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**Critical Encounters:  
Negotiating Textual Connections in a Student-led Discussion of *The Circuit***

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**Abstract**

This article presents an analysis of two fourth-grade students discussing *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997) and finding ways to express their understandings and misunderstandings with a critical encounter in the text. The students' use of freestyling enabled them to recontextualize (Dyson, 2001, 2003; Gilmore, 1983) the literature discussion. This recontextualization provided the students with a way to remain engaged in the discussion and with each other when tension arose from having different interpretations. The student selected format and use of quality Latinx children's literature, enabled the students to draw on multiple literacies.

**Key words:** emergent bilingual, textual connections, Latina/o children's literature, critical encounters

**Introduction**

*The detail that I didn't get yo, was shoot, when the, the, the boy Francisco, left, left, his sister in that tent and then this woman came in doing some voodoo, or I don't know what they're doing in there. She pokes him on the face and belly and then puts a spell on him. And then I didn't like that, because shoot, that was just yo, why would you do that to a baby in the first place? The details I didn't get was, yo man, JZ, takes this from the bottom, yo, yo, yo.*

In the excerpt above, a fourth-grade student with the self-selected pseudonym of Slim Shady, shared his initial reaction to reading about a traditional healer in the autobiographical account of a Latinx migrant farmworker family titled, *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997). Through

freestyling, a form of rap, where each person improvises lyrics in the moment (Weinstein, 2006), Slim Shady expressed surprise and concern with what he had read and engaged his classmate, who had selected the pseudonym JZ, in a discussion. Both students were enrolled in a two-way Spanish/English immersion program in an urban Midwestern school district. Slim Shady, an African-American student, spoke English at home, and had been learning Spanish as a second language as a student at the school for several years. JZ, a Mexican-American student, began elementary school speaking primarily Spanish and was quite proficient in English at the time of the study. In this article, we examine a discussion between the two fourth graders to explore the ways that the students made sense of a Latinx children's literature selection that positioned one as a cultural insider and one as a cultural outsider.

### **Multicultural Children's Literature and Critical Literacy**

The importance of multicultural children's literature has been established (Bishop, 1990, 1997; Clark & Flores, 2016; Harris, 2003), but there continues to be a lack of access to this type of literature in language arts classrooms (Clark & Flores, 2016; McNair, 2013), as indicated by the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement.<sup>1</sup> Multicultural children's literature that accurately represents the language and cultural practices of a particular community (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2016), offers opportunities to connect academic content with students' lives, enabling students to draw on their cultural and linguistic knowledge while developing literacy skills (McNair, 2008; Nieto, 1997). For children from historically marginalized communities, reading texts that authentically represent what they know from home, positions their knowledge as a strength and resource (Clark & Flores, 2016; Martinez-Roldán, 2003; McNair, 2013; Medina, 2010). Additionally, this literature often addresses themes that children may face in their daily lives but do not have opportunities to discuss in school (Nieto, 1997; Medina, 2006; Sánchez & Landa, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo began a twitter exchange expressing their frustration with the lack of diversity in children's literature in response to an all-white, all-male panel of children's authors who would be presenting at BookCon. On April 24, Aisha Saeed, author of *Written in Stars*, tweeted the first #WeNeedDiverseBooks hashtag, and shortly after, the authors and bloggers founded the grassroots organization to produce and promote children's and young adult literature that reflects cultural diversity.

The literature discussion explored here is informed by critical literacy that stresses the importance of examining multiple perspectives and the voices of those who have been historically marginalized (Freire, 1970; Harste et al., 2000). The goals of critical literacy are aligned with perspectives on multicultural children's literature, particularly the potential for engaging in reflexivity regarding one's own position in society (Cai, 2002). Based on the work of Freire (1970), critical literacy emphasizes the political and ideological aspects of literacy (Street, 1984), and the development of personal consciousness regarding power in society (Cai, 2002; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This perspective on reading and writing runs counter to skills-based approaches—instead, it focuses on the ability to construct meaning based on one's lived experiences and an understanding of society as a whole (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Freire and Macedo (1987) define critical literacy as the process of reading one's social context by making sense of one's experiences. Language is at the heart of this process—as understanding and meaning-making occur through language and support the development of awareness. Campano (2007) posits that students from historically marginalized backgrounds possess a critical awareness that supports their enactment of a critical literacy perspective. In their study of fourth grade boys reading the text *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), Campano, Ghiso, and Sanchez (2013) found that African-American students applied a critical lens informed by ideologies developed in their local community to their textual interpretations, leading them to respond with empathy to the circumstances characters faced in the story. The authors write, "...when given space to direct their own literacies, students engage in critical literacies rooted in cultural legacies" (p.107). Campano (2007) refers to this as epistemic privilege, the notion that students' ideologies and dispositions are developed within their homes and communities.

Pedagogical opportunities designed to tap into students' critical literacies will also create ways for students to engage their epistemic privilege. Hybrid spaces (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 2009) incorporate students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) across languages and language varieties. These spaces result in a more authentic context for learning, as students, particularly those whose knowledge has been marginalized within school settings, can draw on literacies developed in their homes and communities, such as popular culture and Hip Hop (Love, 2015; Morrell, 2007). The accessing of language practices and literacies that are meaningful to students opens the door to critical awareness and the transformative potential of critical literacy.

The data in this article—a literature discussion between two young students—was part of a larger study on the use of multicultural children’s literature and literature discussions with emergent Spanish-English bilinguals (DeNicolo, 2004). Through a focus on the textual connections between two students, we explore the tensions and negotiations that arise when students develop differing interpretations of what they read and how they navigate the task of discussing the text with one another. In the following sections, we present an analysis of one literature discussion to show how a critical encounter with text led a Mexican-American emergent bilingual to draw on his cultural experience and linguistic knowledge to help his non-Latinx classmate make sense of the text.

### **Literature Discussions in the Language Arts**

This qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) utilized ethnographic methods to examine the ways students’ talk supported their understanding of multicultural children’s literature and their own lives. The public preK-8 school had 736 students enrolled when the study was conducted, and 73% qualified for free and reduced lunch. The 26 students who participated in the study self-identified as Mexican American, Mexican, Puerto Rican and African American—as well as a combination of ethnicities—and represented a range of linguistic knowledge, reflecting the demographics of the large urban Midwestern school district where the school was located. While the students spoke a range of varieties of Spanish and English, and the goal of the program was for both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students to develop bilingualism by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, many of the students were at an emergent level of literacy in their second language (for a detailed discussion of students’ language use, see DeNicolo, 2010). Additionally, the use of a new, scripted curriculum at the start of the school year did not allow for permeability (Gritter, 2012) in the discussions or promote peer interaction, leaving many of the emergent bilinguals disengaged in the language arts class.

Ms. Lynn (pseudonym) was loved by the students and had been involved with the school in a variety of capacities for 11 years at the time of the study. She is African American and an emergent Spanish speaker interested in finding ways to support the bilingual students in her fourth-grade English language arts classroom. DeNicolo, a multilingual Brazilian American, collected data as a participant observer in Ms. Lynn’s class while also working at the school in the role of language arts specialist. Having taught at the two-way immersion school as a

kindergarten and first-grade teacher prior to the study, DeNicolo was interested in understanding ways emergent bilinguals could participate more in the English language arts classes. Brochin, a Chicana Spanish-English bilingual and former language arts teacher, supported the analysis of the data and reporting of the study findings. We draw on our experiences working in schools, our current roles as educational researchers and our interest in understanding equitable literacy contexts for Latinx youth in the analysis of the literature discussion presented here. As teacher educators, we are committed to using Latinx and multicultural children's literature as pedagogical tools/humanizing practices.

We decided that small group discussions of texts that connected with students' lived experiences would enable a greater level of participation, increase language use while supporting cross-cultural understanding across language groups. As Ms. Lynn was required to follow the district-mandated, scripted curriculum, we sought literature that aligned with the unit of study being covered at the time of the study. Additional selection criteria included: reading level, availability in Spanish, and connection to the cultural backgrounds represented in the class. The titles for the literature discussion included the following: *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997); *When Tía Lola Came to Visit* (Álvarez, 2001); *Song of the Trees* (Taylor, 1975); *Felita* (Mohr, 1979); *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003); and *My Name is María Isabel* (Ada, 1995). To support the students in discussing the literature, they were trained with Daniels' (1994) literature circles method of using specific roles such as discussion director and connector. Ms. Lynn utilized a fifty-minute block of her language arts time daily for the literature discussion, having students read for approximately 25 minutes and discuss what they had read for 25 minutes.

Throughout the second semester, DeNicolo joined this fourth-grade classroom community moving between her role as co-teacher—where she translated Ms. Lynn's instructions into Spanish to ensure all students' understanding of the literature discussion process—to researcher, where she focused on taking field notes documenting how students interacted with one another in the discussion groups. To support students' understanding of the research process, they selected their own pseudonyms and were responsible for recording and stating their pseudonyms at the start of the literature discussions. The boys that are the focus of the article selected pseudonyms that may have contributed to their choice of engaging

in freestyling: Slim Shady<sup>2</sup> was an alias for the rap artist, Eminem, which he introduced in his well-known song, *My Name Is* (Mathers & Young, 1999), and JZ selected a pseudonym that represented the name of the renowned hip hop artist, Jay-Z.

### Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the ways that students engaged in collaborative sense-making of the texts they were reading, data collection involved field notes, audio recording of each of the discussion groups, along with audio recording of whole class discussions of the literature discussion process. Whole group instruction and one of the literature discussion groups was videotaped daily to provide an additional resource for ensuring accuracy in understanding student participation and talk. Ms. Lynn was interviewed informally throughout the study regarding her observations of student learning and engagement in the discussion groups. At the end of the study, formal individual interviews were conducted with Ms. Lynn and thirteen students that were selected based on their interest in talking about their experiences in the discussion groups. The interviews with Ms. Lynn and the students who were learning Spanish in school were conducted entirely in English. For students who were bilingual, the interviews were conducted in Spanish and English based on students' preferences. In addition to field notes, audio-recordings, and interviews, student role sheets, notes, and written responses were collected throughout the semester.

Data analysis involved coding the transcripts of each literature discussion group to identify the ways students used language, interacted within the discussion groups, formed text-to-life connections, and accessed knowledge developed outside of school. We looked at the patterns and identified themes. One theme that emerged was critical encounters, examining those encounters that showed that a shift occurred from interpersonal tension regarding power and voice in the groups to collaborative sense-making of the critical encounter in the text. In tracking these patterns, it became evident that differences of opinion in response to the critical encounters with the text were one source of tension. In the next section, we present analysis of the discussion between Slim Shady and JZ and their negotiation of tension due to Slim Shady being a cultural outsider and JZ a cultural insider.

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<sup>2</sup> Students' self-selected pseudonyms have been maintained in all but one article written about the larger study. In DeNicolò (2010), pseudonyms were changed to protect students' anonymity.

The transcript below occurred during the third month of the study. The literature discussion group being analyzed consisted of four students, but on this particular day, two students (both girls) were absent, which left Slim Shady and JZ to read and discuss on their own. In the discussion excerpt, it is evident that the two boys accessed a range of literacies to negotiate the tensions they experienced from holding differing interpretations of what they were reading. As noted at the start of this article, Slim Shady began his conversation with JZ through the genre of freestyling. He engaged this genre spontaneously without talking it over with JZ as a way to creatively comply with the required task.

### Critical Encounters: Talking Through Tension

Critical encounters have been identified as pivotal moments that change the dynamics and patterns of communication within literature discussion groups (DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006). These encounters come about when students are startled or caught off guard when reading a particular text. The sense of surprise results in a shift in the way students share their understandings with one another in the literature discussion groups. The following excerpt highlights the critical encounter that Slim Shady experienced while reading *The Circuit* and how a critical encounter for Slim Shady became critical to JZ through the use of freestyling,

In preparation for the discussion, the students had read the chapter titled, “Miracle in Tent City,” in *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997). In this chapter, the family of Francisco, the main character, had taken the youngest child who had fallen ill to see Doña María, *la curandera* (the traditional healer). In *Miracle in Tent City*, Jiménez described how Doña María engaged in the practice of using eggs to remove illness from the body—a traditional healing practice in Mexican/Mexican-American communities (Anzaldúa, 2015; Chévez, 2005). This medical approach was unfamiliar to Slim Shady, and similar to the main character in the story, he found the *curandera’s* actions both startling and troublesome. For this reason, he was interested in talking about this section of the text and spontaneously engaged in a freestyling format for the discussion:

**Slim Shady:** What’d you learn today? What’d you learn about the book so far?

**JZ:** I thought we ought to discuss actually about the details. Because if we don't discuss about the details—Ummmm, let's discuss the details.

So today we have to talk and umm, Slim Shady—

**Slim Shady:** All right, yo, yo, yo. What I got for this book was that he was, I didn't like the part—The detail that I didn't get, yo, was shoot, umm...

The vignette at the start of our article is the continuation of the excerpt above. Slim Shady's comment that the *curandera* "came in doing some voodoo" illustrates his lack of the background knowledge necessary to understand the healing practice described in the story. His challenge was not with reading the text in English but with making sense of the character's actions based on his knowledge and experiences with health care and illness in the U.S. He perceived the *curandera's* actions to be violent and reflective of stereotypical depictions of voodoo, drawing on the misrepresentation of voodoo as a satanic ritual, common in film, literature (Glazier, 2001) and media (Bartkowski, 1998). Interpretations of voodoo in the United States have historically distorted the significance it holds for those who practice the religion referred to as "vodun" in Haiti. From the time of colonization, voodoo has been described as a dangerous cult. Bartkowski (1998) argues that this definition is rooted in political ends as it masks the beneficial ways the Afro-Caribbean religion contributed historically to resisting colonialism (Desmangles, 1977). He highlights how inaccurate descriptions of voodoo are kept alive through claims put forth by the military, law enforcement, and media (Bartkowski, 1998).

After Slim Shady expressed his frustration with the actions of the traditional healer through the freestyling genre, he invited JZ to discuss the details he felt were important:

**Slim Shady:** We (rhythmically) gonna talk about the details, we gonna talk about the details, we gonna hand it over to JZ, eh,eh, eh, eh  
(mixing and scratching sounds).

JZ responded with hesitance at first but as he wanted to scaffold the content for Slim Shady by drawing on what he had learned from his family and his experiences, he began to freestyle as well. In urban communities, it is common for children and youth to develop understanding, appreciation, and expertise in the language practices and forms of popular culture attributed to

specific cultural groups (Love, 2015). In the transcript segment that follows, JZ explained to Slim Shady how sometimes the traditional healing practices described in the story are necessary to help children heal and recounts having experienced something similar in his own life. He then asked Slim Shady if he had ever had an egg used on him as a cure.

**JZ:** Okay, now we're gonna, the thing that I think, because they do that—  
because sometimes the kids feel bad and I don't know, like the eggs—  
Have you had to use eggs to take the bad things away from the kids?  
That's what they did to me, but they didn't crack them on me.

The question JZ posed indicated that he was not quite sure if this form of healing was unique to Mexicans or Mexican Americans or if it was practiced among other cultures as well. It also showed that this was a topic that he may not have talked about frequently in school, as he seemed to search for the words he needed to explain his experiences to his classmate. The difficulty in describing his experiences in English as an emergent bilingual, along with the different interpretations of what was happening in the story, left a lot of room for misunderstanding. JZ used the phrase “feeling bad” to refer to feeling sick, and Slim Shady understood him to be saying that children feel bad about themselves.

He asked JZ for further clarification on why people would use voodoo and make everyone feel bad if they didn't want “nobody to be acting bad or kids to be feeling bad.”

**JZ:** I think because the details, because I think that's how different people do it. Because if they don't actually ... if they don't do that, it's because sometimes they have to take, like, they have to take the eggs out. I mean, you know, they have to put the eggs and start praying, while they're doing that thing.

This critical encounter functioned as an impetus for accessing literacies that are not usually drawn upon in school. When Slim Shady communicated feeling perplexed by the traditional healing practices described in the story, JZ relied on his personal experiences participating in a similar ritual and mediated the content for Slim Shady.

Accessing his lived experiences did not make the discussion smooth or easy; on the contrary, the degree of tension increased because the two students were not reaching the same conclusions. As much as JZ tried, Slim Shady was not able to accept *curanderismo* as a valid practice for healing a child. Freestyling functioned as a vehicle for moving through the tension

that they experienced from holding different interpretations of the story and wanting their individual interpretations to be understood and viewed as valid. Slim Shady and JZ maintained the rhythm and flow of the discussion even though a consensus or agreement had not been reached. Their informal commitment to performing their discussion through freestyling enabled them to continue amidst disagreement. The students' knowledge of freestyling and choice to creatively respond in the moment, kept them engaged in the task of talking about the text. Morrell (2007) states, ".... popular culture does not cohere in the CDs and DVDs that become cultural products, rather popular culture is embodied in the practices from which these documents result" (p. 249). Although Ms. Lynn did not know the students were discussing the text through freestyling, they stopped when she approached; the freedom of selecting their own method for literature discussion was central to their ability to complete the task she set for class.

### **Creating a New Role: Snoop Doggin' for Details**

Slim Shady and JZ continued with their discussion although the schema they had for comprehending the text differed greatly. JZ's recounting of his personal experiences with traditional forms of healing highlight the relevance of this particular text to his life. It was not easy for Slim Shady to accept the occurrences in the text or to understand his classmate's explanation. As JZ recognized that he was not moving Slim Shady towards a better understanding of the *curandera*, he sought ways to redirect the conversation and look for details. Additionally, across the discussion, the two boys differed in their goals for their work together: JZ wanted to comply with the teacher's request that they identify the main details in the section of the text they had read, while Slim Shady wanted to find an interesting way to talk about the book they were reading. Freestyling functioned to support the discussion amidst the tension of Slim Shady having a misinterpretation of *curanderismo* and JZ sharing his personal experiences to promote understanding. Freestyling also encouraged verbal play. The boys had to not only think of what to say in regards to their understanding of the text, but also communicate their contributions in a rhythmic manner. In the final segment of their literature discussion, this creativity led to the development of a new role for the literature discussion groups that the boys named "Snoop Doggin'." The transcript excerpt below shows how this

role emerged through the freestyling exchange as a way to align their two goals, complete the assigned activity, and talk about the text in a fun and interesting manner:

**Slim Shady:** We gonna have a discussion? Are you with me, G?

**JZ:** Okay, yo, yo, yo, now we have to get another detail. My, my, my, man right here Slim Shady here. Now we'll have to like—

**Slim Shady:** Snoop Dog, snoop Dog, and what I mean by snoop, we gonna look through this book and find some good details, like Snoop Doggy Dogg.

**JZ:** Okay, let's do that, because if we don't then [what] else. Okay, okay, now we'll have to find the things that you actually like about the story right now. Like you know, yo, yo, So we can take the details out. What are the parts that you been' liking about the story now?

When JZ paused to search for the correct word to continue their work on details, Slim Shady seamlessly adapted the name of yet another well-known hip hop artist, Snoop Dogg, to stress that the task involved looking closely at the text. By doing so, Slim Shady was able to merge his interests with JZ's, use the name of the famous rap artist Snoop Dogg to maintain the freestyling genre, and create a verbal image of snooping for the task of searching for details. This also allowed them to enact the literacy event of literature discussion based on their interests and goals and allowed them to construct their understanding across languages and cultures to negotiate new learning (Dyson, 2003). This enactment was important as well due to Slim Shady's feelings about the text, responding to JZ's question with the following declaration.

**Slim Shady:** Yo, I didn't like none of it, it was all boring, and then with that witch woman, it made it even worse 'cause I didn't like none of that doggone story, none of it was new to me.

This statement by Slim Shady makes it clear that his lack of familiarity with *curanderismo*, which was apparent in the previous transcript segments, made it difficult for him to connect with what he was reading. His comment that the text was “boring” and that he didn't like “none of that doggone story” may also indicate discomfort with JZ's expertise of a topic that challenged his cultural notions of family and childrearing. Although Slim Shady communicated his lack of interest in the text and misinterpretation of the role of the *curandera*, JZ maintained his focus

on completing their assigned work. The purposefulness of the new role of Snoop Doggin' enabled the boys to continue with their discussion, even though they held onto contrasting interpretations of the events that they read. While Slim Shady insisted, in the excerpt above, that he did not find value in the text, in an interview after he finished reading it, he expressed his understanding of how the challenges that Francisco, the protagonist in *The Circuit*, faced were an example of the literature theme they had been studying in his class. He stated, "He never just got to sit somewhere. That was survival to me because he didn't get to rest" (DeNicolo, 2004). Slim Shady's perseverance in the literature discussion analyzed here, as well as his participation in subsequent discussions, indicated that while he experienced frustration from the critical encounter that occurred, he was expanding his understanding of healing, family, and survival.

### Discussion

The discussion between Slim Shady and JZ highlights three benefits to using Latinx children's literature with emergent bilingual students in language arts classrooms: cultural and linguistic mediation; re-contextualization; and transformation of the literacy event. In the literature discussion example above, the two boys were surprised by their different interpretations of the traditional healing practices described in the story they were reading. Their critical encounter pushed JZ into cultural mediation, as his background knowledge provided him with the schema to make sense of what was occurring in the text. While the two boys had been learning to participate in the literacy event of literature discussions, the critical encounter led them each to examine their individual understanding of the main character's experiences. The analysis of this literature discussion shows the value of student engagement in speech situations where they acquire tools for talking about topics that are unfamiliar, sensitive or not commonly discussed with members outside of their culture (Medina, 2010); critical encounters with text are pivotal opportunities for teaching one another about the beliefs, understandings, and experiences that are rooted in their cultural/racial identities. As was seen in the transcript segments, cultural mediation was not an easy task for JZ but provided him with the opportunity to form connections with the text and share his experiences in English. It also positioned JZ as an expert, which was contrary to how he and the other emergent bilinguals

were positioned in this fourth-grade English language arts class prior to the implementation of literature discussion activities.

Engaging in freestyling enabled Slim Shady and JZ to re-contextualize (Dyson, 2001, 2003; Gilmore, 1983) the literacy event of literature discussion. The use of an out-of-school genre served two primary functions in the students' discussion of *The Circuit* (1997): it provided them with a way to talk across cultural experiences when tension arose from having different interpretations of occurrences in text, and it functioned as a way for them to draw on multiple sources of knowledge to engage with and make sense of text. Slim Shady did not normally freestyle in school or at home; however, his desire to make the discussion process more interesting led him to initiate use of the freestyling genre with JZ. The use of freestyling supported turn-taking in their discussion without requiring a correct answer or agreement. This re-contextualization of the discussion format enabled them to work through the tension that arose from their differing perspectives and made the literacy event of literature discussion relevant and meaningful for them (Gilmore, 1983). Their increased level of engagement also resulted in longer segments of discourse, important for discussing literature but necessary for students learning English in school.

This transformation of the literacy event also opened a space for both students to draw on their linguistic repertoires and knowledge of cultural practices as meditational tools that supported their sense making (Dyson, 1996). The meditational tools and re-contextualization allowed for a greater degree of creativity in approaching the process for literature discussion as evidenced in the development of the new discussion role they named, "Snoop Doggin'." This was possible due to the use of literature that portrayed the main character's experiences with a traditional healer or *curandera* in an authentic manner. This authentic representation resulted in a critical encounter for Slim Shady and led JZ to see his own knowledge in relation to the text and recognize what his classmate did not understand.

The use of freestyling was important for the re-contextualization of the literacy event and working through the differing of perspectives across language proficiency levels. In an interview after the completion of the study, Slim Shady stated that he chose freestyling as a response to feeling bored with the structure of the previous discussion groups and that he did not generally use that genre in school or at home. Although the boys did not seem concerned that they would be penalized for using this format, they were aware that it could have been

interpreted as “playing,” inappropriate for a literature discussion and deemed unacceptable by the two group members that happened to be absent that day. This meant that their freestyling most likely would not have occurred had there been a teacher facilitating the discussion or had the two other members of the group been present. Similar to other studies, the dynamics surrounding participation depended on the composition of the group (Martinez-Roldán, 2003). The absence of the female group members was also relevant as they may have been more apt to dissuade the boys from enacting unsanctioned forms of talking in school settings about the text. Across the discussion groups in their classroom, this was the only instance in which students engaged in freestyling.

There are risks to student-led discussion of literature that authentically portray the challenges and uncomfortable truths of life, society, and history (Alvermann, 1996; Short, 2012). Without teacher facilitation, students may silence one another in the discussions (Clarke, 2006) or fail to engage critically with the text. As we saw in this literature discussion, lack of understanding of *curanderismo* impacted Slim Shady’s comprehension of what he was reading. This means that it is essential for teachers to have a thorough understanding of the texts that the children will be reading and identify possible topics and themes that may be unfamiliar to students. Additionally, in order to support the navigation of collaborative sense-making with peers, both teachers and students must engage in critical literacy to examine the ways power, gender, race, ability, class, religion, and linguicism are addressed within the text and what this means in terms of their own beliefs and cultures (Short, 2012).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Latinx children’s literature allows Mexican-American and Latinx students to form connections with their knowledge from their home and communities. For emergent bilinguals, these connections function as pathways for demonstrating their expertise, comprehension of text, and linguistic knowledge. JZ’s knowledge of traditional healing practices supported his understanding of what he was reading and his ability to function as a cultural mediator for Slim Shady. The text highlighted his knowledge and provided an opportunity to discuss concepts he was familiar with in the language he was learning in school. Although the boys did not reach an agreement regarding the validity of those practices, their ability to draw on alternative genres for discussion moved them to deeper levels of comprehension (Gritter, 2011). Cultural and

linguistic mediation builds on students' out-of-school knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) and counters deficit messages regarding languages other than English through the valuing of emergent bilinguals' knowledge and skills. Student-led discussion groups may open the door for students' creative instincts and encourage them to re-contextualize literacy events by drawing on local literacies and knowledge to create their own pedagogical tools to make sense of texts.

This in-depth analysis of one literature discussion highlights the role that critical encounters with a text can play in supporting students' enactment of critical literacy. Critical encounters in literature discussions can shift the ways students talk about what they are reading—leading to more critical discussions of text and deeper understandings of what is being read. Discussions that follow critical encounters in reading enable students to develop an increased understanding of one another as resources of cultural and linguistic knowledge may shift their perception regarding languages and language varieties other than English. This is of particular importance when looking at the English literacy development of emergent bilinguals. A critical literacy approach to language arts and literacy instruction requires teachers to create the spaces for critical encounters to occur. While teachers may not fully anticipate the aspect of the text that would lead to a critical encounter, they can introduce the themes, potential sites of tension, and social issues that are relevant to the children's literature they will be reading. Incorporating opportunities for students' lived experiences, questions, and concerns to enter classroom dialogue related to children's literature may promote greater understanding of their responses to critical encounters and preferred format for talking about the feelings or challenges that arise in literature discussions.

The majority of emergent bilinguals receive instruction in English (Menken, 2008). This means that it is imperative that teachers such as Ms. Lynn, who are not proficient in students' home languages, create spaces for transcultural practices (Guerra, 2016); these include translanguaging (García, 2009), which enable students to access all forms of knowledge such as popular culture (Morrell, 2007), digital and social media (Ek, Sanchez, & Guerra, 2015). The use of Latinx children's literature that reflects students' languages and lived experiences supports the creation of critical contexts where the superiority of English is challenged (DeNicolò, 2010; Fránquíz & De la Luz Reyes, 1998; Iddings, Risko, & Rampulla, 2009) and the socio-political context examined (Sánchez & Landa, 2016). For this to occur, teachers need training in how to

understand the themes, history, and traditions addressed in the literature so that they support students in building the schema to understand the practices they are reading about.

Slim Shady did not have the cultural understanding of *curanderismo*; had the class explored traditional healing practices across cultural contexts prior to reading *The Circuit* (or during), his ability to learn from his reading and discussions would have increased greatly. Asset-based pedagogies such as these, with Latinx emergent bilinguals and all multilingual students of color, pushes back against the discriminatory influences that shape students' developing sense of school belonging and academic identities (López, 2016). However in multicultural classrooms, like the one represented here, to truly push back, students need support in critically examining experiences and traditions that are unfamiliar in order to disrupt metanarratives that marginalize communities of color.

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