

# Learning About Building Literacy Communities in Multicultural and Multilingual Classrooms From Effective Elementary Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the concept of *community* has been at the center of reform in literacy education. Most literacy educators agree that community-oriented environments are critical for students' literacy learning, yet many have difficulty building these communities in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. In this article we draw upon the expertise of successful community builders by highlighting the instructional and classroom practices of two literacy teachers who are effective with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Using qualitative case study methodologies we explore how these exemplary teachers created vibrant multicultural and multilingual literacy communities. Analyses revealed four practices both teachers used to build literacy communities: (a) building relationships amongst community members, (b) fostering collective responsibility within the community, (c) promoting ownership of literacy for all community members, and (d) reflecting on community learning. The findings demonstrate that while teachers used these four common practices to establish successful literacy communities, they also developed specific community-building strategies that were congruent with the strengths and needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms. Implications for literacy educators are also discussed.

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Over the past decade the concept of *community* has been at the center of school reform efforts in literacy education (McKinney, 2003). Shifts from cognitive to social constructivist perspectives have brought the social dimensions of teaching and learning to the fore—thus highlighting the role of literacy communities in students' literacy development. Broadly defined, literacy communities are “dynamic classroom environments that are rich in social relationships, in partnerships, and in collaborations involving talking, reading, thinking, and writing” (Rousculp & Maring, 1992, p. 384). Within literacy communities, members learn through social interactions to appropriate the discursive practices that are sanctioned by the community, to acquire community norms and values, and to fully participate in reading and writing activities (Hiebert & Raphael, 1996). The relationship between active participation and learning in literacy communities is so critical it has even been developed into an English/language arts standard by the International Reading Association and the National Council on Teachers of English: “Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities” (IRA/NCTE Standards, 1996).

While community has become a popular educational concept, research has identified a variety of dilemmas that may interfere with attempts to create successful literacy communities—particularly in multicultural and multilingual elementary classrooms. *Cultural discontinuity* impedes the formation of positive relationships within literacy communities. Teachers, especially those from European American backgrounds, may have difficulty interacting and communicating with their culturally and linguistically diverse students because they do not have the cross-cultural knowledge, skills, or competencies necessary to “recognize and overcome the power differentials, the stereotypes, and other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other” (Delpit, 1995, p. 134). Students may also find it difficult to accept their classmates' differences. Schmidt (1998), for example, found high levels of cultural conflict and tension in a predominantly White kindergarten classroom where two linguistically diverse students were constantly ostracized or teased. In light of cultural discontinuities within the classroom, “the persistent challenge for teachers is to create a place where members not only come together, but also tolerate multiple perspectives” (Peterson, 1992, p. 33).

*Unequal access to learning* represents another formidable barrier to community-building in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Research shows that opportunities to learn in schools are unequally distributed along race, gender, and class lines (Nieto, 1998, 1999). Moller (2005) aptly observes that literacy community settings (e.g., literature response groups) do not necessarily provide equal access to the resources and language tools that students need to create, obtain, and construct meaning. Thus, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may not receive an equal

opportunity to learn literacy, even within community-oriented classrooms. African American students' literacy learning, for example, may be mitigated in classroom communities where the behavioral norms and linguistic conventions associated with the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995, p. 10) remain implicit. Similarly, when English language learners are viewed as having language deficits, they may be excluded from the dialogue and discourses of classroom communities (Valdes, 1998). Culturally and linguistically diverse students who have less access to powerful discourses oftentimes have difficulty becoming full members of the literacy community and as a result may attain literacy at lower levels than their mainstream peers (Au, 1998; Nieto, 1999).

Despite these challenges, some elementary teachers have reported success in building literacy communities in multicultural and multilingual elementary classrooms (e.g., Nathan, 1995; Whatley & Canalis, 2002). We argue that there is great value in exploring the instructional decisions, pedagogical strategies, and classroom experiences of literacy teachers who are effective, particularly those who work successfully with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Sturtevant and Linek (2003) strongly agree, noting, "It is clear that the research community needs to call upon the expertise of classroom teachers in order to learn more about the ways theory-based teaching practices can be implemented in day-to-day practice (p. 75). Research on effective literacy teachers and teaching has been conducted by scholars associated with the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (e.g., Taylor & Pearson, 2002), as well as others (e.g., Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001), yet there is much more to learn about exemplary teachers and the instructional practices which improve the literacy achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

In this article, we highlight the community-building practices of two effective literacy teachers working in multicultural and multilingual elementary classrooms. Using qualitative case study methodologies, we explore how these teachers worked with culturally and linguistically diverse students to create community, with a specific emphasis on the instructional practices and strategies they enacted in their classrooms. In what follows, we briefly present our theoretical framework. Next, we discuss our qualitative methodologies and present findings from each case study. We conclude with implications for literacy educators and literacy education.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by a social constructivist perspective of literacy education (Au, 1998). In this view, literacy learning is accomplished "when a child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Classroom learning environments are seen as

sociocultural contexts that situate the learner and the learning, and are shaped by the instructional approaches, practices, and strategies that teachers enact (Au, 1998; Hammerberg, 2004). Consequently, “both the process (how instruction is delivered and the social interactions that contextualize the learning experience) and the content (focus of instruction) are of major importance to understanding how children learn” (Garcia & Lopez-Velasquez, 2003, p. 194).

In addition to the theoretical work on social constructivism, this inquiry was also informed by the research on effective literacy teachers and teaching, and by research on literacy communities. Studies on teacher effectiveness portray the effective literacy teacher as an *orchestrator* who organizes successful classroom learning environments for students (Allington, 2005; Turner, 2005). Effective teachers create learning environments that facilitate independent literacy learning, and communicate high expectations for student learning and behavior, by establishing classroom rules and routines (Morrow, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Exceptional teachers also build motivational classroom environments which actively engage students in literacy learning by (a) enhancing cooperative learning and reducing competition, (b) providing positive rather than negative feedback, and (c) creating excitement about what is being taught (Morrow, 2002; Pressley, 2003; Wharton-McDonald, 2005). Finally, effective teachers design classroom environments that provide equal access to learning by implementing literacy activities that are meaningful and authentic to students, and providing multiple opportunities for them to acquire and practice new skills (Wharton-McDonald, 2005).

Building upon the image of effective teachers as orchestrators, the research on literacy communities highlights the facilitative role of teachers and the active role of students within these community-oriented settings (Swafford, Chapman, Rhodes, & Kallus, 1996). Within literacy communities teachers view themselves as learners alongside their students so that all members of the community become partners in teaching and learning (Knight, 1994). Teachers and students also work collaboratively to restructure the literacy curriculum which allows for a greater sense of connection to and validation of students' lives and experiences (Peterson, 1992). In this way, teachers and students also come to value and affirm diversity as the varying strengths, talents, histories, and experiences of community members are drawn upon as resources for achieving collective goals (Nieto, 1999).

To summarize, social constructivist theory, together with research on effective literacy teachers and teaching and literacy communities, framed the study. Based upon an interest in improving literacy learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students, this case study investigation was guided by three research questions: (a) What practices did two effective teachers enact to build community within a multicultural classroom and in a multilingual classroom? (b) What types of instructional approaches and pedagogical strategies were

developed by two effective teachers for the purpose of building literacy communities? and (c) How did community-building practices shape literacy teaching and learning in these classrooms?

## METHODOLOGY

### Case study contexts and participants

This article describes the community-building practices enacted in multicultural and multilingual classrooms by drawing on two extensive ethnographic case studies. The first case study centers on Rita and her community-building practices in a multicultural third-grade classroom. Rita taught in a midsized southeastern elementary school that was multicultural, economically diverse, and concerned about improving the performance of culturally and linguistically diverse students (i.e., African American and Hispanic). Rita was nominated as an effective literacy teacher through a rigorous selection process which included recommendations from district and school administrators, school counselors, and former students and their parents.

The second case study highlights Meredith and her community-building practices in an ESL classroom. As a veteran ESL teacher with more than 20 years' experience, Meredith's involvement with ESL issues demonstrated her status as an exemplary teacher. Meredith contributed to the development of the ESL curriculum and assessment system within her district, and participated as the focal teacher in several ESL assessment projects conducted by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). At the time of the study Meredith taught in a midwestern public elementary school serving 240 K–5 students. Of these students, 80% were children of international graduate students from 35 countries and 30 languages, and only 27% possessed minimal English skills. To accommodate these ESL students' cultural and linguistic needs, Meredith and another ESL teacher coordinated a *pull-out* ESL program. Although students were given English instruction outside of their regular classrooms, Meredith worked closely with regular classroom teachers so students received content area instruction while developing their English language skills.

### Data Collection and Analysis

This inquiry represents a reanalysis of data from two qualitative projects on effective literacy teachers and teaching for multicultural and multilingual students (see Kim, 2003; Turner, 2003). Though unusual for some research traditions, such a post hoc revisiting of data generated for different purposes is deemed acceptable within qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Since both of the original studies were concerned with effective literacy teachers in elementary multicultural and multilingual classrooms, extensive ethnographic

data was collected to document the pedagogical strategies and classroom practices employed by Rita and Meredith. Data for Rita's case study were collected by the first author during the 2001–2002 academic year; sources included observational field notes, in-depth teacher interviews, informal student interviews, and classroom artifacts. Data for Meredith's case study were collected by the second author in a longitudinal study from 1997–2000 and included observational field notes, audiotapes and selected videotapes of class sessions, and student work samples.

In the present analysis, we constructed descriptive case studies of the effective literacy teachers' community-building practices and strategies by adapting Patton's (1990) qualitative content analytic procedure. In the first phase—informal analysis—we separately coded our teacher data to identify various community-building strategies. The coding systems we developed were based upon categories in the literature (e.g., establishing rules) as well as our own understandings of the social dimension of effective literacy instruction. In the second phase—theme formation—we engaged in cross-case analyses (Merriam, 1998). We compared our coding schemes across the cases, examining how various community-building strategies were similar or different. We also discussed how the community-building strategies we identified could be combined to reflect broader community-building practices (e.g., strategies such as developing trust-building activities, designing a customized multicultural learning environment, and making cultural connections with students were included in the practice “Building relationships amongst community members”). In the final phase—theme confirmation—we verified our community-building strategies and practices through triangulation of data sources and methodologies, through positive and negative case analysis, and reviewing and discussing pertinent literature.

### **CASE STUDY FINDINGS**

Analyses revealed four practices both teachers used to build literacy communities in their multicultural and multilingual classrooms: (a) building relationships amongst community members, (b) fostering collective responsibility within the community, (c) promoting ownership of literacy for all community members, and (d) reflecting on community learning. Although these community-building practices were similar across both cases, we found the teachers enacted them differently; teachers developed particular strategies that reinforced the literacy communities based on their students' educational and social strengths and needs (see Table 1). The four common community-building practices and how they were enacted by the effective literacy teachers are discussed in greater detail in the remainder of the section.

**Table 1. Effective Literacy Teachers' Community-Building Practices and Strategies**

Common Community-Building Practices	Rita's Community-Building Strategies	Meredith's Community-Building Strategies
Building relationships amongst community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community projects</li> <li>• Trust-building activities (collaborative literacy events)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customized learning environment</li> <li>• Instructional strategies (e.g., repetition)</li> <li>• Positive feedback</li> </ul>
Fostering a sense of collective responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community atmosphere</li> <li>• Community discourse</li> <li>• Community problem solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit rules for participation</li> <li>• Democratic turn-taking</li> </ul>
Promoting ownership of literacy for all community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing multiple opportunities for successful reading:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Read-alouds</li> <li>— Guided reading groups</li> <li>— Heterogeneous groups</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use English as means for communication:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Practical activities</li> <li>— Support for elaborating language</li> <li>— Active use of integrated language skills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Reflecting on the community's learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buddy reading with first graders</li> <li>• Readers theater</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing student assessment</li> <li>• Student portfolio interviews</li> </ul>

**Case 1: Rita's Community-Building Practices in a Multicultural Third-Grade Classroom**

Rita, a European American teacher in her late 20s, explained she had pursued a career in teaching because, "I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children." She was particularly passionate about inclusion, and at the time of the study she had four children—including two boys with mild autism—being mainstreamed into her classroom. Her class was also culturally diverse, including 13 European Americans, six African Americans, one Hispanic, and one Asian American.

### **Building relationships amongst community members**

Rita believed the key to creating a successful literacy community is “making certain that each student feels that he or she belongs to the group and has something important to contribute.” To build positive bonds within the literacy community, Rita and her students worked on community projects that emphasized the importance of relationships throughout the year. On the first day of school community members created a beautiful display of paper dolls. Students initially created the dolls as self-portraits reflecting their own individual styles, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. But the spirit of community coalesced as Rita and her students introduced themselves using their dolls and began talking about their hopes and dreams for their time together. The experience of making the dolls and creating a wall display with them established the relational foundation within the community and served as a conversation piece for many community members during the year.

Rita also designed a series of collaborative literacy events that she called *trust-building activities* for the first few weeks of September. Through these activities Rita and her students wrote and read texts that were personally meaningful to them. In sharing these authentic texts with other community members, an atmosphere of mutual respect, openness, and support was cultivated. A favorite was the *my story* activity; students wrote short stories about themselves in response to several personal questions (e.g., Are you neat or messy? Left handed or right handed? What physical activities do you enjoy?), illustrated their texts, and shared their published stories with partners. Although *my story* and the other trust-building activities were not part of the school’s official language arts curriculum, Rita believed they were essential for successful literacy learning:

We don’t dive into curriculum stuff right away because I think it is important for students to feel comfortable and safe. I mean, school can be a scary experience for them, and I want to create an environment where they can say, ‘I feel safe here, I feel comfortable here, I can share my ideas and opinions and thoughts.’

Thus, Rita emphasized the psychological safety within a caring literacy community because she thought it gave students the freedom to take risks and express themselves to other members. Her commitment to psychological safety remained consistent in community projects and activities for the remainder of the year. For example, in the TED E. BEAR project, each student took a stuffed teddy bear home over the weekend and recorded his daily activities in an *adventure journal*. On Monday mornings students sat in a special author’s chair and read their journal entries to the community. Recognizing a wide variety of family stories would be shared, Rita made explicit comments about the similarities and differences in Ted’s adventures (e.g., “Isn’t it cool that Ted

has visited a church, a synagogue, and a mosque this year?”) and encouraged students to ask questions if they were curious about particular activities (e.g., one African American girl was asked about Ted’s visit to a hair braiding salon). Taken together these projects were powerful community-building practices because they created a sense of unity and affirmed student diversity.

### **Fostering collective responsibility within the community**

Beginning the first day of school, Rita started to create a community atmosphere within their third-grade classroom. Rita arranged the classroom in a way that invited collaborative learning; she grouped desks together, placed a large rug at the front of the room for whole-group reading experiences, and created cozy areas throughout the room to serve as centers for small-group work. In addition, Rita frequently used *community discourse* to foster the spirit of collectivism. She used language markers, such as *we* and *us*, to refer to the class, and she developed classroom rules to encourage teamwork (e.g. “Work together to solve problems;” “Ask team members before asking me”). Rita rewarded their collaborative efforts in a variety of ways including positive feedback (e.g. “We’re really getting the job done today in Writing Workshop!”), providing small treats like candy and popsicles, and giving PAT time (preferred activity time) when students could play computer and/or board games. As Rita explained, “I think rewards are a great motivator for some kids. And it doesn’t have to be a lot, or happen all the time. But kids need to see that when they work together, they accomplish so much more.”

As the spirit of collectivism deepened, students shared responsibility for the collective learning of the literacy community in a variety of ways, including selecting books for the daily read-aloud based upon common interests within the community, managing the peer conferencing phases (e.g., brainstorming, editing, revising) of writing workshop, and co-planning integrated curricular units with Rita. Several students also took the initiative to help Troy, an African American boy with mild autism, to adjust to life within the community. With their words of encouragement and high-fives they were able to help Troy behave in more appropriate ways as well as cultivate a feeling of acceptance and support within the larger classroom community. As Rita happily noted at the end of the year, “I now find that a lot of the kids are very accepting of Troy, even though he is different from them.”

Finally, students exhibited a strong sense of collectivism as they worked together to solve community problems. One memorable instance of this collaborative problem solving occurred after Rita mentioned that she had “run out of ideas for getting students to read during DEAR (*drop everything and read*) time.” Two community members, an autistic African American boy and his best friend, a European American boy, proposed they create a display of their favorite books and the community unanimously accepted their proposal.

Their display reflected a wide range of genres, interests, and issues (e.g., autobiographies, multicultural literature, magazines). The community's book display was hugely successful, and during DEAR time community members were sprawled around the room, reading and talking animatedly about their favorite parts.

### **Promoting ownership of literacy for all community members**

As a literacy teacher, Rita believed it was her responsibility to orchestrate successful literacy-learning experiences for her third graders: "It's important to provide experiences where all students are successful readers. If they're frustrated because the books are too difficult, or they are not connecting with them, then that negative attitude is going to carry from grade to grade." For Rita, owning literacy was more than knowing how to decode and comprehend words; it also included students' attitudes and the personal meanings that they constructed about texts.

To promote ownership of literacy for all community members, Rita implemented three types of shared reading events. First, she organized interactive read-alouds for the entire community. Rita explained she made time to read aloud every day, because "it's neat to read a book as a community. We have time to discuss what we think will happen next, and really get into the characters...It's a really big chance to share with each other." In addition to reading stories, Rita also read a variety of informational texts that integrated math, science, and social studies topics that the community was studying; for example, one morning Rita read aloud *Animals in Winter* (Bancroft & van Gelder, 1997) to complement a science unit on hibernation and migration. Culturally diverse students in the classroom enjoyed these read-alouds because, as one African American boy observed, "We learn something new every time we read together."

Second, Rita implemented flexible guided reading groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) which she called book clubs as the primary context for literacy instruction. She felt the ability grouping aspect of book club was important for student motivation because, "in these groups, everyone is reading at their own level. So you're motivating everyone, and the lower groups are just as engaged in their reading as the higher groups." To enhance student engagement across all groups Rita emphasized strategies and skills for independent reading, such as making and checking predictions. Moreover, Rita frequently developed a common theme for book club selections (e.g., folktales), so readers at all levels would have knowledge of particular topics and thus could successfully participate in whole-group discussions and activities. Ability grouping, then, did not divide the community into groups of higher and lower readers; rather, students saw themselves and each other as competent members with valuable knowledge and experiences to offer to the community.

Finally, Rita organized heterogeneous groups for working at several literacy-based learning centers around the classroom. Unlike teachers who use ability levels to guide all small-group work, Rita felt it was important for students to “work with children who are different readers and writers because they can all help each other to learn.” Observational notes confirmed students were highly engaged in these small-group experiences which included poetry-writing, inquiry projects, and other authentic literacy activities. Importantly, the scaffolding which occurred in these mixed groups enabled community members to view themselves (and others) as *good* readers.

### Reflecting on the community's learning

As a literacy teacher, Rita recognized she played the role of facilitator within the community: “I used to be at the center of my teaching. And now *the kids* are at the center. I am just like a facilitator or a helper.” To Rita, placing students at the center of instruction meant they needed to be at the center of assessment. Although Rita continuously evaluated students’ progress using formal and informal measures, she felt it was important for “students to *really* understand what they can do as readers.”

To help make their accomplishments more visible to the community, Rita created two opportunities for her third graders to reflect upon their learning. The first, *buddy reading*, was a weekly activity which involved the third and first graders reading together for 20-30 minutes. The third graders were deeply committed to creating successful reading experiences for their first-grade buddies; they constantly encouraged each other to practice reading in preparation for buddy reading, carefully selected texts for their buddies, and discussed how to expand buddies’ understanding of these texts. For example, after Rita suggested that the class choose a Gail Gibbons book for buddy reading, the community generated several ideas (e.g., “Gibbons does research so that her books have accurate information”) to share with their buddies based upon information they learned about Gibbons during their author study. Rita was particularly excited when she saw her students making these types of connections because, she explained, “Buddy reading is good, because they get practice reading with a first grader. But it’s also good for them to see where they have come from.... [t]hey get excited when they see that what they’ve learned helps their buddies, too.”

In the final months of school, Rita designed *readers’ theater*, the second opportunity for community reflection on learning. For the first readers’ theater, Rita organized the performers guided by the book club format and worked with community members to develop scripts. The second readers’ theater, however, involved mixed-level groups and community members were encouraged to construct their own scripts based upon fairytales they studied (e.g. the Three Billy Goats Gruff). Rita and her third-grade community worked collaboratively

to generate rules for rehearsing (e.g., “Practice your part until you are comfortable reading it”), and ultimately performed the fairytale readers’ theater for their first-grade buddies and another third-grade class. Community members were proud of their performance. As one Hispanic student exclaimed, “We are super readers. We can read anything!”

### **Case 2: Meredith’s Community-Building Practices in a Multilingual ESL Classroom**

Meredith taught a group of nine ESL students in Grades 4– 6. These ESL students arrived from six different countries (Botswana, China, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, and Pakistan) and were literate in their native languages. The students had low English proficiency because they were fairly new to this country; all nine students had been living in the United States less than 4 years, and six students had arrived within the last 6 months. In the ESL program Meredith taught this group of students for 40 minutes for 4 days each week.

#### **Building relationships amongst community members**

To form a literacy community in her classroom, Meredith focused on building relationships with her students at the beginning of the year in several ways. First, Meredith designed a customized learning environment that reflected the cultural worlds and experiences of her students. She used cultural artifacts of different materials, shapes, and colors in the room to decorate the classroom including oriental wall decorations from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and tablecloths from Africa and South America. She also added plants and other greenery in the classroom. Meredith’s careful arrangement of artifacts created an atmosphere that was friendly and warm, and felt like home—a home that respects individual differences. In doing so Meredith aspired to make the literacy community a place where ESL students felt their unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds were valued and affirmed.

Meredith’s instructional strategies complemented her efforts to build relationships with her ESL students. At the beginning of the school year she used repetition extensively. For example, when Meredith introduced a new unit she gave instruction to the students and then checked their comprehension. If necessary she asked students to repeat the given instruction in order to make sure that the students understood her instruction. Meredith also read numerous books with repetitive patterns, using the predictability of the language to elicit student participation and to draw their attention to syntactical features of English. For Meredith, repetition was an effective community-building strategy because it gave her beginning ESL students the opportunity to hear common English directives and expressions several times which helped to cultivate a sense of shared language and understanding. Repetition also helped Meredith’s

ESL students participate more fully in the dialogue and discourse of the literacy community because with everyone on *the same page*, the students could focus their attention on literacy and language learning.

Meredith also used positive feedback as a community-building practice and instructional tool. By capitalizing on ESL students' strengths Meredith helped the students feel confident in their emerging language skills. Observational data shows that early in the year Meredith made several comments on the volume and articulation of students' speech during whole-group presentations, such as "I liked how you put paper down low so that your audience can see your face," "I liked how you spoke loudly and clearly," and "I liked that you stood up straight during your presentation." Meredith continued providing this supportive feedback throughout the entire year because she understood oftentimes ESL students needed encouragement and validation to participate in community activities because they were not comfortable speaking English. By focusing on the positive aspects of their English language usage Meredith created a literacy community through a culture that made communicating in English a safe experience.

### **Fostering collective responsibility within the community**

Meredith believed students needed to take responsibility for themselves and for others in order to develop a strong literacy and language community. She spent the entire year supporting her students as they slowly learned to work together. For example, Meredith designed an interview activity in which community members would interview each other about their lives outside of school and then present their findings to the entire community. Meredith's purpose for the interview activity was twofold: she wanted to support students' English language development through speaking and listening, and she wanted to help students understand how to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. To accomplish this, Meredith facilitated several discussions, not only about the interviewing process itself, but about the responsibilities and obligations of the speaker and the audience. Additionally, Meredith and the community worked together to develop *should-do-lists* for the audience and the speaker so they could see their lists in written form. Meredith willingly supported students' participation during these collective activities; for example, when Meredith asked students to think of what speakers should do during their presentations and they did not respond, she began demonstrating undesirable behaviors which helped students to open up and make suggestions for the class list.

To foster collective responsibility, Meredith also encouraged *democratic turn taking* during whole-class discussions. She usually asked students to take turns by going around the table to present their ideas. No matter how slow or hesitant a child could be, Meredith encouraged every student to finish his/her

thoughts, and expected the rest of the group to be patient for their peers. For example, in January Meredith led a writing activity that required students to compare a school they attended in their home country with their U.S. school. While developing a concept map for the activity Meredith announced each student's turn by either calling their names or by asking them if they had anything to share. When Eno, a student who was usually an active discussion participant, tried to interrupt Yeum, a shy and hesitant speaker, Meredith explained to Eno that she was still with Yeum and his turn would come around. Conversations like these helped all the ESL learners within the community to take responsibility for listening to and learning with each other.

### **Promoting ownership of literacy for all community members**

To foster her students' ownership of literacy Meredith constructed meaningful learning opportunities for the classroom community. Her primary focus was on the use of English language as a means of communication. To support English language learning of her ESL students, Meredith used three instructional strategies/activities: (a) practical and interactive language tasks, (b) implicit and explicit teaching of language forms, and (c) integrated language skills.

First, Meredith implemented practical activities that directly related to ESL students' everyday life experiences and planned interactive tasks that supported active student participation by connecting their emergent English skills with their cultural knowledge. An important example of this type of activity was interviewing which required students to interview one another about their lives outside of school and present their findings to the entire classroom community. Participating in this type of activity supported these ESL students as they *tried out* the English skills and language forms necessary for positive interactions within society. Writing activities were also integral to Meredith's ESL instruction; for example, Meredith and another ESL teacher implemented a writing activity based on the Thanksgiving holiday. During the activity they modeled an interview about food on Thanksgiving, and their exchange of questions and answers sparked interest and interaction between community members. When Meredith talked about pumpkin pie as a part of a Thanksgiving meal, students volunteered in a wide range from yucky to great fondness. Meredith's mention of mashed potatoes also spurred a short conversation on the colors of sweet potatoes in the United States and Korea.

Second, Meredith often worked with her ESL students to help them use English in clear and more conventional ways which in turn enabled them to take ownership of mainstream language conventions and skills. When Meredith and the community were developing a should-do-list for the audience, Eno, a sixth-grade boy, suggested "What about working with us?" Listening carefully to Eno's comment Meredith asked him to elaborate on his idea and gave him time and support to explain his thoughts, as this field note excerpt demonstrates:

- Eno: What about working with us?  
Meredith: Working with us? Can you tell me more?  
Eno: Hmm. Looks like...I am working (rising intonation). But another person is helps me...looks like this (holding a paper with both hands). It's working with us.  
Meredith: Working together.  
Eno: Yes!  
Meredith: Great! A wonderful idea!!

While Meredith encouraged and listened to Eno's explanation, she guided him to focus on the important details of his message and express them. Furthermore, by providing the word together when Eno completed his explanation, Meredith helped him to connect his conceptual knowledge of the word with its conventional English form. In addition to conversing with individual students Meredith also provided explicit English skill instruction (e.g. spelling, syntax, phonics) as the students' English proficiency increased. For example, at the beginning of the year Meredith did not demand students spell correctly and she typically wrote the words that the students needed help with spelling on the board so the entire community would learn to spell them. As the year progressed Meredith shifted more of the responsibility to students, encouraging them to sound out words when they asked for help with spelling, and designing an editing activity in which students paid close attention to spelling, word choice, and sentence structure. To ensure that all her ESL students were developing English language skills Meredith also provided additional phonics and skills instruction throughout the year.

Finally, Meredith's classroom activities facilitated students' active use of integrated language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in ways that affirmed and respected their knowledge of home culture. For example, when Meredith implemented a writing activity that required students to compare a school they attended in their home country with their U.S. school she began with a community discussion to develop a concept map. After the community discussion students were given an opportunity to write, edit their written work with peers and the teacher, and read their written pieces to the literacy community. Clearly, these integrated activities enabled Meredith's ESL students to *own literacy* by fostering their proficiency in English.

### **Reflecting on the community's learning**

Ongoing student assessment was an essential part of Meredith's ESL instruction. She carefully monitored students' progress and modified her instruction to support student learning. Observational data showed Meredith changed desk arrangements in the classroom because she noticed some students were not participating in community discussions; by rearranging the desks so all

students sat together at the center of the room, Meredith hoped to facilitate active participation and to support the ongoing practicing of English skills in the literacy community. Meredith also used assessment information to match her ESL readers to appropriate texts, which is an essential component of effective literacy instruction (Allington, 2005). For example, Meredith mentioned that her students' oral fluency while reading a story was low and she suspected that the text was too difficult for her students. During the following class Meredith continued to monitor students' comprehension of the key ideas in the story, and based upon students' responses, she concluded the text was too difficult for her students and chose a less difficult text for the community to read. Thus, Meredith constantly assessed the language and literacy learning of community members and used this information to guide her literacy instruction.

Equally important, Meredith helped her ESL students reflect upon their English language development and literacy learning through student portfolio interviews. Meredith and her students shared ownership of the portfolio assessment process and community members were actively involved in selecting, revising, and reflecting on the texts they chose to include in the portfolio as representations of their progress as English language learners. Meredith used a writing workshop approach to provide time and space for students to craft their texts and to share them with the entire literacy community. During the spring, students chose several pieces for their portfolios and the literacy community worked together to edit and revise these texts. Community members also shared the experience of learning about portfolio interviews by watching and discussing a video of a portfolio interview with a former student. These portfolio interviews were student-centered and engaged students in the experience of documenting their English literacy development by asking three important questions: (a) What is your favorite piece? (b) Which piece shows your best work? and (c) Which piece shows your best effort? While sharing their portfolios and talking about texts that were personally meaningful, students became more metacognitive about their own English language development within the literacy community. By orchestrating these student portfolio interviews, Meredith also had the opportunity to reflect upon her classroom community's learning and to gain insights into her own teaching and her ESL students' progress in literacy and language learning. Importantly, based upon the portfolio assessments, Meredith developed instructional plans for individual students in the following year to promote continued growth in learning and thinking.

## DISCUSSION

This case study research describes the community-building practices of two effective teachers in multicultural and multilingual elementary classrooms. It is

a timely study, given the fact that the term *community* has become an increasingly popular term in elementary schools (Swafford, Chapman, Rhodes & Kallus, 1996). Yet many literacy teachers have difficulty building these types of learning environments within culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Similar to other studies of effective teaching (e.g., Taylor & Pearson, 2002), findings from this case study research suggest important insights into difficult practical problems may be gained by closely examining the instructional strategies of effective literacy educators. Specifically, our work revealed four major practices that may help more teachers experience success in building literacy communities, particularly with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds: (a) building relationships amongst community members, (b) fostering a sense of collective responsibility, (c) promoting ownership of literacy for all community members, and (d) reflecting on the community's learning. The community-building practices described in this study reinforce the notion that effective teachers orchestrate classroom environments that motivate students to learn literacy (Morrow, 2002; Pressley, 2003; Taylor, 2002; Turner, 2005) and strongly resonate with the strategies other teachers have used to successfully build literacy communities in their respective classrooms (Nathan, 1995; Whatley & Canalis, 2002).

This case study research holds important implications for literacy educators and education. First, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to building literacy communities in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. While there may be some common principles of building communities that all teachers will need to enact in order to build successful literacy communities (e.g., building relationships), effective teachers also develop specific community-building strategies appropriate for the students in their classrooms. Data in this study clearly indicated Rita and Meredith used common practices to build literacy communities within their classrooms, but they enacted these practices quite differently. Rita, for example, primarily used reading and writing activities (e.g., trust-building activities, read-alouds, writing workshop) to form positive relationships within her multicultural literacy community, while Meredith implemented language-based strategies (e.g., repeating directions, reading predictable books, student interviewing) to support the development of her multilingual literacy community. Both teachers were effective community builders because they orchestrated literacy communities that were congruent with the strengths and needs of their elementary students.

Second, teachers must ensure that all students are actively participating and working productively within their literacy communities. Recent research (e.g., Moller, 2005) suggests community-oriented learning environments do not necessarily provide all students with equal access to literate practices. Thus, teachers who successfully build classroom learning communities must develop structures, policies, and activities that support the literacy development of each and every member, including those students from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds. Findings from this study suggest effective teachers provide equal access to learning by working with their community to achieve an important collective goal: ownership of literacy for all community members. Like Rita and Meredith, teachers can implement community-building strategies which promote culturally and linguistically diverse students' ownership of mainstream literacy practices such as organizing multiple group formats (e.g., shared reading, guided reading groups, and heterogeneous groups) that motivate culturally diverse students to read, and by providing multiple opportunities for ESL students to practice English language skills (e.g., student interviewing activities, class discussions, individual presentations). Additionally, teachers can emphasize collective responsibility and accountability for learning using a wide variety of informal measures (e.g., portfolio assessments) and activities (e.g., readers theater, buddy reading) to assess individual members' literacy development and to support community achievement. Studies which expand this exploratory work to include other effective teachers who build literacy communities in multicultural and multilingual elementary classrooms would be particularly useful because, as McKinney (2003) points out

We especially need to continue research [on learning communities] with populations who are marginalized, with those who do not have access to the tools and experiences of the 'advantaged'...learner...and with those who have not had opportunities to participate in historical trajectories of networks that create advantage in the lives of others. (p. 306)

Finally, teachers in multicultural and multilingual classrooms must recognize the importance of student diversity in order to build successful literacy communities. Many teachers believe colorblindness is the best approach in teaching children; they are proud that they *don't see color* in their classrooms because they think students will feel more accepted in the community if their differences are ignored (Nieto, 1998). Findings from this investigation, however, suggest teachers create motivational literacy-learning communities for culturally and linguistically diverse students by acknowledging and affirming their differences. Both Rita and Meredith were *color-conscious teachers* (Nieto, 1998) who celebrated students' cultural and linguistic differences in a variety of ways (e.g., writing and talking about their home lives through the TED E. BEAR activity, sharing their favorite books, displaying cultural artifacts in the classroom, talking about cultural differences in holidays). Equally important, Rita and Meredith did not view student differences as deficits; they held high expectations for all members of the literacy community and provided the support necessary for students to successfully meet these expectations through peer and teacher scaffolding (e.g., working in heterogeneous reading groups, providing explicit English skill instruction) and community relationships (e.g.,

fostering the spirit of collectivism, building trusting and respectful connections with others). Future research on elementary teachers who effectively enhance the cultural continuity between home and school in order to build literacy learning communities for culturally and linguistically diverse students represents an important step towards improving literacy education for all students.

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