More Mirrors in the Classroom
Using Urban Children’s Literature to Increase Literacy

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Like many students in U.S. schools today, Veronica is a member of a growing population of dual language learners (DLLs). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the proportion of school-age children in the United States who spoke a language other than English at home more than doubled between 1980–2011, increasing from 10 percent to 22 percent (Aud et al. 2012; Ryan 2013). Although dual language learners can be found in classrooms across the country, a substantial proportion of DLLs attend urban schools. For example, of the nearly five million estimated DLLs in the nation’s K–12 public schools, almost 25 percent attend schools among sixty-seven large city school districts (Uro and Barrio 2013).

Students learning English make up an average of 14 percent of urban public school enrollment, ranging from 9.4 percent in small cities to 16.7 percent in large cities (Kenta et al. 2015). While a majority of DLL students in the United States speak Spanish as their first language, nearly four hundred languages are represented in our nation's schools (Ryan 2013). For ex-
ample, among DLLs in New York City Public Schools, the top ten languages represented include Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Russian, Urdu, French, Uzbek, and Punjabi (New York City Department of Education 2015). In addition, an increasing number of DLLs are relative newcomers to schools, having just recently immigrated to the United States (National Education Association 2014).

Although they are linked by the common characteristic of learning English as well as one or more additional languages, DLLs differ in age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, place of birth, reason for migrating, native language(s) spoken, degree to which they are spoken, English proficiency, and educational background. This is certainly the case in Veronica’s class (above).

Veronica was born in the United States shortly after her parents arrived from Mexico. Her first language is Spanish, but she spoke some English at the start of kindergarten as a result of attending one year of preschool the year before. Her classmate, Jasmin, who speaks Arabic, just arrived from Yemen and has had no prior schooling. In Bartek’s home, Polish is spoken by his mom and Spanish by his dad, and he speaks both. Bartek did not attend preschool, but he has picked up some English from playing with neighborhood friends and watching television.

**WHY USE “DUAL LANGUAGE”?**

There are a variety of ways educators refer to students whose first language is different from English (e.g., ESL students, ELL students, etc.). Here, we use the term “Dual Language Learners” to emphasize the fact that these students are continuing to develop language and literacy skills both in their native language as well as English. Many organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the National Head Start Association also use this term.

Differences in nonnative English speakers set them apart from other students. DLLs face the difficult task of developing their literacy as they are learning a new language. Educators, many of whom are not trained to meet the specific needs of DLLs, are challenged to find effective teaching strategies that will facilitate language and literacy development and to develop
effective strategies to engage with families (Ebe 2012; Haynes and Zacarian 2010). This chapter discusses the use of multicultural and urban children's literature as an effective tool for scaffolding the language and literacy development of DLLs and facilitating transitions for students who are new to the country. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of stages of second-language development and offers specific examples of how to help students at different levels of English proficiency make connections to texts.

**Increasing Engagement by Making Connections**

In reviewing "Sandy's story," on the next page, we can see that Veronica is a writer. Throughout the school year, Veronica has been encouraged to write about her life experiences and things that are meaningful to her. This has allowed her to develop her writing and has added to the richness of it. She shares a similar cultural background with her teacher. Her teacher is aware of how important it is to make sure Veronica has many opportunities to see herself reflected in the curriculum.

On the particular day described, Veronica has made a connection with the writing that her teacher has shared, and that has inspired her to write on a similar topic. She does so beautifully and without hesitation. She does not know the word lotion so she writes the Spanish word, crema. She knows that writers will sometimes use more than one language when writing and that this is a strength. She has learned this from the many "interlingual" books in her classroom library that are written primarily in English, but have many Spanish words interwoven in the story (Hadaway and Young 2010, 120), such as Bebé Goes Shopping (Ely 2006), Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin (Tonatiuh 2010), or My Abuelita (Johnston 2009). Veronica is an interlingual writer, just like the authors of the books she enjoys.

One thing that helped Veronica become engaged with writing is certainly the connection that she made with her teacher. Yet even when a student and teacher do not share the same language or cultural background, culturally relevant texts can help increase student engagement and provide a catalyst for discussions that can help students and teachers learn more about each other. For example, Dara Hill (2012) describes how an African American teacher's sharing of Patricia Polacco's The Keeping Quilt (2001) with a first-generation Russian American student led to his deep connections with the text and an extensive discussion with her about cultural practices that were similar or different from those of his family.

Similarly, despite their cultural differences, Mary-Virginia Feger (2006) noticed that her students read more, made more personal connections to
Sandy’s Story:

As I often do, I was mentally going over my to-do list on my way to work. At the top of the list was to call my mom later that day and wish her a Feliz Día de las Madres. Although my mom has been living in the United States for almost forty years, one of many things she holds onto dearly from her native country is celebrating Mother’s Day on the tenth of May. I could hear my mom’s colorful stories of celebrations in Mexico, complete with folkloric dances and a mariachi band playing the mañanitas. I could not forget to call or I might not be forgiven.

Later that day, it was easy to pick a topic for my writing with my students as I often remind them that our ideas for writing are carved from our hearts and our life experiences. I shared with my students the importance of the day, explained that I was celebrating on this day because my mom is from Mexico, and wrote about the amazing influence my mom has been in my life. I gently suggested that they may want to write about an important person in their lives and began to distribute their journals, as I inquired about their topic of writing.

As I am doing this, I feel a tug on my shirt. I turn around to see Veronica mentioning me to come closer to her. I bend down and she softly whispers in my ear that her mom is from Mexico, just like mine. I turn to look at her—her big, brown eyes and smile from ear to ear, sealing a magnificent bond. With that, she is off to write about her mom, a memoir of a bath-time routine.

Veronica wrote: “When I take a shower, my mom puts cremita (lotion) on me and my sister. We play a game and she kisses my feet.” (Written in May of her kindergarten year.)
text, engaged in critical thinking, and made text-to-text connections in their dialogue journals with her when she incorporated culturally relevant books like Gary Soto’s *Buried Onions* (1997) or Sandra Cisneros’s (1984) *House on Mango Street* into the curriculum. Culturally relevant literature can help build these bridges, not only between a student and the curriculum, but between students and teachers. The sharing of culturally relevant texts with family members has also been shown to increase parent engagement with school and encourage more reading and literacy-related discussions with children at home (e.g., Larrotta and Gainer 2008).

**Supporting Dual Language Learners’ Comprehension with Culturally Relevant Literature**

Imagine a situation where someone is taking a cooking class for the first time. Maybe he or she is a beginner and does not have much experience with cooking. Rather than learning to make a simple dish with common ingredients, the cooking class involves a recipe for creating an exotic dish. Both the ingredients and the kitchen are unfamiliar to the novice chef. To top it off, the teacher is giving instructions in a foreign language. The fact that there are so many “unknowns” will certainly add to the challenge and might even get in the way of a successful execution of this dish. For a greater chance of success, it would help if the dish and the ingredients had been seen and used in the past and the language spoken by the chef was the learner’s first language.

As discussed in chapter 3, having background knowledge when approaching a new task is important, and it is especially helpful for reading comprehension. Similar to the cooking example above, when DLLs are presented with books that are not relevant to their lives, they may face the “double task” of trying to comprehend unfamiliar cultural events and concepts (e.g., new characters, unfamiliar settings, novel situations, unusual facts) while simultaneously trying to interpret unfamiliar English words and specialized vocabulary (Agosto 2007, 28). It is important that teachers balance these

“The pictures in the book have happy colors, just like the houses in Colombia.”

—Mariana, age nine, talking about the illustrations in My Diary from Here to There by Amada Irma Pérez (2009)
cognitive demands of learning activities with the language demands so that students do not get "overloaded" (Hadaway 2009, 41).

As discussed in chapter 3, urban children's literature can help with this by providing contexts and content with which students have some experience and can make connections, which reduces some of the cognitive load of the learning task. Readers can construct meaning from texts that resonate with them. They relate to characters who are like them, who have lived similar experiences, and who have walked similar paths. They can visualize and imagine the colors, sights, sounds, and smells of familiar events and settings. Including culturally relevant literature in the curriculum provides DLLs the opportunity to relate to what they already know while building on their background knowledge to allow them to focus on strengthening reading strategies and vocabulary in the new language.

Consider a project in which Sandy Carrillo (2012) read a series of memoirs including My Diary from Here to There/Mi diario de aquí hasta allá by Amada Irma Pérez (2009) and Juan Felipe Herrera's (2006) The Upside Down Boy/El niño de cabeza with a group of fourth-grade DLLs. Like Amada and Juanito in the stories, many of Carrillo's students had experienced recent moves to the United States from places like Colombia and Mexico. Students were able to make self-to-text connections, relating feelings similar to those the characters were feeling when trying to adjust to a new life in the city or when being temporarily separated from family members who had left ahead of them to get things situated in the United States.

"My favorite part of the story was when she travel [sic] to California because I felt the same thing when I came here."
—Daniel, fourth grade, responding to Amada Irma Pérez's My Diary from Here to There

Using texts that presented opportunities for students to draw on their personal experience also reduced the cognitive load of the reading and helped to support comprehension. Children were able to better understand the authors' use of figurative language and subsequently were able to include similar language in their own written narratives. For example, after reading about Juanito's worry that his tongue might "turn into a rock" because he doesn't speak English (Herrera 2006, 7), one student conveyed a similar sentiment...
in her own memoir about her first days at school in the United States: “I felt that a mouse ate my mouth . . . because I didn’t know what to talk.”

Children’s productivity in writing also increased dramatically through access to culturally relevant books. Some students who had dreaded writing prior to this unit were eager to get started on their own stories and were able to compose several pages of writing when describing their own journeys to the United States (Carrillo 2012).

“Can we write our stories today?”
—David, age nine, after studying personal narratives written by Latino authors

Culturally relevant literature is an important tool for supporting the literacy development of DLLs. Students will be drawn into books that they connect with and can understand, which, in turn, can foster reading motivation, persistence, and stamina (e.g., Freeman and Freeman 2004). The more students read, the more academic vocabulary they acquire, which helps expand their oral language proficiency in addition to strengthening their reading comprehension and their writing.

Not only is the selection of texts critical, but the ways in which teachers engage children with diverse language proficiencies matters as well. The next section provides examples of how teachers might consider DLLs’ language levels when engaging them in literature discussion around a culturally relevant text.

A Bridge to Language Development

Teachers take many things into consideration when choosing a book: age-appropriateness, interest, cultural relevancy, and connections to the curriculum, among other things. (For criteria on text selection, please refer to

“Hey, I went there before!”
—Axel, age eight, in response to a picture of the Mercado (market) in The Birthday Swap by Loretta Lopez
chapters 6 and 7.) In order to understand the needs of DLLs and to differentiate instruction to best serve their language needs, it is also important to keep in mind the developmental sequence of language acquisition when choosing and using books.

To illustrate, we use *The Birthday Swap* by Loretta Lopez (1997). When considering the selection of culturally relevant texts for DLLs, educators are encouraged to think broadly about cultural relevance, focusing on experiences and themes that may resonate with DLLs and students who may be newer to the country, such stories including extended family networks, bicultural experiences, family members residing in more than one home country, and themes related to learning new language or understanding a new culture.

In *The Birthday Swap*, Ms. Lopez tells an autobiographical story of the best surprise she ever received when she was a young girl. In this story, the main character, five-year-old Lori, and her family live in a border town between the United States and Mexico and frequently cross the border to shop and visit family. Every year on her older sister Cookie’s birthday, the family gets together for a big family reunion and summer celebration. Since Lori's birthday is in the winter, she never gets to have such a big party, but this year, Cookie has secretly decided to swap birthdays with her little sister. Unbeknownst to Lori, the party she is helping to plan for Cookie is actually for her. While Lori is searching the local Mercado Central for the perfect gift for Cookie’s birthday, the rest of the family is planning the surprise party for Lori.

Many children may find familiarity in the annual family reunion that includes “everyone”—friends, relatives, and neighbors from Mexico and the United States. They might also recognize the fruit and vegetable stands and curio shops of the crowded Mexican mercado as similar to markets they have visited. Even the vibrant colors of Lopez’s illustrations and the various objects featured in their borders, such as the tools used to make piñatas, or the maracas, muñecos, or the caja soplita de viberita (snake-in-the-box toy), may resonate with many children. It is these elements of cultural authenticity that may ground comprehension of the content of the text in familiar experiences, allowing some students to focus more of their cognitive effort on the language-learning demands of the task.

Levels of Language Proficiency

Listed below is a sequence of descriptors based on levels of language proficiency outlined by the TESOL International Association (2015). These

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levels correspond closely with the English language proficiency levels of the WIDA Consortium English Language Development Standards, for educators who may be more familiar with WIDA. After each description, suggestions are provided for how to involve students at different levels of English proficiency in making connections when reading the book, *The Birthday Swap*, by Loretta Lopez.

The examples are meant to serve as a guide that can be used with many books, as well as with questions that focus on other reading comprehension strategies, such as predicting, determining main idea, or making inferences. The intent is to not only develop reading strategies, but to foster language development as well. Choosing a culturally relevant book to use in a lesson, either as the focus or as an addition to a curriculum-prescribed text, will allow DLLs to focus more on the language and reading skills that are being presented.

**Level 1—Starting**
Students are beginning to build their receptive language and have little understanding of English. They require the use of visuals and context to make sense of what is being said. Many students will go through a "silent period" that may last varying lengths of time. Since they do not have the language to respond verbally, they should be encouraged to draw a picture, point or gesture, copy simple written words depending on their age, answer yes-or-no questions, or imitate others to show comprehension. They may begin to use simple words or phrases that they hear repeatedly, such as greetings. The use of illustrations when reading to students at this point is crucial as they require them to construct meaning.

**Level 1 Questioning Strategies.** Ask a yes-or-no question: "Here Lori is breaking the piñata at her birthday party (point to picture). Do you like to break piñatas?"

"Here is Lori with her sister (point to picture). Do you have a sister?"

Students may expand on their answer in their native language.

**Level 2—Emerging**
Students are beginning to understand and use simple phrases and sentences. As in the previous level, they will most likely use phrases that they have memorized from repeated exposure. They can understand and use simple academic vocabulary that is taught with visual support. Students can label and write simple sentences with support, but grammatical errors may impede understanding. Students still strongly benefit from the use of illustrations to make meaning from text.
Level 2 Questioning Strategies. Point to the picture of Lori and her birthday cake. Ask students if the picture reminds them of anything. Expect students to answer in a short phrase or simple sentence with grammatical errors. A student might say, “I eat cake my birthday.” As in level 1, students may want to say more about this in their native language.

Level 3—Developing
Students are understanding more complex speech through repeated encounters. However, their English vocabulary is still limited, which may make it difficult for them to express themselves. Students can write simple, multipart paragraph compositions with support. Their writing still presents itself with grammatical errors, but these no longer impede understanding. Reading abilities vary, but most students are still not reading at grade level when they are “developing” their English. Students will be most successful when they read books for which they have background knowledge that will assist in their comprehension.

Level 3 Questioning Strategies. Point to the picture of Lori and her mom at the market in Mexico. Ask students, “Have you ever been to a market like this one?” Expect a complete sentence or sentences as a response with possible grammatical errors. A student might say, “I go to the market with my grandma. We buyed watermelon and oranges.”

For students who have had the experience of visiting an outdoor market, a prompting question may not even be necessary. As noted in a quote earlier in the chapter, students will usually enthusiastically share that they have been there before and provide details of that experience. Sometimes, they cannot get the words out fast enough. This happens even with students who may not typically speak up in class—and this is exactly what we want—for students to generate ideas and discussions and have the opportunities and space to practice their language skills.

Level 4—Expanding
Students at this level are nearing the English proficiency of a native English speaker. They can read fluently and recall the facts of the text, but they still may have difficulty with comprehension if concepts are presented without much context, or if sentence structure or vocabulary is complex. In particular, students may require support understanding more complex academic concepts.

Level 4 Questioning Strategies. At one point in The Birthday Swap, Lori and her Mom stop by her aunt’s house. Tia Sabina asks Lori to think about what kind of present she might get for her sister while “your mother and I discuss cake business” in the kitchen. Although the illustrations do not provide
much visual support to suggest this, it is presumed the reader might infer that Lori’s mother and aunt take this opportunity to secretly discuss plans for Lori’s party. Ask direct questions to support Level 4 readers in understanding the nuances of the story, such as “Why did Tia Sabina want to talk with Mom in the kitchen?” “What do you think they talked about?”

Level 5—Bridging
Students are able to express themselves in a variety of settings on a range of topics. They have good command of technical and academic vocabulary and often require minimal language support. Students at the Bridging level of language development can be challenged to respond to higher-level comprehension questions that require them to use more sophisticated comprehension strategies, such as comparing and contrasting different texts, making inferences to explain character motivations, or describing cause-and-effect relationships.

Level 5 Questioning Strategies. Ask students, “Does this story remind you of something else you’ve read?” In levels 4 and 5, students have more age-appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures and are able to provide more detailed responses. Students may respond, “It reminds me of The Flower Garden [by Eve Bunting] because the mom got a birthday surprise like Lori. Lori got a party and a puppy and the mom got a garden.”

Summary of Questioning Strategies for Dual Language Learners

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<tr>
<th>TESOL Level of Language Proficiency</th>
<th>Characteristics of Language Level</th>
<th>Questioning Strategies</th>
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| Level 1—Starting                    | Little understanding of second language  
|                                     | May repeat words or phrases they hear often  
|                                     | Go through “silent period” while observing others using new language | Yes/No questions  
|                                     | Emphasize key words  
|                                     | Allow for nonverbal responses (e.g., Show me, Point to, Draw, Gesture, Copy) |
| Level 2—Emerging                    | Use of simple words and phrases  
|                                     | Can understand basic vocabulary  
|                                     | Can label and write sentences with support | Couple questions with strong visual support  
|                                     | Expect answers in short phrases with some grammatical errors |
### Table 4.1. (Continued)

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<th>TESOL Level of Language Proficiency</th>
<th>Characteristics of Language Level</th>
<th>Questioning Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3—Developing</td>
<td>• Understand more complex speech</td>
<td>• Make predictions using prior knowledge and experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Expressive English vocabulary still limited</td>
<td>• Make self-to-text connections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Background knowledge will assist reading comprehension</td>
<td>• Expect response in complete sentences but with possible grammatical errors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4—Expanding</td>
<td>• Nearing conversational proficiency</td>
<td>• Provide support for concepts presented out of context</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can read fluently and recall basic facts</td>
<td>• Ask direct questions to support inferencing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Require support with more complex academic concepts</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5—Bridging</td>
<td>• Can express themselves in a variety of settings and on a range of topics</td>
<td>• Challenge to respond to high-level comprehension questions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Good command of technical and academic vocabulary</td>
<td>• Practice use of sophisticated comprehension strategies to compare/contrast, identify cause and effect, etc.</td>
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**Adjusting to School in a New Country and a New City**

In addition to the challenges of learning a new language, many dual language learners, especially those born in another country, face social and environmental changes and challenges that can oftentimes be stressful. DLLs often feel “set apart” linguistically, socially, and emotionally from other students in their classrooms (Agosto 2007, 27). In addition, many have left behind family, friends, possessions, and everything they knew to come to a different place with a new language and new ways of doing things. They go from a place of competence to not being able to do what other children can do because they do not yet speak the language.
Large “gateway” cities, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, have long been traditional entry points for many immigrant families (Price and Benton-Short 2008). While this continues to be the case, an increasing number of families are also heading for mid-sized and smaller metropolitan areas like Detroit, Minneapolis, and El Paso, Texas (Painter and Yu 2008). Urban environments can present another layer of challenge, particularly for students who are immigrating from more suburban or rural settings in their home countries.

Adjusting to the Urban Environment

The unique set of challenges presented in learning a new language, in a new school, in a new culture, but also, in a place as busy and chaotic as an urban setting may seem insurmountable to young children and their families. The activity level, the sights, sounds, pace, and congestion of the city may feel overwhelming. Urban children’s literature may serve as a useful tool to help organize all of this new information and provide some of the new language needed to describe and process it.

For young children, books like 123 NYC: A Counting Book of New York City (Dungan 2007), City Colors (Milich 2006), or Wow! City! (Neubecker 2004) capture many of the new sights and sounds children may be experiencing while labeling photographs and illustrations with helpful, basic vocabulary. Other selections such William Low’s (1997) Chinatown or George Ancona’s and colleagues (2004) Mi Barrio/My Neighborhood in which children explore the people, resources, and activities in their urban neighborhoods may also provide a context to which children can relate many of their new experiences in the city.

Maintaining a Strong Bicultural Identity

Oftentimes, children who are new immigrants feel they lose their identity as they leave their name and language at the door of the school. As Marcia Baghban (2007) points out, “all children live between the worlds of home and school, but for immigrant children, there is a clear disparity between their home and school worlds” (72). Immigrant children must establish their identity in their new country as well as at their new school. Children who grew up in the dominant culture must establish their school identity only.

As discussed in chapter 2, seeing oneself represented and valued in the curriculum can help strengthen all students’ connections to school and support development of positive academic self-concepts. Who we are is shaped
by our culture and our experiences (Rogoff 2003). Despite language differences, our students enter our schools with a rich background and a wealth of lived experiences. Culturally relevant urban children’s literature can help children understand who they are and help them become confident that their experiences matter when they see themselves represented in the curriculum. As described above, books like My Diary from Here to There and The Upside Down Boy can help teachers get to know students better by fostering communication and helping students feel comfortable talking about their own lives (e.g., Rodriguez 2009).

“I know that in the United States I will have a better life, but I will never forget my home.”

—Mahdi, age eleven, translated from Arabic on his first day in a U.S. school

Urban children’s literature can also support maintenance of a positive bicultural identity. For example, in his autobiographical book of poems, A Movie in My Pillow/Una película en mi almohada, Jorge Arqueta (2007) captures how “Jorgito” gradually develops into an expert resident of San Francisco’s Mission District while he still holds close the memories and values of his native El Salvador. Similar themes are present in Arqueta’s (2008) Xóchitl and the Flowers/Xóchitl, la Niña de las flores. Books like Madlenka by Peter Sís (2000), while not specific to any one cultural group, demonstrate how a group of neighbors with roots all over the world form a close-knit community in a New York City neighborhood while continuing to value and share traditions and stories from their homelands.

Learning a New Language

Successes and challenges in learning a new language can play a central role in shaping DLLs’ sense of self and feelings of competence (Izawa 1995). Many books like The Upside Down Boy and My Diary from Here to There can serve as a forum for students to open up about the frustration that can come with learning English. Cooper’s Lesson (Shin 2004) puts the shoe on the other foot, showing how Cooper, a biracial, second-generation Korean American student, struggles to learn Korean in order to communicate and fit in with the owner and patrons of his neighborhood grocery store.
For some children, their roles in their families change as they begin to learn more and more English and are called on to help parents and extended family members with translation. These experiences may lead to feelings of disconnect between children and their families. In Tony Johnston's (2001) Uncle Rain Cloud, young Carlos initially resents being asked regularly to translate for his often-grumpy Uncle Tomás (aka "Uncle Rain Cloud" in Carlos's mind). Over time, Carlos comes to understand that his uncle's disposition is the result of feelings of fear and displacement in the largely English-speaking-world of Los Angeles.

While Uncle Rain Cloud does draw attention to the ways children who translate sometimes take on adult responsibilities, it also can be used to emphasize the students' asset of being bilingual. Johnston makes clear in Uncle Rain Cloud how skilled Uncle Tomás is with language in general—he's a virtual master of storytelling and tongue-twisting—just not in English yet. It also makes clear that while learning English is definitely important, it is also important for Carlos to continue to learn Spanish and to learn about his heritage.

Educators should also note a difference between Uncle Rain Cloud and some other books that highlight children's experience as translators (e.g., A Day's Work [Bunting 1997]). Sometimes books that touch on this theme can infantilize the adult characters, making it seem as if the children are in charge (Mendoza and Reese 2001). Even though Carlos does translate for Uncle Tomás during his parent-teacher conference and at the grocery store, it is clear throughout the book that Uncle Tomás is the one taking care of Carlos, not the other way around.

Coping with Separation

Culturally relevant urban children's literature not only helps students form a positive self-concept but can also help alleviate the stress encountered by DLLs, especially those new to the country (Baghbani 2007; Celic 2009; Ebe 2010). Many children experience short- or even long-term separation from close family members when they move to the United States. Books like A Movie in My Pillow (Argueta 2007), Tía Isa Wants a Car (Medina 2011), and Siti's Secrets (Nye 1997) may help students work through these experiences as they discuss characters who are going through similar situations of separation or loss. In a rare find in picture books for young readers, René Colato Latínez (2010) takes on the subject of separation via deportation in From North to South/Del Norte al Sur when José's Mamá is deported from their home in San Diego to Tijuana.
As discussed in chapter 2, books like these might be especially useful recommendations for families experiencing separation or for a child who has experienced the deportation of a parent or other family member. Children may find comfort in discussing situations involving storybook characters rather than their own personal situations. Even in the context of a fictional story, discussing characters’ emotions can be a useful outlet for exploring students’ own feelings about a similar situation.

Support Through Context and Connection

When incorporated into the curriculum, urban children’s literature is an effective tool that teachers can use to support DLLs’ language and literacy development. As with other students, urban children’s literature can increase student engagement in reading and writing and can help students make connections that can increase comprehension of texts. For DLLs in particular, culturally relevant urban children’s literature can support language development by grounding potentially challenging language tasks in a familiar context, allowing students to build on familiar experiences, and freeing up cognitive energy to apply to the task of learning new vocabulary and language structures.

Summing It Up: Supporting the Literacy Development of Dual Language Learners

- Culturally relevant texts can provide a vehicle for discussions that can help students and teachers learn more about each other
- Urban children’s literature can support students’ development of a positive bicultural identity and a stronger sense of belonging in school
- Urban children’s literature may help alleviate the stress encountered by dual language learners, especially those new to the country
- Culturally relevant texts help balance the cognitive and language demands of learning activities so students do not get overloaded
- Consider a range of appropriate questioning strategies to support language and literacy development for students at various levels of language proficiency.
In addition, DLLs can often feel disconnected from other students in their classrooms because of language and cultural differences. Seeing their home language, aspects of their culture, and familiar settings and experiences represented in texts can contribute to a sense of belonging among DLLs and can foster a stronger connection to school. Urban children’s literature may also help students who are new to the country and to a new environment cope with the many changes they are experiencing. Educators are encouraged to keep in mind both cultural relevance and levels of language development in selecting texts to best serve the needs of our dual language learners.

Notes

1. See Hadaway and Young (2010, 10) for an extensive discussion of “The Many Faces of English Language Learners.”
2. For more extensive reading related to the overview provided here, we again recommend Nancy Hadaway’s and Terrell Young’s (2010) Matching Books to Readers: Helping English Learners in Grades K-6.
3. Current limitations in the availability of urban children’s literature that incorporates the experiences of children from diverse language backgrounds may make it difficult to find texts that are “perfect” mirrors for DLLs in urban schools. Books like The Birthday Swap, which includes a close, extended family network, bilingual experiences, and family members residing in more than one home country, may resonate with many DLLs because of its connection with other aspects of students’ identities. Educators are encouraged to consider a broad range of multicultural and urban children’s literature that may be most culturally relevant to the students in your classrooms. Limitations in the urban subgenre are discussed in more depth in chapter 5. THE BIRTHDAY SWAP copyright © 1997 by Loretta Lopez. Permission arranged with LEE & LOW BOOKS Inc., New York, NY 10016.
4. See Celic (2009) for additional examples and question frames for helping students connect with text.