Crossing Cultural Boundaries to Learn from and Contribute to Practice in Multiethnic Urban Settings

Carmen I. Mercado
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hunter College of the City University of New York

This paper will examine three interrelated purposes that literacy has played in the activities of a grassroots, school-college partnership in a middle school, in an area that has come to be known as "the South Bronx." Specifically, literacy has been a vital means of communicating among members of the collaborative and their families. It has also been an essential tool for thinking and learning. Most importantly, literacy has been an important means of coming to understand while at the same time affirming and transforming personal, ethnic, and linguistic identities. It is in the process of writing to affirm who we are and writing to share what we do with others that we all experience using a wider range of written communication and with greater intensity than any of us is used to. However, writing also provides a powerful emotional outlet, a personal form of communion as well as an interpersonal one, necessary to deal with the tensions inherent in all of our lives.

The effort grew out of a sense of social responsibility on the part of two Latina educators, one a classroom teacher and the other a teacher educator, and of our need for human agency. Compelled to act against the academic underpreparation that limits the opportunities that young adolescent students from poor and working class families have to pursue a broad range of studies, we initiated this intervention research project to deal with an important barrier to advancement: equality of access to academic literacies. Because we realized that neither of us could affect change by ourselves, we welcomed the opportunity to collaborate when it presented itself rather unexpectedly near the end of a semester of graduate studies. Gradually, individuals of varying backgrounds and ethnicities, and from different teaching communities have taken an interest in our work and have joined with us in this effort.

We agree with Delpit (1990) that, to be successful in academic pursuits, students need to learn the ways of using language that are associated with powerful and influential people in our society. Our approach accomplishes this, not with a skills-oriented approach, but with one that is consistent with sociocognitive and sociohistorical approaches in which literacy is a social practice that is both a means and an outcome of academic learning (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, and Greenberg, 1990; Langer, 1987). This is an especially appropriate approach for young adolescent students.

Our activities have been influenced by the seminal work of Brice Heath (1985), who was among the first to engage Black and Mexican American high school students in ethnographic research on language use in their communities; similar work with Latino students in the Southwest (Moll and Diaz, 1987; Trueba, 1987; Moll, Ibanez, and Greenberg, 1990); and collaborative research involving environmental scientists and primarily Haitian-Creole and Latino students in Boston (Warren, Rosebery, and Conant, 1989). In all of these projects, as in ours, the emphasis is on collaborative research with an emphasis on writing.
Data from this ethnographic case study over a three-year period, demonstrate that young adolescent students from marginalized groups who have been characterized as bringing fears, resistance, and skepticism to the school setting (Giroux in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 23) learn to value and appropriate academic literacies with little difficulty and without resistance. Most are remarkably sophisticated in using these academic forms early on in the school year, suggesting that they may have been waiting for the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities when pushed to their limits by adults whom they respect and who are respectful of them. Although achieving success is always a complex interactional accomplishment, our data suggest that our accomplishments are, in part, attributable to the trust and faith we have in students to discover for themselves and to achieve the unimaginable when challenged to do so, especially during a difficult period of development and adjustment. We have also employed an apprenticeship-enculturation approach in which students observe how adults carry out authentic research activities as students are doing the same.

In the process, we have found evidence that suggests that community uses of literacy may exceed those of the school. What this tells us is that families live in restricted economic conditions for many reasons and, as Moll (1990) and his associates emphasize, assumptions should not be made about the resources for learning that reside in any given community on the basis of poverty or income. We have found individuals who are highly literate in Spanish among these families, as is Heidi's mother, who was a teacher in Santo Domingo.

Through our activities we have also grown increasingly aware of the barriers to equity that influence this type of work. Education reform may begin in one classroom, but it cannot be sustained unless there is change in ideology at the level of schools and school districts. Although we know that schools are as resistant to change, as they are to collaboration, reform cannot occur without partnerships among schools, communities, and teacher education programs and among bilingual, English as a second language (ESL), and mainstream educators. However, doing so also requires an understanding of the tensions inherent in the collaborative process. Our work opens the dialogue over this sensitive issue, particularly in terms of the tensions inherent in communicating within and across cultural, linguistic, class, and gender boundaries that were evident in our activities. We agree with Freire (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 49) that "we cannot exist outside an interplay of tensions" and that recognizing this is a first step to dealing with it. Opening the dialogue over this important issue is necessary to strengthen collaborative intervention approaches, one of our best hopes of bringing about necessary education change.

Setting and Participants

There are two distinct ways to describe the setting for our activities. One is the official portrait painted by the board of education data and the other is through the eyes of participants. In view of our ethnographic approach, multiple perspectives are presented here.

Typically, schools are described in terms of: (1) the number of students receiving free lunch, an indicator of poverty; (2) the ethnic and racial composition; and (3) the percentage of students on grade level. Accordingly, the characteristics of this site are as follows:

1. Eighty-five percent of the approximately 1,400 students attending this intermediate school are entitled to receive free lunch;
2. the student population is predominantly Hispanic (65 percent), with a large percentage of African American students (30 percent) and a small percentage of other groups, including Asians (5 percent); and
3. less than 25 percent of the sixth graders are on or above grade level in reading, and more than 40 percent of the students in the school are entitled to remediation, but a similar statistic applies to seventh and eighth graders.

Together, these three board of education statistics explain and justify why this school has been classified as a school under revision and review (SURR) by the State Education Department. That is, in SURRs, students do poorly on standardized test of achievement and this failure is usually attributable to poverty and racial and ethnic differences. These data also explain the expectations for learning that are likely to prevail in settings where students are considered, at best, "very basic" and "in need of remediation" and, at worst, disinterested in learning.

However, when "insiders," students and parents in particular, describe this school, they articulate other concerns. One major concern is the drug and attendant violence that is pervasive in communities and schools such as this one—communities where the poor live. This is what incoming sixth graders and their parents worry about when attending school, and it is these fears that sometimes lead to the break-up of families as children are sent away to study with relatives and friends in safer surroundings, as one parent admitted she had considered during one of our presentations.

Inside the school, the fear of violence is handled through stringent disciplinary policies, which may explain why some students comment that the school is like a "jail," and a place where "people get into trouble," despite what the posters on the walls suggest:

What a place for dreams is this moving, singing, restless thing we call school.

[This school is] dedicated to excellence and cultural respect.

Jessica's simple eloquence captures the ambivalence that students and parents feel about such schools.

Well the first day of school I was very scared because I was thinking how about if they beat me up or I get lost in school well I havent gotting lost yet and this school looks like it is great and I am not scared any only some time I get scared but that will go away later in the year...

(09/12/90)

Yet, students articulate other concerns.

I'm board with board work! (02/91)

they only look at our notebooks when we're in trouble. (03/91)

The work they give is different over there from here. In Guyana school they give hard school work. (06/91)

I want to do college work. (09/91)

Teach your children that you have the power to teach them.

When students talk about themselves and their school, they suggest aspirations, expectations, and a profound desire to learn. Students' words give a different texture to this setting and cast a new light on the data used to paint the official portrait.
Participants

This study examines how participation in an activity-based program in which students employ the literacy practices of ethnographic researchers to learn about topics of personal interest influences writing among young adolescent students who are predominantly bilingual Latinos, as evident in Table 1. Sixth graders entering this intermediate school setting (grades six through eight) and who are assigned to one teacher's official class, are the focus of this analysis. The composition of this sixth grade class, as it has changed over the span of three years, is presented in Table 2. Although it is evident that most students come from Spanish-speaking communities, what these data do not reveal is the diversity that is inherent in each of these categories. Some of these students are second and third generation Americans, and some are more recent arrivals from countries such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Nicaragua; that means that they introduce varieties of Spanish and distinct cultural ways into a community where everyone's culture and language is influenced by everyone else's and where new forms of both get reinvented on a daily basis.

However, the characteristics of the sixth grade population opened the possibility of examining changes in literacy/biliteracy among young adolescent, Spanish/English bilinguals, many of whom have participated in bilingual programs, some as recently as the previous year. According to Hornberger (1990, p. 2),

The term biliteracy refers to any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing.

Therefore, this analysis highlights the work of several such students: Angel, Heidi, Danny, Jessica, and Epi.

Table 1
Sixth Graders in Homeroom Class Doing Research

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43 (55%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>80</td>
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Table 2
The Class Composition

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Teacher-Researchers

The sixth grade teacher, who is considered a "veteran" with 10 years experience, is bilingual (English-Spanish) and holds a masters degree with a bilingual specialization. Concerns over seniority and tenure led her to prefer a "common branches" license over the bilingual license, which precludes the possibility of teaching within the school's bilingual program. However, she uses her background and training to teach and to communicate with her students in the mainstream setting to which she is assigned. She communicates freely with her students in both languages, even her English monolingual students, who pick up Spanish and incorporate certain phrases into their active vocabularies. Because she values the use of Spanish, her bilingual students also learn to value it, as is evident when they attempt to teach Spanish to their English-speaking college students, as Edward, Juan, and Melissa did to Patricia this year.

As the researcher-teacher, I am both participant and observer, as my role has been to share my world as a Latina researcher engaged in education ethnography. In response to students' curiosities, my own need to affirm who I am, and as a way to relate to the experiences these young adolescent students may be having, I have also shared my culture and language background, especially the strict upbringing that my parents provided. As they do with their teacher, students communicate with me in both languages and we have drawn upon our common cultural and linguistic heritages to reflect upon and understand who we are and what our aspirations are. The fact that I was an elementary classroom teacher in a bilingual school for eight years contributes to the comfort that I feel in the classroom, but it is a world I also see with different, and sometimes conflicting, eyes. I am at once a researcher, a student, and a teacher.

Other adults in this researcher-teacher role include several "college students," as the students refer to them. The three graduate students who joined us in the spring of 1990 are nontraditional teacher education students entering the profession at the graduate level, after a brief first career. Although they initially referred to themselves as "Americans," through our work together they have begun to make reference to their different cultural heritages—Ellie's heritage is Greek-Puerto Rican, Patricia's is Irish, and Pamela's is Jewish. Of these three students, Pamela enjoys communicating in Spanish, which she learned through her travels in Spanish-speaking countries. The only undergraduate student in the group, Elsa, joined us in the fall of 1990. She has a strong sense of identification with her Puerto Rican heritage, as both the teacher and I do, and is also bilingual.

Parent-Participants

It is instructive that several parents have become involved in our activities. These include the parents of the young adolescent students, but also those of their adult collaborators. My own father, who has been a part of my support system as are the parents of the sixth-grade teacher, has now begun to write to some of the students. It is this love and respect that we have for our families—a reflection of our cultural values and beliefs—and that we have for one another that has prompted students to comment on more than one occasion, "when we do research, we are like a family."

It is in this manner that we extend ourselves across a number of different boundaries, including language, ethnicity, class, and age, among others. In addition, we have all become encultured as members of a professional community of educators and researchers with its distinct values, beliefs, and practices.

Methods/Techniques
Ours is the kind of work that "involves the researcher in a democratic process of inquiry characterized by negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment," as Lather expresses it (1986). We are all the researchers and we are all the researched. This is most evident when students take notes of what the adults do much the way that adults take notes of what students do, a sometimes unsettling experience, as occurred when I read Heidi's journal entry of 12/90:

> This is a quote from Dr. Mercado. "Some people don't speak and they have wonderfull handwriting in their research notebooks and some people speak alot and they don't have wonderfull handwriting in their research notebook." I think this is a powerful quote.

It is also evident in the words students use to describe our experiences:

> We got to meet alot of important people. I liked the conference. We learned alot from people and they learned alot from us. We got to know each other (Epi, 01/91).

Statements such as this one reveal that the way we relate to one another is a distinctive aspect of our methodology that in no small way explains what we have been able to accomplish through our collaborative approach to pedagogy and research.

A major theoretical construct that has guided what we do is the notion that literacy is acquired through activity with more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978). It is the activity of doing ethnographic research with middle school students and of documenting and learning about how this influences the development of academic uses of literacy that gives adult collaborators a reason to write. Similarly, it is through the activity of doing ethnographic research on topics of concern that students have a reason to write. We collaborate in the sense that we support and learn from one another in a manner that allows each of us the status of student, teacher, researcher, and "expert." For example, adult collaborators learn from the middle school students about teaching and learning, and as Pamela discovered, young adolescent students can be "teachers of teachers." Similarly, the middle school students learn from adult collaborators who enculturate them into the world of ethnographic research and who engage, along with them, in authentic uses of literacy common to academic settings. Throughout, teaching and learning are reciprocal processes as we all learn a great deal from one another, no matter our expertise nor our experiential background.

Our activities demonstrate the potential of research as a pedagogical act. That is, as the sixth graders are engaged in conducting their own collaborative research, their adult guides help students to plan, to reflect upon, and to assess the progress they are making. What is important is that this gives adults the opportunity to learn about students—to gather data about how students are reacting to working and thinking like ethnographic researchers and the influence that this is having on their writing. For each of us, doing ethnographic research requires gathering information from a variety of sources and from a variety of perspectives. It requires observing and listening carefully to what people say and do, and keeping careful records of these, quoting and preserving the exact words others use. However, doing ethnographic research requires planning and organization as well as resourcefulness and creativity. Doing ethnographic research also requires awareness that information exists everywhere, as Epi realized. Information does not only come from reading books; it is in people, as Angel emphasized. Most importantly, doing ethnographic research requires reflection, as researchers need to struggle to understand and make sense of the different pieces of the puzzle they are seeing, checking out their understandings with others who provide different interpretive frameworks. However, as the students discovered, the purpose for doing ethnographic research is to take action against undesirable conditions in their community. In effect, to engage in ethnographic research is to engage in literate thinking, as Wells (1990, p. 14) defines it.
To be fully literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, feeling, and thinking in the context of meaningful social activity.

Wells argues that this type of literacy is required for full participation in a technologically advanced society.

It is the writing that results from these experiences that is the focus of our concern. These documents enable us to understand how students' writings change in response to what we are doing, they help us to monitor students' progress, and they serve to chronicle what we are doing. Jezebel's (04/19/91) transcription of an activity that Pamela recorded as her Indian Culture group reflected on their analysis of an Indian legend illustrates how research and teaching are pedagogical acts.

Were are talking about the story that we have tape along time ago.

Pam: What did you think about the story?

Epi: It looks as if they made up the story right?

Pam: Uhah

Epi: Because it's funny because there was a fox or a kioty or when he wanted the monster to swallow him. But why would he do that?

Pam: Because he had

Anthony: Because he had magic and he could distroy it

Pam: Does this remind you of any other story you ever heard?

Epi/Anthony/me/Jery: Nop

Pam: No?

Epi: But sopose his magic back fires?

Anthony: Yea

Epi: I didn't work and he would be swallowed.

Pam: That's true.

Rereading through the tomes of written documents that have been amassed over the course of three years and reflecting on these individually and collectively is at the heart of data analysis. What makes the procedures we follow powerful is that all written documents represent at least three distinct perspectives—those of the students, those of the teachers (including the teacher educator and the college students), and those of the parents. However, it is important to emphasize that, even within each of those role groups, there are unique perspectives that reflect our individual and collective selves.

At the Ethnography Forum this year, Fred Erickson appropriately described this kind of research as work
that is done with the heart, the mind, and the body. Although we are centered in this work, as Delgado-Gaitan (1987) describes it, our responsibilities as researchers require that we establish "data trustworthiness," which we work toward when we obtain different perspectives (i.e., triangulation) and when we examine different interpretive frameworks.

Triangulating is critical to establishing data trustworthiness, a triangulation expanded beyond psychometric definition of multiple measures to include multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes" (Lather, 1986, p.).

We have engaged in collective reflections in a variety of settings—in and out of school, including the classroom, our homes, on bus/train rides, on the phone, as well as during conference presentations, to name but a few. Throughout, writing has been central to the data analysis process, which continues through the drafting of and shared readings of research reports, and through the presentation of our work at professional gatherings.

Data Sources

It should by now be evident that data for this evolving ethnographic case study are being generated from a wide range of sources and from different perspectives. Participants document activities in and out of the classroom in their marble composition notebooks or journals, a procedure we initiated the second year to avoid the loss of documentation. Through their research activities, middle school students have played a key role in documenting the project through their extensive and impressive collection of "scribe" notes (much like ethnographic field notes) in which they record ongoing activities as well as personal reflections. Jessica's research notebook illustrates the contents of one notebook. It is instructive that many entries were several pages long and contained individual initiatives in and out of school as well as common research activities. Each student's journal is a unique reflection of his/her individuality; and one of the joys that comes from reading these on a regular basis is discovering the unique contributions that each one makes to our collaborative research.

Some use is being made of audio and video recordings, but photo-documentary has developed into a significant form of visual data that is an especially valuable tool for reflection. We use it to recollect past actions and to examine them in light of new understandings, as Maglenny (03/92) describes in her writing.

In this picture I was writing questions for interviews with adults and doctors. My questions are or I consider good questions. My best questions Dr. Mercado said to put a little star next to it. I have really learned alot about interviewing people since I came to this class. And Elza has helped me alot to understand, and take notes when I do interviews. I like interviewing because of people's diffrent appinions and reactions to my questions.

Data gathering and data analyses are ongoing, interactive processes, with data analyses focusing the gathering of data. Although the great majority of the data are qualitative, quantitative data such as the results from statewide reading examinations (DRP) have also been examined over a three-year period.

Chart 1

Multiple Sources of Data From Multiple Perspectives
Observational Notes

During classroom activities, out of the classroom, and during conference presentations

Reading and rereading documents individually, with other members of the team and with more distant others

Produced by the students assigned and on their own: research journals; assignments, projects, letters

Produced by other members of the collaborative: research journals, reports, summaries, letters

Produced by more distant "others": letters or summaries of/about our activities

Viewing and reviewing photographs individually, with other members of the team and with more distant others

Viewing and reviewing videotaped activities individually, with other members of the team, and with more distant others

Viewing and reviewing audiotape and selective transcriptions individually, with other members of the team, and with more distant others

Conversations and interviews with students and other members of the team
during conferences in school, on the phone, through letters/notes

The Contents of Jessica's Research Notebook

1. Pen-Pal Letter (09/27)
2. Research Notes (10/09)
3. Meeting with Research Group (10/10)
4. Research Notes (10/11)
5. Research Group Members (10/11)
6. Rationale for Topic (10/11)
7. Three drafts of Research Notes (10/19)
8. Activity Sheet (10/19)
9. Research Notes (10/26)


11. Research Notes (11/20)

12. Biographical Sketch (11/20)

13. What is Research? Group Notes (01/02)

14. What is Research? Jessica's View (01/03)

15. Copying Notes from Board (undated)

16. Thank You Letter (01/17)

17. Peer/Self Assessment (01/18)

18. I am wondering... (01/18)

19. Peer Interview (01/21)

20. Doing Research on Gossip (01/21)

21. The Parents Conference (01/31)

22. Copying Homework from the Board (02/01)

23. 2 Drafts of About my Trip with Mr. G. (undated)

24. What We Have Been Doing: Outline for Boston Presentation

25. Notes on way to Boston

26. Copying notes from the board (undated)

27. What I plan to do in Boston

28. What I plan to say

29. Trip to Boston (02/10)

30. Taking notes at the conference (02/11)

31. Interview of Conference Participant (02/11)

32. Research Notes about trip to Boston (undated)

33. Polio (02/21)
Findings: Emerging Themes

Although some may consider that the activities of this project are concerned with "getting kids to learn to write better," we prefer to describe them as getting young adolescent students to want to write and to affirm themselves through writing. Several major themes that surfaced from our collaborative analysis of data include: (1) the uses of power literacies in inner city schools; (2) the uses of literacy in the community; (3) having something to say and wanting to write; (4) changes in writing; and (5) what writing reveals about biliterate students.

The Uses of Power Literacies in an Inner City Middle School

Even when teachers are concerned about broadening their students' learning opportunities, the reality is that the uses of literacy in school for young adolescent students in inner city schools tend to be limited and limiting, as research tells us is common at the elementary school level (Moll and Diaz, 1987). At best,
writing consists of copying assignments from the board, copying information from textbooks or reference books, answering questions on assignments and tests, and composing narratives on topics assigned by the teacher for purposes of satisfying the requirements of a grade. That is, school writing does not usually occur, as in real life, for purposes of communication, supposedly the purpose of writing. Although a schoolwide Chapter 1 writing program was initiated during the 1990-91 school year—The Writing Project—its use of personal journals and an emphasis on literature-based writing activities provides practice with a narrower range of literacy than those employed in our inquiry-based activities listed on the chart.

Engaging in ethnographic research introduces new uses for reading and writing in school, as occurred when students engaged in (1) taking observational notes or “scribing,” as I preferred to call it, to draw a connection between the Spanish "escribir," to write; (2) developing plans and agendas; (3) organizing chronologies or summaries of our activities; and (4) preparing project abstracts. These research-related practices have a powerful potential to help students become better students/learners. In the narrative that follows, we will highlight the importance and significance of scribing as a literacy practice associated with authentic ethnographic field work.

**Scribing**

Scribing was central to the way researchers of all ages gathered data and documented our activities. However, because they are basically field notes, scribe notes are different from the notes students' generally take during subject-area discussions. Scribe notes include elements such as the date and time when the observations occurred as well as the actions and the exact words individuals use when making important points. Angel (10/90) captures the essence of scribing in the following excerpt from his writing.

> At 11:40, Mrs. T. asked me to be a scribe and to observe her class. I am a seventh grader now, last year I was in Mrs. T's class and I knew about scribing. Mrs. T. went to the front of the room. Mrs. T. told the kid or her students. She asked them what is scribing the class happily answer "scribing is observing and writing. Mrs. T. told them about me and how I used to be a scribe in 6th grade...

By engaging in scribing, students discovered or learned that “A researcher takes good notes” (Jessica, 10/90); “that there is no research without notes” (Jezebel, 10/90); and “if you are a good researcher you could write everything what somebody says. It's very important because they use wonderful words” (Danny, 11/90).

In particular, they learned the significance of quoting during scribing.

> Quotes are very important to researchers because you may be interviewing somebody and they say something important that you need or you could tell other people about the person you interviewed and tell them about the important quotes that person gave to you and the researchers can find out what that person ment or said. (Anthony, 06/91).

However, students also learned about the ethics of research and the importance of preserving the anonymity of informants which, according to Heidi (11/90), is like quoting people and putting it in nicknames.

Although both of these aspects get at the need for precision in research, they also have an empowering effect on students who are now in the position of being subjects, rather than objects, in the teaching learning process, in the sense used by Freire (Freire and Macedo, 1987), as these statements suggest:
...when you quote someone it shows that you are listening, it shows that what others say is important (and when somebody quotes you, it shows that) you are authorities (Keith, 10/90).

Ms. T said our words are very valuable and Dr. M. wrote it down on the board (Keith, 10/30/90)

I know you want me to take notes, but I can't....Oh, are you quoting me? (Puli, 03/91)

Because I shared the notes that I took on my first visit and I also shared students notes anonymously, these young adolescent students learned about the importance of sharing notes in the research process. Sharing notes enables you to validate or to correct the notes that you took, but it also provides different perspectives on what occurred:

Dr. Mercado gave out copies of students research notes...She said we can learn from someone else's notes. (Jerry, 10/26/90)

I think everybody should share each other's notes because we can get notes that you don't have. (Anthony, 10/90)

Moreover, students also learned that language differences do not have to be a barrier to scribing, as Angela (12/90) found out when she was invited to attend the AIDS Conference organized by a social studies class in the bilingual program—an activity that reflects the influence of this project on other teachers:

Today I got picked to go to a conference, but I don't know any Spanish so Mrs. T. is going to translate the speaking so I could take notes because I'm very good in taking notes.

In addition to acquiring new literacy practices, we also created real needs for communicating even with familiar forms such as the writing of letters, interviews, autobiographical sketches, and speeches, a form that Angel introduced in preparation for our first conference presentation in January 1990. It should be emphasized that even copying from the board took on a new dimension as students were provided with agendas and assignments that challenged them both cognitively and linguistically and that did not underestimate their abilities to understand and to learn, as this entry in Jessica's research notebook illustrates.

Homework for Research 2/1/91

1) We need to develop an agenda for our next presentation Remember that we will only have an hour and fifteen minutes to tell the conference participants about our project.

2) We need to develop a abstract of our special research project this will be used as a hand out for our next presentation. we can develop this abstract collaboratively. That is, different groups can answer different questions and then we can put all the answers together.

1) What is the name of our project?

2) Why is this project important?
3) What is the purpose of this project?

4) What do classes who participate in this project do?

5) What are the participants learning?

6) How can this project help students and teachers in this and other schools?

What these forms of literacy did was to give students practice using academic forms of writing for authentic purposes that grew from their research activities. They wrote agendas to plan and organize their research activities:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Persentain Agenda: learning about learning Colabaratily 2/22/91</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angle he is going to say our name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school, the fact that he is from 7 and we are from 6 grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. the project abstract for 6M21 Research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel, Epi, they have project abstract for class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How we got started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony, Jessica we start talking about when we got started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are the different groups doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laila will show the trainparents with me the I will say how we got the interview with doctor B then make a play back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What we are learning about learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jessica, 02/22/91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They wrote self-assessments to create awareness of how they could communicate more effectively with audiences they addressed.

What I like about the presentation

What I didn't like

How you and others can improve

I liked the conference because everyone listened to each other everyone was a good odiance I like when Jessica made the flashback of the interview with Mr. B. and when I was Mr. Gripo and they asked questions. I didn't like when we messed up in the begining I think we can
improve by planning what we are going to do because then we forget.

Suggestions on how we can improve our presentation.

I think we should practice more decide what you are going to share at the conference.

I think we should help each other for example if some one gets stuck someone should help the person.

(Epi, 2/91)

They wrote project abstracts to inform individuals interested in getting a sense of our project:

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**6M21 Project Abstract**

**Why is this Project Important**

Students pick a topic on what they want to learn. (Drugs, AIDS, pubity, children's sickness, etc.) The students did research on these topics and found out things they never imagine. So then the knowledge that they learn can help them threw life, families, friends and there own community.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project is for students to pick something they want to learn so then they could know at least a little of what they pick and that little they learn can help the threw life.

**How the Project was Conducted**

The project was conducted in September 1989 threw 1990 with a sixth grade class. In September 10, 1990 the project was doe with another six grade class.

In September 15, 1989 Mrs. Torres (a 6th grade teacher in the Bronx...) told her class about a special work that they are going to do with a college teacher name Dr. Mercado (Dr. Mercado was Mrs. Torres teacher in Hunter College) she told her class the work that they are going to do was call research. When Dr. Mercado came to Mrs. Torres class she told her class about research and soon the class started doing research al year long. Whe the school year finish the class got sad because they weren't going to do research anymore, but they also said that they were going to do research the following school years but the following year only a few started doing research.
On the beginning of the school year Mrs. Torres told her new class about research and from her last year class only one started doing research again. Mrs. Torres introduce her class to Dr. Mercado and Dr. Mercado started doing research with Angel Acosta as a research assistant and Mrs. Torres new class.

**Findings**

Here are some students from Mrs. Torres class telling what they found out about their topics doing research.

**AIDS**

AIDS have no cure for it and that you need protection when you have sex. You get AIDS when you share needles that have been already infected. AIDS is a blood virus. People don't get AIDS by kissing or sharing foods. AIDS is very serious and deadly.

**Children's Sickness**

One type of disease is "Bronxcides." Jeans decide if your baby is going to have a sickness or not. If the parent have a disease the baby have a possibility he/she might get it. We can prevent children's sicknesses by protecting yourself and staying healthy.

**Drugs**

People use drugs because they think drugs might solve their problem but it get them more problems. Drugs are bad and they can kill you and damage your whole life. Drugs are deadly.

**Pubity**

Every girl gets her period around 11 or 15 years old. Every month girls get their periods. Whe boys get to pubity they start growing hair on parts of their body. When girls and boys get to the stage of pubity they start reacting differently toward things or people. (boys, girls, want to make up etc.)

**Homeless**

Homelessness is not a joke. People get homeless by variety of things.

(Drugs, teenage pregnancy, they don't want to work, etc.) If we work collaboratively we can end homelessness.
Implications for Practice

Teachers should:

Teachers should tell her class about research.

Get the class together and make them pick their own topic on what they want to learn about.

The students should make interviews, surveys, questionnaires, observe and many other things.

(Angel, 02/91)

They wrote notes to their adult guides to let us know how we could be of help:

May 17, 1991

Dear Dr. Mercado,

I am willing to ask you to help my group. Because we haven't done much in my group. And we just read each others agendas and take notes. I want my group to discover what is happen on the bright side. What I am trying to say is I want my group to do more work. So we can become real researchers.

Sincerely,

Peilian

Moreover, these forms of writing were used all the time, with different teachers and in different activities in the school, at home, and during our travels to presentations. What this suggests is that students appropriated these literacy practices associated with the work of real education ethnographers, and made them their own, a significant and empowering learning, particularly when their notes served to inform us of what transpired during other classes or when substitutes were assigned to the class.

The Uses of Literacy and Biliteracy in the Community

"I love writing, reading, and mathematics" (Hiedi's mother, 06/91)

"A conference my mother made: This was in Westchester. My mother was making a conference in Spanish. She wrote 10 pages of what she was going to say in the conference. I was shocked because I didn't know she was going to write all those pages. I thought she was only going to say a little brief speech." (Heidi, 06/91)
"...we had to go to a Spanish Conference where there were about 600 parents...Heidi's mother made the best speech I've ever heard. She wrote ten pages of beautiful speech." (Epi, 06/91)

Our data gives some indication that in addition to valuing literacy, families living in restricted socioeconomic conditions do not necessarily have restricted uses of literacy in the home—particularly when it comes to uses of literacy in the language that primary caretakers prefer to use, which in this case study was Spanish. Parents and caretakers may engage in a broad range of literacy practices than typically assumed, as we discovered from our activities with parents. Among the parents and family members I met were poets, song writers, and other skilled in literary and oratorical ways that are valued among Latinos, particularly if they were schooled in a Spanish-speaking country. This is an important finding because what it suggests is that some Latino students have the opportunity of being enculturated into ways of using literacy that support school success. However, unless students value ways of using language that are used in the home, these resources for learning may remain untapped.

It was in reading Heidi's mother's autobiography that we discovered this possibility. In her autobiography she describes her love of reading, which we already had evidence for when she came prepared a 10-page speech in Spanish to deliver to parents attending the conference of the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (SABE). Reading Heidi's autobiography added to our understanding of the vital role literacy had played in this family, as she relates how she and her brother, Peter, were named for characters "in a book" that her mother had read. We would probably not have made these discoveries had it not been for the special relationship we shared, a relationship that blossomed because she felt that her presence was welcomed and valued in her daughter's class.

Heidi's mother was not the only parent whose literacy we discovered during our second-year activities. In the writing of her autobiography, Eric's mother similarly revealed the uses of literacy in her life, especially now that she has returned to school to continue her education.

It is important to document when students begin to appropriate the activities associated with research as their own. It is even more striking when students have the opportunity to see their parents using writing in the same ways that they use it—that students use literacy in similar manners as their parents. It is only by opening ourselves to see the student as part of a family that we were able to grasp how students are affected by what is occurring in their families.

Often, in settings such as this one, parents are seen as not having anything to contribute. Poor is equated with uneducated, lack of discipline, and amoral behavior. Ideas such as "it's not the children's fault that they are behind in school but it's the parents" flourish. Parents, like students bring unique gifts into the classroom and it is important that these resources be utilized in the classroom. Doing so conveys the message that their family uses of literacy are valued.

**Chart 2**

*The Variety of Written Texts Produced by Students-Researchers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The students' research journals contained:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Observational notes (Scribe notes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explanations for selecting their research topics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Research plans and agendas.

4. Notes and information obtained from:
   interviews and conversations;
   reading books, magazines, newspapers;
   viewing videos or TV programs; and
   conferences or meetings attended.

5. Self-assessments and peer assessments.

6. Project chronologies and other data summaries.

7. Transcriptions of interviews and dialogues.

**Students have also prepared/written:**

7. Progress reports.

8. Speeches and presentation notes.

9. Handouts and transparencies for presentations.

10. Thank you notes and letters.

11. Project abstracts.


**Students also record activities in day planners.**

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**Autobiography**

My name is Ana. I am Dominican and I have been married since 1973. I am the mother of two children, "Peter and Heidi" whom I adore and who are my reason to live.

I am 45 years old. I completed my primary, intermediate and secondary schooling in my birthplace, San Francisco de Macoris (the 3rd capital of the Dominican Republic). For financial reasons, it was impossible to continue with my university studies. My big dream was to study...
medicine. Well, my father died when I was barely 11 years old. I am the eldest of seven. I graduated with my degree at the age of 18 and to help my mother with the household expenses, I was named teacher at a primary school, teaching students in first and third grades.

Two years after entering teaching, my mother died (1968) leaving us orphaned. My youngest sister was hardly four (4) years old. I had to struggle hard during that time to help my brothers and sisters so that they would have food and clothing as all human beings should have. That way they would be able to progress and to prepare themselves academically. Today, two of them have degrees in business administration. There is also a lawyer, a language teacher, a dental mechanic, a laboratory technician, and one began a career in journalism but has yet to complete it.

Now, I am studying English in order to help my children and all those who need my help, and above all to excel. I love writing, reading, and mathematics. I like to go shopping and I love buying and selling. I am also fascinated by children. Because of this I am now taking classes in a "Day Care Center." The children are between the ages of 4 and 5. I like to participate in all the activities of the Center. I like to share with others and I am also humanitarian. These are qualities that I inherited from my mother.

Having Something to Say and Wanting to Write

Regardless of their previous experiences with literacy, young adolescent students willingly engaged in a broad range of academic uses of literacy necessary to pursue advanced academic studies, and neither lack of motivation nor lack of verbal fluency seem to be as problematic as is commonly assumed. Our data suggest that when young adolescent students do research (1) on topics that represent experiences that are lived rather than studied in textbooks; (2) intensively over the course of one school year; (3) for authentic purposes of their own choosing; and (4) with respected adults who write along with them, they usually have something to say and want to write. Similar findings have been obtained from research with bilingual students at the primary, elementary school (Moll and Diaz, 1987; Diaz, Moll, and Mehan, 1986; Edelsky, 1986) and at the high school level (Trueba, 1987; Brice-Heath, 1986). Although young adolescent students sometimes express reluctance or unwillingness to write, generally they are willing participants in this special community of writers where writing is a requirement for membership.

I don't like to write (John, 05/90)

I don't like to write but when it comes to research, I love to write (Sandy, 10/91)

However, our data reveal other important influences on writing. Data from this ethnographic case study with middle school students suggest that peers are a positive influence on motivating writing, as this journal entry by Mario (02/91) revealed to us.

Today Mrs. Torres was talking to Dr. Mercado. Angel was here. He said all of them should be
writing so we started writing. It help me a lot because if it wasn't for him I wouldn't write these words right now.

Thank You

Angel

Public acknowledgment and sharing of students’ work, read by the teacher or shared anonymously with the class, appears to be another important influence:

Dr. Mercado was impressed with our notes (Puli, 10/19/90); 

Dr. M. was impressed with our notes again (Keith, 10/30/90); and 

Dr. M started talking about college people look at our paper and are interested in it (Puli, 10/26/90).

Another important influence was challenging students or, as one student expressed it, “treating [students] like adults” (Jerry, 10/19).

Through their involvement in their research work, students got into writing and, as many stated emphatically, as if surprised at what they had discovered about themselves:

I can't stop taking notes. I love it! (Puli, 10/90)

When I started scribing, it helped me ... to write more (Angel, 12/90)

I can't help it. I keep writing! (Epi, 03/91)

In effect, data from this case study suggests that for the sixth-graders in our community of literate thinkers, writing quickly transformed itself into a social practice that we all engaged in naturally and for authentic purposes, and a means of establishing membership among a very special community of writers. Students understood the unspoken rule they were responsible for creating: "If you want to belong, you have to write."

Changes in Writing

In the foreword of Atwell's (1987) classic text on writing, reading, and learning with adolescents, Graves observes,

For some time now the nation has been preoccupied with student improvement in writing and reading... Some improvement is seen in the elementary years but by the middle school and senior high school years problems are particularly acute. Teachers have less time with their students, and the accumulation of school failure causes still greater problems in student attitude. . .[T]here remain major problems in text coherence and the ability of students to use information to persuade is severely lacking. . .

Graves statement accurately captures the pervasive belief among practitioners that young adolescent students of all backgrounds are "very poor in writing." The perception that the problem is especially acute among
racial and linguistic minorities is even more pronounced, especially when attention is paid to aspects such as penmanship, punctuation, spelling, standard English usage, and length.

Although students in this case study were described as being "very poor in writing," our data suggests otherwise. We found that students demonstrated sophisticated writing abilities early in the school year, as did Heidi, who was the type of student who spoke through her writing, as this letter illustrates.

September 27, 1990

Dear Pen Pals;

Hi, my name is Heidi Genao. I have 10 years old and I'm in 6th grade my teachers name is Mrs Torres she is really nice techer although she gives homework every day but just a little bit she is still a nice teacher. I live in the Bronx as you could see on the in-side address above. My culture is from the Dominican Republic but don't worry I like Puerto Ricans all my best friends I have are Puerto Ricans so you don't have to worry about it. Dominicans are just like you guys they just want to be your friends so the world could be together. I kind of like the Puerto Ricans alot so lets just forget about that know lets know talk about me. As I told you above my name is Heidi Genao and I have ten years old so far I've told you that OK so lets start now some of my feelings are when I'm crying I want people to leave me alone my favorite sport that I like to go swiming and when I go swiming I don't want to leave I like to eat alot of arroz con mollejaz those are the things I like to eat, well my little conversation with me and you is finish here something I want to say wright back soon my pen pal.

Yours truly friend

Heidi

Angel and Danny were also students who always had something to write and who apparently enjoyed doing so. Yet, other students evidenced dramatic changes in terms of (1) having something to write, as did Epi and Jessica; (2) expressing it in ways that conform to standard forms of written English, as did Amanda; and in terms of (3) appropriating the discourse of ethnographic researchers. For all students, however, there were tremendous fluctuations in their writing, that is their willingness to write and to engage themselves meaningfully/authentically in their writing, which suggests other explanations for not writing or being very poor in writing, as these statements suggest.

Today I didn't feel like talking or anything else because I was bored and I didn't feel like doing research today. (06/90)

We agree with Edelsky (1991) that the term “development” may not accurately explain changes in the writings of young adolescent students—students who are going through a period of rapid growth and physical development and, as a result, experience dramatic shifts in temperament.

We found that students wanted to write "correctly" and to be corrected, as Rebecca, Puli, and Nadia expressed rather strongly. We had assumed the posture of not correcting students as a way of encouraging them to write and of giving them the opportunity to self-correct. However, we learned a great deal from their reactions to these procedures. Rebecca was particularly angry when we shared her work at the Ethnography Conference with what she perceived were mistakes and Nadia was indignant because we did
not correct her spelling of "reaserch." The issue of correction is an especially important one among young adolescent students who do not want to be publicly humiliated because their work does not conform to established norms of correctness that they know exist, even if not reflected in their writings. Moreover, when given an opportunity to reread their work, students often cited carelessness and writing too fast as explanations for "mistakes" they had made, as Jessica responded in writing to her teacher's written comment:

   (T) Don't you like to use periods?"

   (J) Yes, but I was not paying attention at it because I was in your house.

It should be evident from the students' writings that have been presented throughout this document that students appropriated the language of researchers as well as the forms of literacy associated with this subculture, effortlessly and on their own, an important finding that may be explained by the type of relationship we had with the students and the respect and admiration they had for us. Not only did they want to speak like us, as Puli kept insisting, they also wanted to write like us. What is significant is that this appropriation was reciprocal in the sense that we, too, appropriated their words—words that we found to be a powerful means of communicating with the audiences we addressed at gatherings of professionals.

**What Writing Reveals about Biliterate Students**

There is much that we do not know about biliterate development among young adolescent students. Data from this case study suggest that even when these Latino students use English to write, their writing reveals their biliteracy in a number of ways: (1) in the way they use Spanish to write English; (2) in what they choose to write about; and (3) in affirming the values and beliefs of their cultural heritage.

**Using Spanish to Write English**

In their journalistic essay, *The story of English*, McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil (1986) document the thesis that, just as there are varieties of spoken English, there are varieties of written English that reflect the unique world views and social realities of particular groups of speakers. Hernandez Cruz, a contemporary Latino writer, argues that when Spanish/English bilinguals write English, they are involved in a process of revitalizing the English language, as follows.

As the children of these immigrants, we are at the centre of a world debate; we can speak of the shift from agriculture to industry to technology and the toll it has taken upon the human equilibrium. Let us look at it with clear eyes in our trajectory from one language (Spanish) to another (English). What have we lost or gained? ... Is there an inner flower which passions its fragrance despite its being clothed in English words? I believe that this is happening in much U.S. Hispanic literature; the syntax of the English is being changed....Of course we must strive for an English that is standard and universal, a language that can be understood by as many people as possible, but why lose the Spanish in the process? We should change the English and give it spice, Hispanic mobility, all this can be done within the framework of understanding, whether the reader is Anglo or Latin (Hernandez Cruz, 1991, pp. 88-89).

Our data suggests that this revitalization occurs naturally when young adolescent students express themselves through the written word and that neither theories of transference nor interference adequately
explain the phenomenon, one of clothing cultural values and beliefs in the clothing of English words, as these examples illustrate.

My father gives me a good influence because he works hard to buy us food. He tries to do everything he can for us so we can have what we want. This is a good influence for me because in the future I can help my family. And also give the example my father gave me. My mother gives me a good influence because she gives me love and care. And in the future I can love and care alot about my family (Epi).

I am very worried because people in the street use crack and kill people and the family of the victim cry alot for the victim and God must be crying even more. (Danny)

The first time I came to school at NY City I went to PS9 and and I started in the first grade because I went to knidergarten in Puerto Rico. I was in PS9 my teacher was Miss franco. She was a bilingual teacher. I made a lot of friends but I was scared of anything that happened to me. I was scared of the teachers and the children. I was even scared of writing on my paper. There was a boy named Joaquin. May he rest in peace. I really enjoyed playing with him (Jessica).

My mother and father are the most precious things that I have because they gave me a home and did the best they could do. I am very proud of my parents. They are very nice. (Heidi)

I want to know about drugs because everyone needs to know about drugs because they will fall in the hands of drugs. (Epi)

Reinventing English enables young adolescent Latino students to add to their expressive possibilities (Hernandez Cruz, 1991) and to communicate cultural values and beliefs that are otherwise impossible to express, among them the importance of the family, caring and compassion for others, respect, trust, and pride. Many of these cultural values and beliefs are evident in the previous excerpts.

The concern for the ill or less fortunate is evident in the plans recorded by Jessica for the group of five girls interested in doing research on children's illness. However, this value is also evident in the writings of male students, as it was when Angel expressed a renewed compassion for the problems of the homeless.

The theme of respect, both respecting and being respectful of others, was especially dominant among the writings of the young adolescent students we examined.

I respect everybody if they respect me first. (Danny)

I don't like to talk too much and I don't like people who talk too much. I only have friends that repsects so I could respect them too. Sometimes I don't like people to talk or joke about me because I take it seriously. I respect people and teachers, specially Mrs. T. my official teacher. (Mario)

We meet this bell captain named Ronie. I want to get to a point about what he said he said he meet alot of important people in the hotel business. I wanted to interrupt him but he was so involved that I didn't interrupt him. So I told Mrs. Torres that just because we are young doesn't mean that we haven't meet important people. (Epi)
Most importantly, students' writings reveal their desire to excel, to achieve to make their families and teachers proud, and to be proud of accomplishments obtained through effort and hard work.

I was proud of myself when I heard that I was the only person who brought the work over the Easter vacation. All of the teachers were proud. So was my mother. (Jezebel)

I made a speech of all the things I wrote about my topic drugs. I talked about how do drugs effect your your body and what are the consequences of the victim using drugs. Of course I was nervous because it was the first time I been to a presentation before. But after I finish talking, I felt proud of myself. (Danny)

**Plans**

**Childrens Sickness**

Notes

Where Memorial Sloan Ketering

are 1275 York Ave

going

What we we have to get permission

have to from parent and teacher
do
to children write get well sone

in hospital cards. and maybe get little present to.

we have we take pictures if we can
to do

Maleen
talena Ask your mom permission

for tape recorded.

We would like to have the children in the hospital as foster kids

Maleen Ray Ray Cristina
Conclusions and Recommendations

Using an activity-based approach in which literacy is at the service of learning, participants in our middle school collaborative are gaining from working together as members of a community of literate thinkers, in an environment characterized by respect, reciprocity, and collaborative research and pedagogy. By engaging in writing for authentic purposes in the presence of students, respected adults send a powerful message about the significance that writing has in our personal lives and of the power of the written word to inform, to reveal, and to affirm. Not only do students gain a new perspective on the importance and utility of writing, but they also begin to see themselves as writers and to understand that writing is a social responsibility for individuals who come from marginalized communities. We need to tell our own stories. We need to inform others of our cultural and linguistic heritages, and we need to preserve these treasures, even when there are multiple and competing demands on our time.

In the process, we have learned about how writing reveals the person of the writer: what their interests, values, and beliefs are; what their fears are; and what life is like for them and for their families. Looking at the writing of students means more than looking at the user of the language. Looking at the writing of parents, we have learned to see the person of the child through new eyes while also acquiring a new appreciation and respect for the home. Most importantly, we have come to realize how writing changes us, enabling us to better understand our individual and collective identities, and enabling us to come to terms with what our responsibilities are and what we have to do.

Our findings suggest ways to organize learning environments that support learning—environments in which writing is for sharing, for reflecting together, and for fashioning new texts from our collective voices, as is this one. We have also gained new understandings about the dramatic fluctuations in the literacy profiles and practices of multiethnic students in poor urban settings—changes that reflect student interest and effort, but also preoccupations with the conditions of their lives. Not only have we gained increased respect for the unique gifts that each student brings, we have gained a new respect for the unique cognitive and literacy-related resources parents and families are able to contribute to the education of all children, not just their own.

References


Delgado Gaitan, C.


