the social reproductive nature of ideology.

As a system, ideology functions by transmitting beliefs and practices of how the world works through relations, language, and social structures. By design, it is saturating and pervasive, and so those beliefs and practices are taken for granted and reconsidered as "the way things are." This inequitable structure continues, because, just as is inherent with capitalism, this American ideology believes someone has to be on the "bottom."

Pressures such as these within the institution of schooling are strong. It is easy for a teacher to succumb to such pressures, because they are viewed as the normal conditions in which to operate. What is then most critical for teachers themselves are ways for them to remain capable of being self-reflective, especially when their actions are challenged.

### Toward Five Principles

Ms. Z may have been initially influenced by the pressures of the school when she asked about her new student's interest in writing and drawing. However, given Darya's father's response—"She will learn, because she is eager"—Ms. Z did not respond argumentatively nor defensively. Based on the father's comments, she was regrouped in a way that all educators often need. The response from Darya's father reminded Ms. Z that rather than focus on performance on tests, teachers should

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be stressing the sociocultural process of learning. *What we learn, how we learn, and what motivates us to learn* are very much functions of the conditions and situations that surround us as learners (Gibbons, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

With that in mind, this article focuses on highlighting five principles crucial to building and sustaining the empowering cultural conditions needed for children who are emergent in their bi/multilingualism and have families who recently immigrated to the U.S. We believe these principles, when considered as a cohesive framework rather than disconnected “tips,” operate in direct rejection of educational systems and practices that perpetuate oppression. These principles offer a cultural pedagogy that works systemically to raise consciousness of the cultural nature of ideas and practices concerning children and education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

This article does not instruct readers what to do. Rather, it presents a values-centered, principle-based, sociohistorically grounded framework to catalyze readers to critically self-reflect on and reimagine their specific educational context. Additionally, while these principles are situated within a TK classroom, we believe that they can be adapted to all of the prekindergarten to fifth grades.

### **A Values-Centered, Cultural Pedagogy Questions Assumptions**

Each child has a unique history, a set of current living conditions, motivation for learning, and an overall journey throughout the schooling process. Particularly for children from families who have immigrated to the U.S., making assumptions about any of these circumstances leads us down a path of pathologizing students for what is wrong with them, focusing on what they cannot do and what is broken. Ultimately, such thinking affects teachers’ attitudes toward how they view and treat their students.

Ana (pseudonym) and her family reminded Ms. Z of this. Ana, a child of Guatemalan descent, started out her journey in Ms. Z’s class by entering each day with a bright, happy smile, but almost always 40 minutes late. Her father would appear groggy, as if he had just woken up. At first, Ms. Z found herself reminding Ana’s parents to bring her to school on time. She would *tell* Ana’s parents that arriving on time demonstrates the importance of schooling to Ana. However, Ms. Z initially never asked *why* Ana often arrived late. She assumed Ana’s parents or Ana frequently overslept.

Ms. Z later challenged her initial assumptions when she engaged Ana’s parents in a general conversation outside of school and learned they worked from 7:00 P.M. to 4:00 A.M. each night. This difficult work schedule was the primary cause of Ana being frequently late. Ms. Z’s conversation with Ana’s parents allowed her to question the assumptions she had previously made and to consider the ways that the challenges that family faced could become strengths. Ms. Z reflected,

The families of my students who have immigrated here have schedules that are different—complex and difficult. Living next to a stadium that hires many of our families, our parents work in the day in fast-food restaurants and at night selling hot dogs to enthusiastic sports fans and concert goers. They clean the stadium all night and rush home to make sure their child is clean, hair combed, lunch packed, and although sometimes late, still ready to learn.

Through her reflection of the material conditions of Ana’s family and families like Ana’s, Ms. Z became critical of how the dominant ideology of schooling that is based on objectivity, meritocracy, and equal opportunity (Yosso, 2005) had initially influenced the way she thought of them. Such ideology silences, ignores, and distorts the experiences of families who have immigrated to the U.S. in such a way that it creates barriers to knowing each child, thus in turn limiting a child’s opportunities for success.

Ms. Z may have initially made assumptions about the reason for Ana’s chronic tardiness, but as she examined those assumptions, she learned how she might more appropriately support Ana and engage in a regular practice of challenging her own assumptions. This learning equipped Ms. Z to have the kind of greater understanding that recognized the aspirational cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) of Ana’s parents, as well as Ana herself, which valued school *despite* a difficult employment schedule.

### **A Values-Centered, Cultural Pedagogy Requires Teachers to Pay Attention, Listen, and Learn**

Hassan (pseudonym) was a boy newly arrived from Yemen. He only spoke Arabic, but he managed to learn how to yell this to Ms. Z: “I Arab. I speak no English. No Spanish.”

Ms. Z could have easily culturally misinterpreted the child’s tone and responded negatively, but instead she bent

down to his eye level and replied with a calm voice, “Yes, you do speak Arabic, and it is beautiful. I do not speak Arabic, but I will learn. Can you teach me Arabic, and I teach you Spanish and English?” Hassan’s body language loosened, his voice softened, and eventually, they both agreed with a handshake.

Such an interaction set a tone for the kind of positive environment through which teachers make transparent their genuine desire to learn from their students and thereby support students’ intrinsic motivations to be a part of a learning community (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ms. Z paid attention to Hassan’s voice, because she believed it was important. She recognized Hassan’s courage to speak his truth and openly listened to it so that she could learn from it.

Under the pressures of traditional policies and schools, another teacher might have responded by saying, “You are in the United States now, and so you must also learn English.” Such ideological baggage (Espósito & Favela, 2003; Martinez, 2000) reflects how teachers reproduce through their classroom behavior what they implicitly gained from their own schooling experiences. Such baggage is complex, but teachers like Ms. Z, if aware of that baggage, can regularly and critically inspect it (Martinez, 2000). This in turn catalyzes teachers to act in ways counterhegemonic to the dominant culture.

Ms. Z eventually learned from Hassan how to say in Arabic “hello,” “good morning,” “thank you,” “you are doing great work,” and “tell me about your work.” These choices in words reflected Ms. Z’s values toward creating a welcoming and positive learning environment. She also built on Hassan’s linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) by listening, paying attention, and learning from him.

Listening plays an important part in the search for meaning (Rinaldi, 2012). One must listen to oneself, to others, and to the surrounding world as part of a sense-making process to understand how to be and become. According to Rinaldi, of the Reggio Emilia Schools, listening takes place within a listening culture, in which children learn both to listen and to speak in ways in which they feel legitimized to represent and offer their thoughts. In such a culture, listening acts as a seed to cultivate students’ unbounded identities, self-confidence, and sense of belongingness. It helps to nourish the conditions for building community and co-constructing knowledge.

Paying attention throughout the practice of listening enables teachers to “hear”

and learn. The pressures of schooling often work counter to listening and paying attention in this way. When teachers, however, make the commitment and take the time, listening becomes a pedagogical bridge between learning and building community with students and their families. A family that has recently immigrated to the U.S. in particular faces a lot of transition, change, and uncertainty. As such, a pedagogy of listening can help to build the necessary trust and open channels of communication.

Within that first week of Hassan's introduction into his new TK class, his parents were receiving text messages from Ms. Z. The nature of those messages consisted of photographs of what Hassan was learning and doing in class. Hassan's parents were seeing that their 5-year-old son was happily engaging with new friends, being creative, and overall enjoying school. After that first month of school, Hassan's older sister and father took Ms. Z aside to speak with her. Hassan's father said something to his daughter in Arabic to be translated. When she understood him, she relayed to Ms. Z:

My father wants to thank you for being a great teacher. He likes that you send pictures of Hassan, because he sees what Hassan is learning and doing every day. No other teacher sends pictures of his children. Thank you.

This gesture from Hassan's father both invited continued communication and suggested that he trusted that Ms. Z keeps Hassan's learning and well-being central.

Listening and paying attention to a child throughout the school day brings reciprocity to the teacher–parent relationship. Paying attention to the assets, as opposed to what might seem like deficits, of a child during adjustment to a new educational setting directs the teacher's gaze onto how to build upon the resources a child has to bridge new learning experiences. At the same time, when this type of asset-based attention opens communication between the classroom and the home, families will be more likely to trust that they can share relevant knowledge to better inform teachers how to reach their children without fear of judgment.

### ***A Values-Centered, Cultural Pedagogy Intentionally Co-Cultivates Culture WITH Students***

Ms. Z holds a classroom community meeting each morning. During that meeting, the students and her sing "The Good Morning Song." What is unique about their version of "The Good Morning Song" is that

in addition to a verse sung in English, the same verse is repeated again in all of the home languages that are spoken by each of the children. During this song, not only does Darya get to hear Ms. Z sing the song in the language of Dari but, along with herself, she hears all of her classmates sing in Dari. Likewise, Ana hears the song in Mam. Hassan hears it in Arabic.

Such a practice is not just a routine; rather, it is a ritual with meaning and purpose and is values centered. "The Good Morning Song" manifests the value that each child's home language is important and is a part of and not apart from the culture of the learning community. Concomitantly, children contribute to this cultural practice. In fact, the practice is built around them and who they are.

A values-centered learning culture must be intentionally cultivated and nurtured. Such a culture is sustained not only through the designed pedagogical and physical structures but also in the ways that people act, interact, and create products. A healthy and positive culture is like the soil that nourishes the seeds of structure. It provides the conditions for effective learning and positive interaction.

Values must be rooted in an unequivocal belief in the expansive intellectual capacity of all students (Jackson, 2011). They must also be grounded in the importance of creating emotionally and physically safe environments that support students' cognitive, social, and emotional development, knowledge of self, sense of belongingness, self-respect, and self-love. To create such classroom learning, exemplary teachers value students' prior knowledge and experiences and use them to reshape and extend their own thinking. Similarly, these teachers also reshape and extend their own practice as they themselves learn through this process.

In a values-centered learning culture, student strengths direct the focus for cultivation to nurture intellectual and social growth. This focus helps to build a shared culture of positive reciprocal relationships, in which students are genuinely part of the classroom community and contribute toward a space of shared values, rituals, and practices that recognize and nurture the capacity of the teachers and the students (Jackson, 2011). This cultural process of co-cultivation of learning produces students who become insiders of the ecology of the classroom and allows students to develop and incorporate a meaningful identity into their existing repertoires.

### ***A Values-Centered, Cultural Pedagogy Cultivates and Nurtures the Conditions for Play, Being Reactive, and Working Collaboratively***

At the writing/drawing center, Darya was partnered with the talkative Pedro (pseudonym). Pedro had already learned through the culture of Ms. Z's classroom that leadership is a collaborative and creative action and not a position. Ms. Z asked him to take leadership at that center to help support Darya, who had not used a pencil, crayon, or clipboard before.

Although speaking in Spanish instead of Darya's native language of Dari, Pedro guided Darya to access the supplies to produce something on paper. At first, Darya hesitated, picking up a pencil and holding it upside down. Upon what looked like careful observation of what Pedro was doing, Darya rearranged the pencil and began drawing circles and lines.

Noticing that Darya was creating something similar to what he was making, Pedro went to the bin that contained micro cars (i.e., small toy cars) and brought two back to their center. He gave one to Darya and kept one for himself. He then moved his paper next to Darya's and started using the geometric shapes that both of them had drawn as roads for the cars to navigate. Darya quickly caught on and contributed to the imaginary situation that they were co-constructing.

Children satisfy certain developmental needs through play (Vygotsky, 1978). Through play, a child individually or collaboratively creates meaning through objects and actions, usually within an imaginary situation. In a child's development, play is a significant part of the capacity to develop abstract thought, establish purpose, make conscious choices, create/follow rules, and be creative.

Creativity can be thought of as the "expression of the soul" (Akbar, 1998). At the individual level, the expression of the soul is the expression of one's essence as represented along and through one's unique journey in life. At the collective level, soul exists at the intersections of the essence of a group's aligned purpose, beliefs, and values along with the unique talents, contributions, and experiences of the individual members who compose the whole. When the creative process is enacted, it is empowering. The freedom to make unique choices helps to nurture the expressive needs of an individual's/collective's core being while also contributing toward the meaning-making process of becoming.

Students in healthy collaborative



situations and relationships negotiate decision-making in ways that build collective autonomy, agency, and ownership. A teacher might be close by to facilitate or guide, but he or she does not make the decisions for the students. A teacher co-creates the conditions for students to engage in problem-based learning, but he or she does not solve the problems. Under such conditions, collaboration acts as a relationship-based mediator to negotiate creativity, meaning making, and action. Through relationships, children collaborate to support others, solve problems, and co-construct knowledge, culture, and shared experiences.

Playing, creating, and collaborating are part of what it means to be human. When these get subtracted from the schooling process, particularly in urban schools, where there are greater numbers of children from families who have immigrated to the U.S., it becomes an act of dehumanization. Such an act strips the children of their humanity (Freire, 2000). To cultivate and nurture the conditions for children to play, create, and collaborate then becomes not only a humanizing act but a political act as well.

#### **A Values-Centered, Cultural Pedagogy Requires Teachers to Pedagogically Design Opportunities for Students to Share Their Authentic Stories**

*“Me sientia mal porque la inmigracion,”* wrote Ana in her daily journal. Given the opportunity to write her truth, grapple with her emotions, and work toward her own healing, Ana depicted a traumatic family experience of being caught and detained by Immigrations Customs Enforcement (see Figure 1). By writing in a journal, she was invited into a humanizing pedagogical space of creative agency and authority that not only welcomed but also legitimized her voice, experience, and feelings as part of her authentic learning process. That is, Ana’s voice, experience, and feelings were nothing to be ashamed of. They were in fact a normalized part of her learning process within Ms. Z’s class.

This practice required deliberate mindfulness on the part of Ms. Z to create opportunities beyond the daily pressures of schooling to invite and listen to what individual children were experiencing (Campano, 2007). Yet schools are often not organized to structurally function in this way, especially for students who are from families who have immigrated to the U.S., where the process of schooling is subtractive rather than additive (Valenzuela, 1999). Schools tend to mirror the attitudes

of dominant society and so function to mold individuals, keeping them away from anything different than what is viewed as the acceptable norm. As such, the dominant form of schooling would likely look at Ana and call her an “alien” or an “illegal” without hesitation.

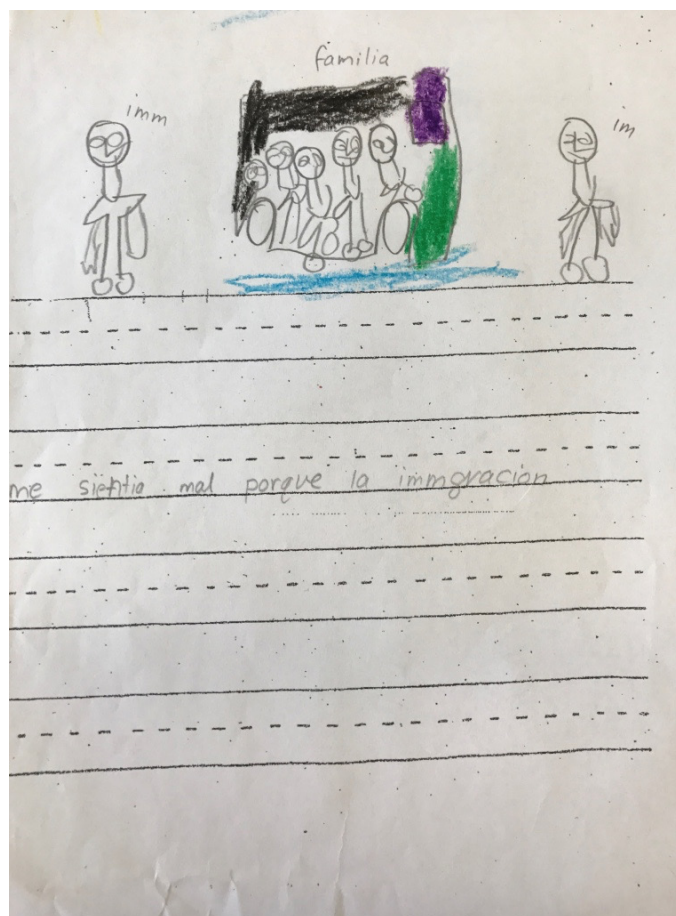
When a human being is given these types of subhuman names, as if they capture the essence of her identity, then acts of criminalization, such as being put into a detention facility, become viewed as normal. Those who become relegated to this position get placed into an inferior status and viewed as deserving of such punishment. There is nothing normal about these oppressive acts and beliefs. The resulting powerlessness, both as process and culture, silences voices and invalidates experiences deeming them unimportant.

Ms. Z’s class, however, structurally and culturally works counter to these dehumanizing practices. She views all children and their families to be deserving of the kind of education that brings them closer to soul (Akbar, 1998). Ms. Z asks all

her students, from the beginning of the school year until the end, who they are, where they come from, and who are they becoming. The children are invited to bring pictures of themselves with their families to place on their community wall, which acts as their authentic representation of how families and community can and do look. They are not being told (or shown) by the dominant society how “real families” look.

Families are also invited into this process with their children. Together, students and their families frequently engage in projects to depict and narrate who they are, where they come from, and who they are becoming. Not only do pedagogical practices such as these humanize the students and their families within a U.S. school, which can otherwise seem like a hostile space, but they also work to build an authentic community that is formed through understandings of the unique experiences, forms of knowledge, and cultural identities of each individual child.

**Figure 1**



## Conclusion

If the development of classroom culture is taken for granted and unattended, then the outcomes are left to chance. Culture is certainly a natural by-product of working together, so then how can a teacher balance intentional design with organic evolution? A cultural pedagogy is not all controlling and rigid, but it does trust that an intentional design that is values-centered can create the frame for a healthy and productive learning culture that is responsive to all members of the classroom community. Particularly in the multilingual/multicultural classroom, where culture can be highly dynamic, it is essential to be ideologically clear on the design while being open to collaborating toward a vision that is inclusive of all students.

In this article, we intentionally took a particular narrative stance to invoke the readers' own capacities and imaginative hope for their own classrooms. At the same time, while sharing this work in the form of five principles with supporting vignettes as narratives of hope rather than as narratives of pathology, we do not suggest that the corresponding actions are simple, easy to implement, and/or free from challenge. To do so would be problematic and far from the case. As critical participant practitioner researchers, we admit to having stumbled many times throughout our careers in the classroom. We also believe that teachers everywhere stumble. It is through those many moments of stumbling where we learn the most, particularly when we self-reflect and are intentional about our adjustments.

As teachers continue to embrace this cycle of reflection by examining what we do, why we do it, and how we do it, we also are working to understand ourselves. In this process, teachers build their own as well as their students' capacities despite the too-often oppressive school structures that might otherwise influence them to do otherwise. This unrelenting nature and

stance keeps students at the center. It reminds us that we must continue to believe that we as educators can and must be active in the co-creation of the conditions for all of our students, whenever it is they arrive into our classrooms, to be engaged participants in their education and their processes of self-actualization.

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