

# Reading, Living, and Writing Bilingual Poetry as ScholARTistry in the Language Arts Classroom

*Poetry can be a reflective place for bilingual students and their teachers to explore their linguistic and cultural experiences.*

Melisa Cahnmann

## I Am From

I am from Mexico  
I am from Guanajuato  
I am from my home

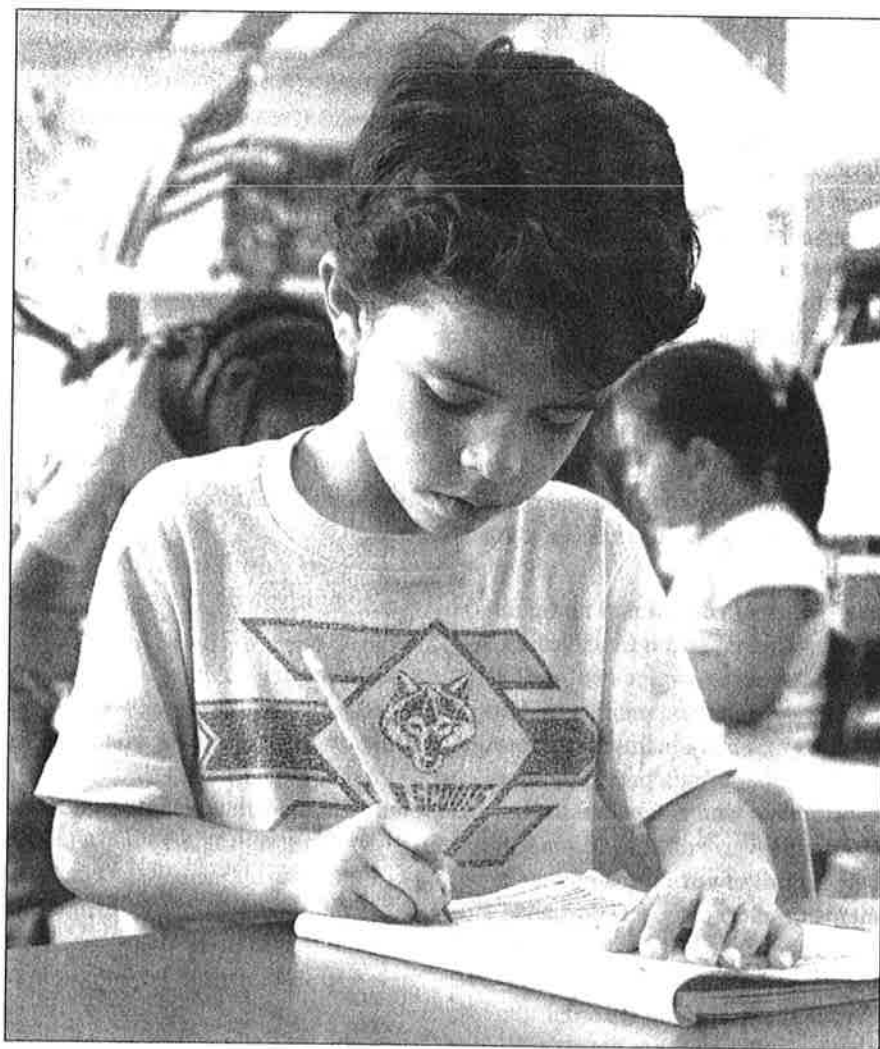
I am from chicken  
I am from pizza  
I am from strawberry cake  
I am from white rice

I am from "limpia tu cuarto"  
I am from "no vallas"  
I am from "métate"  
I am from "vé a la tienda"

I am from Mom and Dad  
I am from Misha  
I am from Mrs. Lysa  
I am from my friends.

Daniella, 3rd grade, Ms. Aaron

Language arts educators who teach Latino English language learners know that part of our job is to help students learn to distinguish between the vernacular varieties of Spanish (or Mandarin, or Portuguese, or Swahili), English they use at home, and the school varieties of language expected in the classroom and in other professional and institutional contexts. Bilingual or not, language arts teachers know how to teach students to correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar according to prescribed, standard English norms.



But how many educators learn the *art* of the multiple languages spoken by their Latino students? According to Freire (2000), most educators are trained in the "bank-

ing model" of education, depositing rules for standard language use into our students' "accounts." Seldom do we learn to listen to the music in bilingual diction or the creativity of

Latino students' sentence structure or the content of their spoken and written words.

Daniella's work is one example of how poetry can become a place for bilingual students *and their teachers* to explore a wide range of linguistic and cultural competencies. As a poet, educator, and scholar in the field of bilingual education, I often visit schools to give workshops and demonstrations on the development of Latino students' biliteracy. Increasingly, I use poetry as a resource with English language learners. When visiting Daniella's third-grade class, I gave the "I Am From" writing prompt (Rosaen, 2003) where students, together with their teachers, write four stanzas:

1. I am from [familiar places]
2. I am from [familiar foods you eat with your family]
3. I am from [familiar sayings or expressions you hear at home]
4. I am from [people you love]

Daniella is proficient for her age and grade level in Spanish and English, but she is still learning both. She wrote bilingually, including her mother's voice in the third stanza: "limpia tu cuarto" (clean your room), "no vallas" (don't go), "métate" (get inside), and "vé a la tienda" (go to the store). In order for educators to use poetry in the classroom to explore and embrace the diversity of language and dialect that Latino students like Daniella bring to the classroom, they need to move beyond their own anxieties about writing poetry. Poetry and the arts can be important tools for exploring different linguistic and cultural worlds.

My goal as a "scholARTist" (Neilsen, 2001) is to use poetry with students and teachers to better understand the experiences of bilingual, Latino youth as they negotiate

multiple varieties of English and Spanish and the relationship between language, culture, and power. ScholARTistry is a hybrid practice that combines tools used by the literary, visual, and/or performing arts with tools used by

interviews that have informed my own scholARTistry. Then I propose reading, writing, and living poetry as three scholARTistic approaches useful to all English language arts teachers. Bilingual or not, all teachers can use poetry as a way to

**ScholARTistry is a hybrid practice that combines tools used by the literary, visual, and/or performing arts with tools used by educators and other social scientists to explore the human condition.**

educators and other social scientists to explore the human condition. Neilsen (2005) addresses three goals of scholARTistry on her Web site: "to make academic writing an area where virtuosity and clarity are valued, to make educational research an area where the arts are legitimate inquiry, and to infuse scholarship with the spirit of creative connection." As a scholar in the field of bilingualism and an emerging poet, my scholARTistry combines data gathered from open-ended interviews with bilingual youth with my own experiences as a teacher, researcher, and creative writer. I have rendered my findings on bilingualism and bilingual education in poetic form, creating lyrical portraits of what it means to communicate in more than one culture and code.

I begin by sharing a poem that examines how I resolved tensions between my language arts training in prestige varieties of Spanish and English and my gradual acceptance, appreciation, and use of bilingual, vernacular community norms and identities. This poem and others I've written about bilingual and bicultural identity are based on interviews with Latino youth. I share excerpts from these

meaningfully incorporate multicultural and multilingual resources into their classrooms and lives.

### DISCOVERING THE VALUE AND VALIDITY OF CODE-SWITCHING

I wrote "I Am That Good" in response to a poetry lesson plan published on Bill Moyers's "Fooling with Words" Web site (Murphy, 1999). The writing prompt, "Write a poem about a cultural encounter that led to confusion or blunder and retell it in a conversational voice," gave me an opportunity to explore the dichotomy between the institutionally sanctioned bilingualism I experienced (developing Spanish in foreign language classrooms in high school, college, and abroad) and the simultaneous, vernacular varieties of bilingualism developed in many bilingual communities in the U.S., especially among Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, which is the context for this poem:

#### I Am That Good

I can hold my bag in the crook of my elbow,  
raise brows and in perfect Spanish, tell  
the vendor to take a hike  
in a way that says if he'll sell me three  
for that price I'll return.

I can sing happy birthday in Spanish and  
not just "feliz  
cumpleaños" but the whole *mañanitas*  
with a new, long tune  
I now know by heart.

I can say *no* and mean *sí* and dance all  
night with the same  
married, *panzón*, who buys me drinks  
and keeps his dirty *manitos*  
off all the wrong places the whole night  
long.

I am so good that when I ordered  
breakfast at the Puerto Rican  
diner in North Philly, *huevos revueltos*  
*con papas fritas*, I didn't have to look  
at the eggs and hashbrowns translation  
underneath,  
but I did.

The way I laugh at the punchlines on  
time and still look at the English  
on the screen's bottom to see what all  
the other monolingual English  
*pobrecitos* are missing, and laugh again.

So imagine my surprise when my  
scrambled eggs arrived  
with French fries. 9am and soggy on the  
side  
of my plate like a bad American joke.

I didn't order this, I said in my most  
indignant, perfect  
Spanish. And the waitress made herself  
larger, her tray  
like a shield and said that I did.

I pulled out my English weapon and  
pointed to the translation.  
"I ordered hash browns" I said to this  
girl, realizing all the times  
I ordered *huevos rancheros* and *tortilla*  
*española* for breakfast—

but never in Veracruz, Madrid, or Buenos  
Aires had I ever said  
this American word for breakfast  
potato.

I shrank to the time when I made my  
first public mistakes  
with gender, the imperfect. Ashamed, I  
took off my costume  
of big earrings and pouty lips and asked  
in my most innocent, non-native like  
way:

How do you say "hash browns?"

In her most perfect, Spanish-accented  
English, she said  
"*Papas fritas son Frensh fry*," as if she  
were explaining the rules of baseball  
to a Phillies fan. "If das whatchu wan,  
chu say '*hahsh brawn*.'"

This poem is based on an actual  
experience where a Latina waitress  
in Philadelphia helped me  
understand what Anzaldúa (1987)  
described as a bilingual language  
for a bilingual, Latino identity in  
the U.S.:

*For a people who are neither Span-  
ish nor live in a country in which  
Spanish is the first language; for a  
people who live in a country in  
which English is the reigning tongue  
but who are not Anglo; for a people  
who cannot entirely identify with  
either standard (formal, Castillian)  
Spanish nor standard English, what  
recourse is left to them but to create  
their own language? A language  
which they can connect their identity  
to, one capable of communicating the  
realities and values true to  
themselves—a language with terms  
that are neither español ni inglés,  
but both. (p. 55)*

As a college graduate with a degree  
in Spanish and Latin American  
Studies, I was unaware of these  
bilingual norms when I was  
recruited to teach fourth-grade  
bilingual education in South Central  
Los Angeles. I taught English as a  
Second Language as well as Span-  
ish language arts, mathematics, and  
other core content subjects in text-  
book Spanish. I quickly learned the  
Spanish I'd acquired as a foreign  
language student at college and as  
an exchange student in Mexico  
City, while helpful during the hiring  
process, was of much less use when  
teaching my fourth graders recently  
arrived from Mexico and Central  
America.

Spanish degree in hand, I initially  
perceived my students' native lan-  
guage use as "broken," either  
because some parents had limited  
Spanish literacy or because of wide-  
spread borrowing of English words  
into Spanish or code-switching  
between Spanish and English. My  
students mixed English words in  
Spanish sentences, inventing what  
appeared to be a new hybrid  
language that wasn't one or the  
other but both. *Parquendo la troca*  
was a perfectly acceptable way to  
say you were "parking your truck"  
in South Central, but it wouldn't  
have held up in my Spanish courses  
in college and would have been  
laughed at or misunderstood by  
monolingual Spanish speakers in  
Mexico City. Like many language  
arts teachers, I felt an obligation  
to uphold "standard" language

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norms—in this case, those set forth  
by the Spanish academy and  
assessed in the Spanish version of  
standardized exams my students  
took at the end of the year. What  
good was studying subjects in  
Spanish if they used English loan  
words like "*hahsh brawn*" or kept  
writing the word for grandmother  
according to their community  
norms, *aguella*, instead of the stan-  
dard spelling, *abuela*?

During my years as a bilingual  
teacher, my students repeatedly  
asked to *sharpear* their pencils  
(instead of the "correct"—i.e., stan-  
dard form—*sacar punta* to say  
*sharpen*), despite my corrections. I  
went from frustrated to complacent

to finally becoming somewhat proficient in this bilingual variety, using this same *barrio* (Latino working class neighborhood) diction to communicate with students and their families. “*Mi’ijo*, what are you doing?” I would say tenderly to a fourth grader who was throwing *papelitos* (papers) out from his desk. “*Termina lo que estás haciendo* (finish what you’re doing) or you’re going to have to stay with me after school!”

Rather than relying on the *monolingual norms* that guided my foreign language study in high school and college, I was learning to use two codes along with the bilingual norms that operated in the communities where my students lived. “*Mi’ijo*,” for example, was a common term of endearment among Spanish speaking households, particularly those of Mexican origin or descent. I learned that bilingual adults often used phrases in Spanish (e.g., “*termina lo que estás haciendo*”) when reprimanding children as a means to get young people’s attention and show them one meant serious business. Finally, as a partial insider and outsider to the community, I also learned that using one word in Spanish in the context of an English sentence, like “*papelitos*,” could be alternatively perceived as a gesture of solidarity or condescension, depending on contextual variables, including who was speaking what to whom and with what purpose. I began to question my *monolingual norms*, those that valued language separation and a one language = one nation = one literacy paradigm. In other words, the bilingual repertoire includes communication resources (such as borrowing, code-switching, and bilingual lexical choices) that communicate meaning, function, and identity in ways that are not

easily or adequately translated into a singular code.

Living and working among bilingual communities in the U.S., I came to see that boundaries between codes are often blurred. However, it was reading poetry, fiction, and research on the bilingual experience that led me to truly value the *bilingual norms*

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that operate among youth and adults in my school community, like sanctioning the contextualized use of borrowing English words with Spanish grammar (e.g., *parquear* for “to park”) or the functional alternation between prestige and vernacular varieties of English and Spanish to address different communication needs, abilities, and relationships. According to Rampton (1995), the widespread notion that monolingualism is the ideal linguistic condition helps to explain why new and mixed linguistic identities are seldom recognized by educators, policy makers, and researchers:

*The bilingual whole might be more than the sum of two monolingual parts. There has been an overwhelming tendency to treat languages in the bilingual repertoire as if they were separate entities, ignoring the ways in which they can combine to create new forms that are quite distinct from monolingual use in either language.* (p. 338)

When I used these bilingual norms in the classroom, was I becoming “lazy,” content to speak and model “street Spanish” at school? Or was I

doing exactly what I had done when I lived a summer in Salamanca, Spain—acquiring the norms of the speech community in which I lived (like the familiar plural, *vosotros*), wanting to be accepted, loved, and understood by my Latino students and their families? ScholARTistry helped me to find the answers to many of these questions. Through

interviews with bilingual youth and creative explorations of bilingualism through poetry and research, I acquired strategies for making expressive use of all students’ language resources as well as a greater understanding of many Latino students’ desire to identify with their bilingual vernacular as part of group membership with other bilingual speakers.

## LISTENING TO BILINGUAL STUDENTS’ VOICES

In a study of Mexican-descent adolescents in Northern California (Cahnmann, 1999), I interviewed an eighth-grader named Alvaro (pseudonym) who was fluent in spoken Spanish and English but struggled with English literacy at school. Alvaro proudly described his language as something that “runs through my body,” an important part of his cultural and linguistic identity:

*If you’re bilingual and all that or Chicano, it like runs through you, runs through my body. It’s like that’s how you talk, it’s like, “Hórale, por dónde vas? You’re going to the movies?”*

Invítame, no seas un dummy, you know!" [Hey, where are you going? You're going to the movies? Invite me, don't be a dummy, you know!]

Alvaro demonstrated proficiency and pride in his ability to alternate between two codes with bilingual peers. While most U.S. Latino community norms operate along a continua of Spanish-English (Hornberger, 1989), monolingual contexts expect bilinguals to have perfectly balanced language sheets in their brains; anything less is often mistakenly seen as proof that bilingualism is an inferior cognitive state of being. Research by bilingual scholars such as Poplack (2000) and Zentella (1997) have revealed the sophistication and skill required to draw on multiple codes for different purposes, depending upon the people, place, and purpose of an exchange. Despite these research findings, negative societal attitudes toward bilingual ways of communicating persist. Thus, it is not surprising to find that when bilingual youth are interviewed about their language abilities, use, and attitudes, their reports are mixed with one part pride and another part shame.

In an ethnographic study of Puerto Rican ninth graders, another Latina student, Wilma, described the conflict she felt between the bilingual norms she used at home and the monolingual norms she was expected to follow at a school (Cahnmann, 2003). When Wilma was asked if she knew about code-switching, she responded:

*Oh yeah, Miss. I know a bunch of words like rooffo (rooff) and parkea (park). One time I was home and my mom used parkea and I said, "No, Mom, it's estaciona el carro" (Standard Spanish, "park the car"). She told me, "No te pongas como mierda!" (Wilma translated this as a*

*diplomatic, "Don't get all high class on me!" instead of the more direct translation, which was roughly, "Don't act like a little \*t#!")*

When "strong forms" (Baker, 2001) of bilingual education, where students' native languages are used as a medium of instruction, are not available to develop students' full biliteracy, Latino youth begin to shift from Spanish to English dominance. Ultimately, many Latino students like Wilma and her peer, Catí, describe themselves as limited in both their Spanish and English abilities, because they struggle to read, write, and speak prestige varieties of both languages. While limited confidence and ability in English affect school performance, limited abilities in Spanish affect relationships with family members. Catí, a Puerto Rican ninth grader who had receptive but not productive abilities in Spanish, described feelings of shame when communicating with her family (Cahnmann, 2001):

*Yeah, I try [to learn Spanish]. My Mom will probably write in and speak it, so I go home and I show her what it says and then she'll make me read it so I'll understand. My Grandma does the same thing. I don't go to Puerto Rico until I know how to speak Spanish. I can understand whatever they speak but I'm scared to speak it for the one fact that I [might] say something wrong.*

Based on these interviews, I wrote the poem "What You Are" (Cahnmann, 2000) from the combined voices of these youth to dramatize the mistrust that can occur when Latino students are forced to choose between the language of school and the languages of home. Persona poems are opportunities to articulate another point of view, "a means of exploring both the inner world of

the person and the phenomenal world outside, and of creating imaginative relationships with these worlds" (Johnson, 1990, p. 26).

### What You Are

Between Halloween and Martin Luther King Day,  
little Ramona forgot her language,  
started to leave it at home  
the day her classmates laughed, the day  
she picked up  
a dirty piece of paper when the teacher  
really said,  
"RuhMOhnuh, you dropped your glove."

That's how it starts, the señoras say.  
When a piece of you drops off, and you  
pick up something else instead.  
But nobody gives you that other piece  
back.

You have to fight for it. Like Ramona's  
cousin Gloria  
who went back to the island when she  
was nineteen  
because she was all-English, and the  
family said  
she wasn't Puerto Rican anymore, like  
she always thought she was.  
She was cool and what the f--- man. She  
even thought  
you made sancocho from a can!

No way, Gloria says to Ramona.  
Ain't nobody gonna give you back your  
culture  
once you leave it lying there like a  
wrinkled  
piece of paper. You have to put your  
name on it.  
Purple with plantain stains on your  
fingers.  
Puerto Rican. *Puerto Riqueño*. If they ask  
you,  
that's what you are.

The testimonies from bilingual youth have illustrated to me that one's degree of language expertise is not fixed. Rather, bilingual abilities shift according to context, interlocutor, and subject. These youths' testimonies combined with poetic explorations offer a form of

scholARTistry that can help teachers “interrogate personal and cultural assumptions that have come to be taken for granted” (Barone, 2001, p. 26). Rather than only encouraging and correcting bilingual students’ English, a poetic sensibility can help bilingual and monolingual teachers foster multiliteracy in their classrooms (Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Reading, living, and writing poetry are three of the many scholARTistic ways teachers make the continua of bilingual experience in their classrooms and personal and professional lives visible and valuable.

## READING POEMS ON THE BILINGUAL EXPERIENCE

The act of reading poetry is an underused resource for developing teachers’ abilities to attend deeply to what students are saying and how they say it. Sloan’s (2003) action research projects with graduate students at Queen’s College provided naturalistic evidence that poetry can make a difference in the language and literacy development of both teachers and students. The challenge is for teachers to find opportunities through literature to more reflexively cross multiple cultural and linguistic worlds.

Greater inclusion of poetry and fiction on the bilingual experience will combat findings from a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reporting that literary reading has declined dramatically among all age groups over the past 20 years, with only 12 percent of respondents reporting having read any poetry (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004). The report suggests that declining reading rates may be particularly significant among Latino populations. Increased exposure to

literature on the bilingual experience will certainly influence teachers’ understanding of diverse linguistic and cultural community life. Just as important, teachers’ exposure to literature on the bilingual experience may also increase their use of it with Latino students, thus expanding interest and investment in biliteracy.

Where do teachers and teacher educators find poetry on the bilingual experience? While more multi-genre resources are needed for teacher education, an edited anthology by Santa Ana (2004), *Tongue Tied*, is one volume that fills this gap. The anthology includes poetry, prose, and scholarship about a wide range of bilingual and bidialectal experiences, offering the perspectives of scholars as well as bilinguals themselves on what it means to grow up speaking, listening, reading, and writing in more than one code. Poetry collections by Martín Espada (2003), Chitra Divakaruni (2000), and Marilyn Chin (1994), among others, include many poems on the bilingual-bicultural experience, and anthologies such as *Cool Salsa* (Carlson, 1994) and *Wáchale* (Stavans, 2001) offer works by many bilingual writers that are vital for any language arts educator’s bookshelf. Bilingual writers such as Trinidad Sánchez, Jr. (1994) can draw readers into the condition of the “not me,” pulling us out of our own racial, linguistic, and cultural positions. Recently, I shared this poem with a heterogeneous fourth-grade class of students whose native languages included English, Bengali, Portuguese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. Despite the lack of translation, the classroom teachers and students were all engaged by the fluent mix of Spanish and English and amused by the surprise Chicano perspective at the end.

## Why Am I So Brown?

A question Chicanitas sometimes ask while others wonder: Why is the sky blue or the grass so green?

Why am I so Brown?

God made you brown, mi’ja  
color bronce—color of your raza  
connecting you to your raices,  
your story/historia  
as you begin moving towards your future.

God made you brown, mi’ja  
color bronce, beautiful/strong,  
reminding you of the goodness  
de tu mamá, de tus abuelas  
y tus antepasados.

God made you brown, mi’ja  
to wear as a crown for you are royalty—  
a princess, la raza nueva,  
the people of the sun.

It is the color of Chicana women—  
leaders/madres of Chicano warriors  
luchando por la paz y la dignidad  
de la justicia de la nación, Aztlán!

God wants you to understand . . . brown  
is not a color . . . it is:  
a state of being a very human texture  
alive and full of song, celebrating—  
dancing to the new world  
which is for everyone . . .

Finally, mi’ja  
God made you brown  
because it is one of HER favorite colors!

Trinidad Sanchez

Poetry from the bilingual and bidialectal perspective often assumes connections where our culture assumes dichotomies and separation—between English and Spanish, literary and vernacular, public and private. Inviting bilingual language use in the context of reading and writing poetry recognizes the all-too-often hidden resources of students. When I worked with this multilingual group of fourth graders, their teachers were enthusiastic about the experience of writing the languages of home with their

## Poetry about Bilingual Experiences

Ada, Alma Flor, & Campoy, F. Isabel with English adaptations by Schertle, Alice. *Pio Peep! Traditional Spanish Nursery Rhymes*. Illus. V. Escrivá. (Harper, 2003).

This selection of rhymes from the rich tradition of Latino oral folklore is in both English and Spanish. The English versions are poetic re-creations of the originals.

Alarcon, Francisco X. *Poems to Dream Together*. Illus. P. Barragan. (Lee & Low, 2005).

Alarcon's poems deliver a strong message in Spanish and English about his dreams for children.

Carlson, Lori (Ed.). *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Hispanic in the United States*. (Holt, 1994).

An energetic collection of poems in English and Spanish that features voices of familiar and lesser-known poets. Also see Carlson's *Red Hot Salsa* (2005).

Delacre, Lulu. *Arorro, Mi Niño: Latino Lullabies and Gentle Games*. (Lee & Low, 2004).

These participatory finger play games, nursery rhymes, and lullabies are in English and Spanish.

Medina, Jane. *The Dream on Blanca's Wall*. Illus. R. Casilla. (Boyds Mills, 2004).

Poems in English and Spanish describe the life and dreams of a sixth-grade girl whose family has recently emigrated from Mexico to the United States.

Medina, Jane. *My Name Is Jorge*. Illus. F. V. Broeck. (Boyds Mills, 1999).

The bilingual poems describe the struggles of a young Mexican boy to learn a new life and language in the U.S.

Mora, Pat. *Confetti: Poems for Children*. Illus. E. Sanchez. (Lee & Low, 1999).

The culture and life of the Southwest are captured in these poems from the point of view of a Mexican-American girl. Spanish words are woven throughout the poems.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *The Tree Is Older than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems and Stories from Mexico*. (Simon Pulse, 1998).

This bilingual anthology of poems and stories is distinguished by illustrations from Mexican artists.

Orozco, Jose-Luis. *Diez Deditos: Ten Little Fingers & Other Play Rhymes and Action Songs from Latin America*. Illus. E. Kleven. (Puffin, 2002).

Poems, rhymes, and songs are presented in English and Spanish, along with musical arrangements for the songs and diagrams of the fingerplays for the rhymes. See also their *De Colores* (1994) and *Fiestas* (2002).

Soto, Gary. *Neighborhood Odes*. Illus. D. Diaz. (Harcourt, 1992).

Soto celebrates life in his Mexican-American community with poetry in which he naturally code-switches into Spanish. Also see *Canto Familiar* (1995).

Stavans, Illan (Ed.). *Wachale!: Poetry and Prose about Growing Up Latino in America*. (Cricket, 2001).

This anthology includes classic and modern poems and writings in Spanish, English, and code-switching.

Wong, Janet. *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems*. (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1996).

Some of these poems focus on Wong's Korean and Chinese heritage in contrast with American language and culture. Also, see Wong's *Good Luck Gold* (1994).

—Marilyn Carpenter

students. One teacher, Elizabeth Connell, described her experience:

*I loved the way you encouraged us to include words that are often said in our homes. Silly phrases, commands, and expressions in other languages made the poems so much richer. Some of our*

*quietest students (also those for whom English is not their first language) were excited to share such special words with their classmates. They are not often given such opportunities. I would not have thought to include two French phrases that I use with my own children each night at bedtime if you*

*had not specifically suggested this, but I really liked including those and they are important words in our home.*

Reading poetry on the bilingual experience brings us closer to the cultural and linguistic experiences of others as well as ourselves.



## ENGAGING IN BILINGUAL COMMUNITY LIFE

However many books and poems a teacher reads about the bilingual experience, there is no replacement for engaging oneself in bilingual community life and language learning. Becoming a language learner for the short or long term is one way for teachers to understand the processes of second language acquisition first hand. Whether through language courses in the community or immersion in a teacher development program abroad, teachers need opportunities to feel the headaches, misunderstandings, and mistakes of communicating in a non-native language.

Not only can we as educators find value in immersion in second language learning contexts in classrooms and abroad, we can also engage more deeply in bilingual life surrounding our home and work communities. Communities that live, work, pray, and play in more than one language are thriving throughout the United States. Educators at all levels need professional development opportunities to cross the cultural and linguistic boundaries in their own backyards, regardless of their own language proficiency. Crossing cultural and linguistic worlds and spending time in local Latino community settings is an important way for educators working with Latino youth to understand the speech community norms our students bring with them to school. By attending social events—birthday parties, festivals, *quinceñeras*—and frequenting other community contexts, educators can slowly become familiar with bilingual funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

The J & J flea market, “the largest in Georgia” (although I must have seen a half a dozen signs for other

flea markets that make this same claim), is a place where many local Latino and African American families in my community go to buy produce and other goods. My visit there was an important source of discovery in relation to my work with Latino as well as African American communities with whom I work in Georgia classrooms. Before my visit to the flea market, I didn’t understand an African American third grader who wrote, “My house is like a pond. There’s a

**Teachers need opportunities to feel the headaches, misunderstandings, and mistakes of communicating in a non-native language.**

waterfall by the door.” After puzzling over her meaning, I visited the flea market and wrote the following piece of scholARTistry in response:

### Teaching Poetry in Georgia Schools

*My house is like a pond, she says. Is so pretty.  
I ask her to say it again.  
Can you say that again?  
Did you say “pond”?*

Round body of water behind a house in  
Vermont  
where a white girl skinny dips and geese  
make merry with picnics:  
How can a house be like a pond?

She tells me Grandmom bakes custard pies.  
She has a green carpet in the kitchen.  
Her daddy likes candy. There’s a waterfall  
by the door.

I ask her to say it again.  
Can you say that again?  
Did you say “waterfall” by the door?

I don’t know if there is water by her  
house,  
a splashing image in a cheap frame from  
the flea market,  
or the sound of a neighbor’s pipes  
flushing through the wall.

She writes about rainbows and spells  
rain *rian* and bow  
as a separate word and door with two  
r’s and one o  
and she sits next to a boy who writes  
that he is from *Mixeco*.

Her skin is the color of pine bark; eyes  
framed in small gold globes like two  
ponds filled  
with invisible life. I know how to live in  
this school trailer,  
but I’m from a house like a jewel box.

She asks me to say it again.  
*Can you say it again?*  
Did you say “jewel box”? Thas nice.

When I saw framed, electric images of waterfalls and ponds at the flea market, I had a better understanding of what this third grader meant by “my house is like a pond.” ScholARTistry involves stepping out of our comfort zones and into the lives of our students. In this way, literature on the bilingual experience comes to make more sense to us as members of the same, shared community.

## WRITING LEADS TO TRANSFORMATIVE BILINGUAL PRACTICE

The act of writing helps one to document and interpret the pleasures, pains, and uncertainties of moving between different linguistic and cultural worlds from different social and cultural positions. Reading about bilingual experiences and participating in language learning and bilingual community life come alive through the practice of writing poetry. However, results from the NEA survey indicate that almost no adults (1 percent) reported having



experienced any creative writing class or lesson during the survey year (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004). In my own experience, it is the act of creating and sharing poetry in writing environments that allows me to examine old questions about working with bilingual youth in new ways. When teachers create or join their own writing groups, they create a place to practice the art of poetry and the risk-taking necessary to explore taboo subject matter, awkward feelings, and quirky language involved in cross-cultural experiences.

The products of teachers' scholARTistry need not be for publication so much as for the cultivation of personal growth through exploration and critical reflection. However, making these poems public through creative writing groups and publications for teachers' and students' work can increase public dialogue about language learning, loss, and revitalization. Writing poetry can also engage teachers in multicultural introspection (Hidalgo, 1993), recalling processes of linguistic, cultural, and racial shift that may have occurred in their own family histories. The following poem was written by an elementary literacy coach with whom I share the love of reading and writing poetry. The poem, "Mixed Fit Him Nicely," explores the shift in an adult's thinking as a result of her own and another child's description of biracial identity.

#### Mixed Fit Him Nicely

There I stood assuming  
a mother's posture, hip shifted to  
the side on which you rested. We  
were surrounded by the endless  
smiles of the library shelves when

the boy with skin warm and  
brown asked if you were mixed.  
I found myself surprised, not  
because I thought him rude or

because you are not, in fact, mixed,  
but because I had really only thought  
of nuts and drinks and cut flowers  
that way. And shouldn't I have  
considered your mixedness  
already? I looked at him, imagining  
him your age and at you, imagining you his.

You liked this boy and so did I. Mixed fit him  
nicely, so I tried it on you and smiled.  
One day, when you are newly  
teenaged and passing an afternoon  
sideways

reading the spines in the library, may you  
be comfortable enough in the honey  
skin that holds you to speak to the mother  
of the baby in whose face you recognize  
yourself.

Jan Burkins

This poem is a moving example of the power of poetry to give language to the unsayable. Burkins is not bilingual, but she uses her own explorations of race as a way to model literacy practices that work in the multicultural classroom by laying bare her own questions

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and experience. As a complement to current testing environments in classrooms, she encourages teachers to explore poetry as a balance to other more test-driven instructional tasks. Burkins has used whole professional days to work with teachers on their own writing in the belief that teachers who themselves write will become better teachers of writing. Teacher and poetry writer Elizabeth Connell shared these reflections on writing poetry alongside her students:

*I think all kids love to see that their teachers are human—that we, too, have fears and difficulties and that we can work through those things. By sharing our own steps with writing and letting kids know it is okay to make mistakes, we help them to take chances and try to model this—to try the new things right beside them . . . to be nervous and vulnerable and excited all together!*

More opportunities ought to be available for teachers to practice their own cultural introspection through poetry and develop literacy curriculum as writers themselves. Whether through formal professional development efforts such as The National Writing Project, poetry writing during professional development days, or informal writing groups in living rooms or cafés, teachers should be encouraged to seek their own opportunities to develop as multicultural writers.

#### POETRY'S PLACE IN CREATING BILINGUAL COMMUNITY

Reading, living, and writing poetry are three scholARTistic ways to cross cultural and linguistic worlds with attention and dignity and give language to what has often been unsayable and thus unsaid. The practice of writing poetry is not about recording what one already knows, but, rather, about exploring what one does not yet know. Poems invite teachers and students to find fresh language, new insight, and discovery about themselves and others.

If poetry is such a rich resource for teachers and students, why are there such limited numbers of Americans who actively read or write poetry? Poet Ira Sadoff (2004) argued it may be because in the United States, we are trained not to fail. I believe this is especially true for teachers and

researchers of language. We are trained to be experts, consultants, knowers. However, crossing cultural and linguistic worlds in classrooms and fieldwork requires us to learn how to take risks and be willing to embarrass ourselves and to direct our attention to the conflicts at stake—what Sadoff (2004) refers to as “the worry” in life and in poetry.

In light of the anti-bilingual education sentiment across the country as well as national legislation

best we can do is listen to one another, and the privileged need to listen harder” (p. 95). I believe the increased exposure of Latino students and their teachers to lyrical portraits of what it means to communicate in more than one culture and code offers exciting possibilities to listen to diverse experiences with attention and dignity, developing our students’ full (bi)literacy potential. Reading, writing, and living poetry can have implications for how we

**The practice of writing poetry is not about recording what one already knows, but, rather, about exploring what one does not yet know.**

promoting standardized tests in English for immigrant children within the first three years of their arrival, there is much to worry about bilingual youth and their chances of becoming fully biliterate lifelong readers and writers. Reading, living, and writing bilingual poetry can elucidate the goal of bilingual education—to provide an educational environment where students’ home languages and cultures are visible and valued as resources in the classroom. Through reading, living, and writing bilingual poetry, “any teacher can foster multiliteracy in the classroom without being a speaker of those languages” (Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003, p. 453).

If there is anything we have learned from literacy and bilingualism in the twentieth century, it’s that poetry remains a vital form of witness to negotiations of language, culture, and power. As Ostriker (2000) has said of enduring forms of oppression, “No solution is in sight, the

teach our students, and how we sustain our creative lives as teacher-learners.

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## CALL FOR 2006 DONALD H. GRAVES WRITING AWARD NOMINATIONS

Established in 2001 by Donald H. Graves, this award annually recognizes teachers in grades 1-6 who demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in the teaching of writing. The award is administered by the NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee, which selects an award recipient from the portfolios and essays submitted during the year.

Submission material information can be found on the NCTE Web site at <http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/graves> and must be postmarked no later than **June 1, 2006**. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2006 Annual Convention in Nashville, Tennessee during the Elementary Get-Together.

## JAMES MOFFETT AWARD

NCTE's Conference on English Education, in conjunction with the National Writing Project, offers this grant to support teacher research projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. All K-12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Moffett Award winners receive a certificate, a monetary award (up to \$1000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project, and a copy of James Moffett's last book, *The Universal Schoolhouse*. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as

the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the research. The deadline for nominations for the 2006 Moffett Award is **May 1, 2006**. Winners will be notified in July 2006 and announced at the 2006 NCTE Annual Convention in Nashville. Submit nominations to James Moffett Award, Kristen McGowan, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. For more information, go to <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cee/awards/moffett/108836.htm>.