There was an air of excitement and a flurry of activity throughout the room as desks and chairs were pushed and pulled. The fourth graders in Mrs. Lynn’s English language arts class prepared to meet for literature circle discussion. These small student-led groups were organized in sharp contrast to the whole-class teacher-led reading instruction that had just ended.

The students loved the chance to talk with each other about what they were reading. Mia, JLo, Lupita, and Naila were meeting to read and discuss events in the second chapter of the story, *Felita* (Mohr, 1979). While the four girls in the literature circle knew each other, they were not all close friends. JLo self-identified as Puerto Rican and African American, and Naila as African American, Both were proficient in English and at beginning stages of Spanish proficiency. Mia self-identified as Mexican American and was proficient in English. Lupita, who also self-identified as Mexican American, was more proficient in Spanish.

In her role as discussion director, Mia waited patiently as the other girls flipped through their books to see who could find the answer to her question first. “I know, I know,” JLo stated enthusiastically as she read the answer from a sentence in the story. “Correct,” stated Mia, “Now it’s Lupita’s turn to read.” Lupita read slowly, pausing occasionally to think about the pronunciation before reading the words aloud. She read what a neighbor was saying to Felita, “...so many colors in your family. What are you?” As the neighbors continued to show contempt toward Felita and her family, Lupita read, “Her mother is black and her father is white.” Lupita continued reading, “They ain’t white...just trying to pass.” She then read a word none of the girls had ever read before, “Niggers.”

The girls all gasped and ran to their teacher. Mrs. Lynn said, “It’s not a bad word, but it’s not a good word.” Although Lupita had read the word to her literature circle, she asked her teacher, “Do I have to say it?” and Mrs. Lynn reassured her she did not have to say it again. (From field notes and audio transcription, 3/26/03)

Critical encounters emerge when a word, concept, or event in a story surprises, shocks, or frightens the reader or readers to such a degree that they seek to inquire further about the vocabulary or event selected by the author. Through our work, we have found that these encounters are pivotal moments that have transformative possibilities for student discussion and learning. Appleman (2000) uses the term *critical encounters* to stress how adolescents can learn to read critically by utilizing multiple literary theories. In our work and in this article, we use the term *critical encounters* to address the specific moments in reading that disrupt the traditional social pattern of talk. In the example above, the girls’ reading was frozen by racist dialogue in their literature selection.

As Mia, Lupita, JLo, and Naila were reading the second chapter of *Felita* (Mohr, 1979), they were perplexed by the degree of discrimination the 10-year-old female protagonist, Felita, and her Puerto Rican family experienced when they moved to a new neighborhood. While reading aloud, Lupita’s voice expressed tension, and suddenly she had to decide what to do with the uncommon presence of a particularly pejorative word.

1. All participants in the study used self-selected pseudonyms.

2. Mrs. Lynn shared with us that she was aware of the controversial nature of the word as well as the historical meanings and varied uses that students may have been familiar with. She wanted students to understand that it was a word used to hurt. See Randall Kennedy (1999–2000; 2002) for an historical analysis of the word.
We argue that quality multicultural children’s literature engages readers with critical encounters of social (in)justice through its selective use of language, plot, and characterizations. As bilingual researchers, we recognize an important connection between multicultural literature and bilingual education, as do other literacy educators. For example, Dudley-Marling (2003) refers to the definition of multicultural literature that he used when he was teaching third grade: “[Multicultural literature is] literature by and about people who are members of groups considered to be outside the socio-political mainstream” (Bishop, 1992, cited in Dudley-Marling p. 305). This definition was useful to us, as it was to Dudley-Marling, because it raises issues related to the insider/outsider authorial perspective in children’s literature, alludes to the types of opportunities that should be presented to children to see themselves authentically represented in the literacy curriculum, and points to the benefits of providing storylines wherein characters, and by extension students, are pushed to question negative stereotypes, discriminatory language, or unfair acts directed toward characters in stories.

As part of our larger interest in the development of literacies among bilingual students, we have documented and analyzed the talk of four girls regarding their critical encounter with racism in the novel Felita. Through our participation as bilingual researchers in the children’s classroom, we were able to document the powerful conversations that occur in discussion groups in bilingual programs using multicultural literature. The context of the study was unique because the majority of participants were members of diverse ethnic groups, in this case Mexican American, African American, Puerto Rican, and Mexican. Some students self-identified with two communities—Puerto Rican and Panamanian, Dominican and Salvadoran, Puerto Rican and Jamaican, Mexican American and Irish American. In this urban classroom context, the primary research question we considered was, how do students in literature discussion groups access cultural and linguistic resources to build collective understandings of multicultural literature? We propose that through the analysis of children’s talk, we can make visible how meaning is mediated among teachers and students. In the following section, we discuss how sociocultural theory—functioning as a lens for interpreting the ways student talk related to critical encounters in text—altered the format and content of student discussions.

**Theoretical Framework**

Mrs. Lynn’s goal was to immerse all of her students in a process through which they would become full participants in the new literacy practice of literature circles. She was informed by Daniels’s (1994) model of creating and sustaining literature circles, and valued its apprenticeship potential (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for building community among her students. The notion that learning through apprenticeship is inseparable from becoming full participants in the world of the classroom is grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) primary tenet that higher psychological functions originate in human social and cultural activities.

Vygotskian-inspired research (Moll, 2001) advances the idea that there are cognitive benefits to an individual when engaging in a meaningful apprentice-type social activity. Students are seen as knowledgeable beings with their own theories of the world (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Smith, 1975) and are invited to bring their own, and build on each other’s, prior knowledge. We agree with Freire (1983) who espoused the theory that literacy instruction must include the use of culturally relevant reading materials in the dialogic interaction of a community of practice. The success of literacy also requires that teachers act as sociocultural mediators by organizing “learning aimed at the potential and not at the developmental level of the children” (Díaz & Flores, 2001, p. 30).

Accordingly, sociocultural theory suggests some factors that must be present to foster literacy development—an environment in which participants can build a community of practice, in this case with the help of a sociocultural mediator; availability of textual tools that are culturally relevant, in this case through quality multicultural literature; and literacy events that provide an abundance of interactional opportunities between and among classroom members, in this case through literature circles. Unfortunately, national policies have led to language arts programs where discrete skills and scripted instructional strategies all too often take precedence over literacy.
program designs that are more sensitive to local histories, teacher knowledge, and students' full participation in learning.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Mrs. Lynn’s English language arts classroom was a rich context for our semester-long (January 2003 to June 2003) qualitative study of the implementation of literature circles using quality multicultural children’s literature. The classroom was located in a bilingual elementary school of a large Midwestern city with a growing Latina/o community. In this urban school, native language reading instruction was provided for both Spanish- and English-dominant students from kindergarten through third grade. At the time of the study, beginning in the fourth grade, students received English language arts instruction and Spanish language arts instruction. In addition, the school district had mandated the use of a highly scripted language arts curriculum, Open Court. Programs such as Open Court are widely used in urban school districts with bilingual populations (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004) and prioritize the acquisition of skills and proficiency in English over critical reading practices (Gutiérrez, 2001).

Mrs. Lynn constructed her lesson plans in accordance with the Open Court program, conducting whole-class lessons using the order and class configuration outlined in the teacher guide. Mrs. Lynn coordinated with the Spanish language arts teacher who used the Spanish language version of the Open Court program, Foro Abierto, for instruction. They alternated stories within each theme so that students were never receiving instruction on the same story in both languages. The total required language arts time was divided between the two classes. Mrs. Lynn provided approximately one hour and forty-five minutes of English language arts instruction to each fourth-grade class daily.

At the start of the 2002–2003 school year, Mrs. Lynn was searching for ways to support the students assigned to her class who were in the process of transitioning from Spanish to English reading. Spanish, which contributed to their more frequent association with peers who shared their language preference. In consultation with the researchers, she decided that discussion groups with quality multicultural literature could address many of her concerns.

Using ethnographic methods to collect and analyze the data, we sought to understand how literature discussion groups influence English language learners who speak a different language or language variety in their homes. We utilized classroom ethnographic methods through systematic collection of field notes, interviews, audio- and videotapes, and student-produced artifacts in order to provide an in-depth account (Trueba, 1993) of the classroom culture (Dixon, Frank, & Green, 1999). Artifacts included student role sheets, evaluations, and written responses.

Mrs. Lynn communicated her enthusiasm for literature circles to her fourth-grade bilingual community. Prior to implementing literature circles, class time was dedicated to preparing students for using specific roles in the discussions. Daniels (1994) recommends using roles such as: discussion director, connector, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, and illustrator. These labels/ functions served as temporary scaffolds to support the development of discussion skills during literature discussion circles. The discussion director thinks of questions to promote discussion; the vocabulary enricher chooses interesting or perplexing words or phrases to pose to the group; the connector supplies connections with other texts, film, or personal experiences; the summarizer provides a summary of the section read; and the illustrator represents visually his or her thoughts related to the reading. In Ms. Lynn’s class, students used “role sheets” with prompts created by Daniels (1994) to remind them of their roles during discussions.

Mrs. Lynn was explicit about upholding a principle of reading and writing that would create “our own theories and ways of understanding the world” (Wenger, Pea, Brown, & Heath, 1999, p. 48). She reminded students daily of the responsibility they each had as members of cooperative groups. As recommended by Wenger et al., her goal was to make students “aware of their interdependence in making the job possible and
the atmosphere pleasant” (p. 47). Mrs. Lynn made explicit the social values of both listening intently when others read and encouraging the use of Spanish and English in order to ensure that everyone understood what was being read and discussed.

The development of a new, shared practice entailed a process of gradual release of specific responsibilities—selecting materials to read, leading discussion, navigating multiple perspectives, deciding next steps—from the teacher to the students (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). As well as additional responsibilities, the shared practice required a different style of participation than was expected in the Open Court program. For this reason, supplementing language arts instruction with literature circles provided students with opportunities to take up increased responsibility as well as access multiple linguistic codes in making meaning of text. For Mrs. Lynn, this meant organizing instruction to effectively support students in both the teacher-directed format of Open Court reading instruction and the mode of participation required for the new practice of literature discussions.

[Mrs. Lynn] was learning Spanish as a second language and was enthusiastically immersed in the multilingual environment of the school and wider community.

MRS. LYNN: “I TEACH FOR LIFE.”

Díaz & Flores (2001) argue that as sociocultural mediators, teachers must set up optimal environments for students to engage in and succeed with school-based reading and writing practices. With demands to meet requirements of a mandated language arts curriculum such as Open Court, this means teachers who value critical encounters with literature must make a case for the inclusion of quality multicultural children’s literature to supplement the prescribed curriculum. Mrs. Lynn strove to create a space in her English language arts class to include literature that represented the cultural diversity of her students. This decision was a reflection of her commitment to assist her students in the development of their academic as well as socio-emotional capacities.

As an African American woman, born and raised in the city where the school was located, Mrs. Lynn embraced the demographic shifts that were occurring, mainly a growing Latino population. Her decisions, such as supplementing the scripted reading program with literature circles, were grounded in her desire for her Latina/o stu-


dents to have an equitable education. For approximately ten years, she had been active in the bilingual school—as parent, community liaison, teaching English as a second language, and as a fourth-grade English language arts teacher. She was learning Spanish as a second language and was enthusiastically immersed in the multilingual environment of the school and wider community. She was determined to provide all of her students with an education that enabled them to develop pride in themselves and their culture, and respect for one another.

Mrs. Lynn’s interest in extending beyond her own African American community speaks to her personal values and the potential these beliefs have for learning about and developing respect for lives across ethnic borders. She conveyed that her choices at times were questioned. For example, it was not uncommon for African American teachers who chose to work in areas of the city that were predominantly Latino to sense disapproval from the wider community for not “working with their own.” Mrs. Lynn’s solid belief in her role as a sociocultural mediator in and outside of her classroom is of utmost importance today. African American and Latina/o communities are increasingly brought together to inhabit similar spaces, often set up to vie for resources rather than learning to share. Thus, she stated, “I teach for life.”

Teachers like Mrs. Lynn who accept and understand teaching as a sociopolitical role have extremely high standards and expectations for their students (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such teachers are not shy about providing opportunities for students to question oral and written language, unjust policies and unfair acts in former or present times, or in monocultural or multicultural texts. Additionally, the strong commitment to validate students’ language and lived experiences is not dependent on being a member of their students’ ethnic/racial community or having proficiency in their native language (Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998; Fránquiz, 2002; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004). The way that literacy was co-constructed in Mrs. Lynn’s classroom, then, provides an illustration of ways her personal values and political stances paved possible avenues for all students to participate in learning within a bilingual community of practice.
Mrs. Lynn was explicit in setting guidelines for participation in the discussion groups to ensure that all students shared their thoughts and contributed to discussions regardless of their degree of English language proficiency. At the start of one discussion group, she stated, “I want you all to respect each other’s opinions and respect each other in the groups. I don’t want to hear of anybody making fun of anyone if they use a word wrong, or, you know, because of their accent or whatever. I don’t want to see any of that. It’s hurtful . . . your group is your family. If a family member is having problems, what do you do?” (Audio transcription, 3/17/03). This statement brought to the forefront an ideological stance in which literary response is a space for disagreements, and it reinforced the premise that mediation is expected in this community of practice when a class member is having a problem.

**Quality Multicultural Children’s Literature**

Given Mrs. Lynn’s orientation toward teaching, she was interested in providing students with literature selections that connected them with and deepened their understanding of social issues, such as race relations, health traditions, and family mobility, among others. The variety of multicultural books Mrs. Lynn selected for the literature circles was intended to provide her students with a more complex understanding of the survival theme they were studying in the Open Court language arts program. For this theme, the Open Court program had a series of literature selections that addressed surviving natural disasters, political turmoil, and religious differences. The Open Court student anthology contained only segments of stories rather than entire literature selections, and while a few selections centered on the experiences of people of color, they did not represent the cultural diversity of the classroom. For these reasons, the multicultural literature Mrs. Lynn ultimately selected to complement the Open Court themes was grade-level appropriate, contained main characters representative of the students’ age and racial/cultural backgrounds, and in some cases, were available in Spanish (see Table 1). In the following section, we take a closer look at the approach for choosing the stories to implement the new social practice of literature circles, with specific focus on the story, *Felita* (Mohr, 1979).

In multicultural literature for upper elementary students, all aspects of culture, language, beliefs, and attitudes are conveyed through literary elements presented in chapters. Multicultural literature highlights characters that participate within and across multiple cultures to differing degrees (Bishop, 1997) and honors the dynamic nature of authentic communication that can be accessed for different purposes in the real world. Multicultural literature also tells historical accounts that may be absent from the school curriculum and presents alternatives to stereotypical representations of culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Harris, 2003). Thus, multicultural literature seeks to teach via cultural images, characters, languages, and dialects. Bishop (1992) identified three categories of multicultural books. These classifications are dependent on the degree of cultural understanding they afford the reader. Culturally neutral books portray characters of color but contain no real cultural content. Culturally generic books focus on characters representing a specific cultural group (through a name, a location, or perhaps a few non-English words), but do not provide culturally specific information, such as extensive use of language and its relationship to the characters’ attitude toward their sense of belonging in their home or community. Books like *Felita* (Mohr, 1979) are culturally specific books because they incorporate details that help define the main characters as members of a particular cultural group, in this case Puerto Rican.

*Felita* was a character created over 25 years ago. The author, Nicholasa Mohr, weaves memories of her childhood experiences growing up Puerto Rican in New York City. Like the author, the main character, Felita Maldonado, is Puerto Rican. According to Anderson (2006), the reader shares the hurt and anxiety young Felita experiences when her family moves “from El Barrio to what they believe is a better neighborhood and school district for their children. Instead of the better future that her father promised, the children are faced with racism and hatred” (p. 229). Abuelita (Grandmother) is the confidante who encourages Felita to be proud of her heritage. She helps
Felita with feelings such as missing her old neighborhood and friends and dealing with unexpected and unwelcome racist taunts from both children and adults in the new neighborhood.

In the story, Nicholasa Mohr represents the Puerto Rican community in New York across different eras with recognizable accuracy. The story contains several strong themes that are still relevant today—moving to a new neighborhood, confronting racism, and losing a beloved grandmother. According to Nieto (1997), while there exists great diversity within the Puerto Rican culture, there are several themes that represent commonalities within the broad Puerto Rican community, such as the centrality of family and personal resilience in the face of adversity. These are both present in the characters of the story and may account for the relevancy of this cultural tool so many years after publication.

While some of the titles promoted more discussion than others, Felita was the text that promoted the most in-depth and complex discourse among students regarding critical encounters. In other transcript segments, the focus of critical encounters included examining one another’s perspectives on curanderismo or traditional healing practices as represented in The Circuit (Jiménez, 1997), the danger and causes of fires in Felita (Mohr, 1979), and overcoming feelings of fear and anger in My Name Is María Isabel (Ada, 1995).

**LITERATURE CIRCLES**

In addition to providing quality multicultural literature that reflected the students’ cultural backgrounds, Mrs. Lynn wanted her fourth graders to have the opportunity to select and talk about literature in small-group, student-led literature discussions. In this way, the act of reading becomes a purposeful meaning-making activity for developing multiple (Daniels, 1994) rather than single interpretations. Additionally, research indicates that literature discussions are exemplary for stimulating inquiry (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1995), promoting inferential reasoning (Jewell & Pratt, 1999), mediating understanding of difficult social issues (Möller & Allen, 2000; Möller, 2002), and facilitating risk-taking among second-language learners of English (Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000). In fact, McMahon (1997) states that elementary school students can help one another construct meaning and also “fill in missing background knowledge, analyze and synthesize information, and solve problems” (p. 90).

However, research also indicates that such interactive response-centered discussions sometimes require the teacher to take a role as facilitator, participant, mediator, or active listener in the literature circle discussion (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999). Overall, proponents of literature circles agree that student discussion requires robust social interaction and the willingness of teacher and students to (re)position their roles while layering meanings by building on each other’s responses to the selected literature.

The interactions and communication involved in literature discussion have additional purposes for bilingual classrooms. In these classrooms, peers often serve in the role of the more expert other, particularly as language models, when participating in the reading and discussing of selected literature. Hearing a native speaker of Spanish or English read or talk about events in a story can serve as a powerful model for the development of

<table>
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Connection to Theme</th>
<th>Language of Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mi Nombre es María Isabel</td>
<td>Alma Flor Ada</td>
<td>Moving/Maintaining Identity</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>My Name Is María Isabel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locomotion</td>
<td>Jacqueline Woodson</td>
<td>Loss/Change</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cajas de Cartón: Relato de la vida peregrina de un niño campesino</td>
<td>Francisco Jiménez</td>
<td>Moving/Migrating</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child</td>
<td>Mildred Taylor</td>
<td>Racism/Environmental</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>Song of the Trees</td>
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<td>Danger/Depression Era</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>How Tía Lola Came to Visit</td>
<td>Julia Álvarez</td>
<td>Moving/Adapting to Change</td>
<td>English</td>
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Table 1. Multicultural children’s literature on the theme of “Survival”
the target language. This modeling becomes even more effective when students have the opportunity to expand their existing schema to the topic of the story (Escamilla, 1997) based on the contributions of their peers across literature circle meetings. It is also possible for a teacher and students to assist each other in making sense of sad, painful, and complex social issues, such as racial injustice (Möller, 2002), by using all textual and linguistic resources available from members of the class (Enciso, 2003).

In their research on literature discussion groups in a first-grade bilingual classroom, Martínez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999) purposely chose picture books with provocative themes. The Spanish-speaking students in their Arizona classroom were imaginative storytellers during literature group discussions. Similarly, the Trackton students in the seminal study conducted by Heath (1983) in the Carolina Piedmonts displayed creative storytelling abilities, yet had difficulty understanding school’s ways with words. They encountered a contrast in language socialization between ways with words in their homes and schools. According to Martínez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999), the Spanish-speaking students who engaged in storytelling in their first-grade classroom displayed their difficulty with the school’s ways with words by missing important story details in the picture books. In contrast, their English-speaking counterparts remembered discrete details but seemed either less interested in or less adept at using their imaginations to elaborate on the story line. In Heath’s study, the middle-class children also were able to recount discrete details and less able to be creative storytellers. Interestingly, both studies show that socioeconomic class and language differences influence participation structures in classroom events. Such findings suggest that a variety of language arts activities are necessary for providing students with equitable opportunities to learn.

Literature circles in Mrs. Lynn’s classroom were not dependent on Spanish or English reading level/ proficiency and presented new opportunities for the fourth graders to read and discuss quality multicultural literature with each other. Many formats are used for literature discussion in classrooms; for example, in the study by Martínez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999), the students had books read to them at home, then came together to discuss them at school. The fourth-grade students in Peralta-Nash and Dutch’s (2000) study of literature circles read in the discussion groups. Mrs. Lynn chose to have students read with their groups to ensure that they would have support when they came across challenges in the text. The students were encouraged to read silently; however, they would often choose to read “round robin” style, where each took a turn reading aloud to the group while the others followed along in their books.

The new way of discussing literature invited students to use their life experiences as linguistic and cultural tools for personal understanding and for bringing about understanding in others. Concretely, this meant that students transitioning from Spanish to English were provided practice in using receptive and productive language as well as positive reinforcement in the strategies of listening, using context clues for guessing at meaning of story events, listening for known elements and key words, differentiating between major and minor points of information, and initiating conversations. Thus, in literature circles, Felita was not only a story that served to mediate prior experiences and understandings about the effects of racism in ordinary lives, but also served as an appropriate text for developing confidence among second language learners of English as they further developed their oral language skills.

**DO I HAVE TO SAY IT?**

In the vignette presented at the opening of the article, Mia, Naila, JLo, and Lupita were surprised and saddened by the violence that Felita experienced in her new neighborhood. They were particularly shocked by the word that symbolized that violence. After informing Mrs. Lynn of what they had read, the researcher stepped into their literature circle and asked them to share their understanding of the events that led up to the critical encounter. In the story, Felita and her family had just moved, and she was playing with her new friends in front of her apartment building. Several adults gathered outside and called for the girls playing with Felita to join them. The adults began questioning the girls in hushed voices while staring at Felita. As Felita tried to go up the stairs to her apartment, the girls blocked her path and began using discriminatory and racist taunts.
Felita pushed through the girls as they hit and punched her, until she finally made it home.

As other researchers have found, literacy learning casts children as “social actors” who must position themselves and each other (Heath, 1983; Luke, 1994; Larson, 2003) in relation to racialized beliefs. Research that promotes making race visible (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003) claims that through reader positionings, or what we refer to as critical encounters, students are provided opportunities to learn how racism, classism, sexism, ablism, or linguicism function in order to work against its effects. In the following transcript segment, Mia begins the discussion by explaining her understanding of the bad word.

Researcher: Why is this a bad word?
Mia: Because you can’t make fun of somebody for being that way. That’s how God made them and that’s my true feelings.

Researcher: Yeah, but this word in particular, was it used to make what people . . .
Naila: Impression.
Researcher: An impression.
JLo: Or talk down Puerto Ricans and Black people.
Researcher: . . . and Black people. So, because it’s in this book doesn’t mean it’s an okay word. Are sometimes people mean to other people?
Naila: Yes.
Researcher: So, they called her that name. Then they called her Spic and so what did she do?
Mia: She yelled. [Reads from the book] She said, “Let me through!” She screamed.
Researcher: Why don’t you guys talk for a few minutes; what would you do, what would you have done if you were Felita?

In the excerpt above, Mia referred to race as a God-given characteristic, while Naila and JLo agreed that racial slurs are used to impress, hurt, or “talk down” Black and Puerto Rican people. Interestingly, Mia directed her attention to the task and read on to find out what happened to Felita. The researcher stepped out of the literature circle at this point in order to provide students with the opportunity to position themselves in relation to the discriminatory words hurled at Felita. In this way, they could make connections between their multiple social worlds and Felita’s dilemma. The teacher and researcher expected the girls to serve as mediators for one another by engaging in discourse that would offer different ways to solve Felita’s problem.

Mia had been leading the discussions using a teacher-like question-and-answer format. At the onset of the next transcript segment, however, she briefly relinquished her role as discussion director to JLo. While her immediate response was to resolve Felita’s problem with violence, JLo and Lupita were struggling to imagine different resolutions. These reactions illustrate the powerful role that literacy can play. As Ladson-Billings describes, “Literacy serves as a site for racial struggle and potentially racial understanding” (2003, p. ix). The tension and struggle are evident in the dialogue that ensued.

JLo: Mia, what would you do if you were Felita?
Mia: Well JLo, I would get all my friends and beat ‘em up and try to solve the problem. Even though I would want to beat them up so bad and I’d just try to solve the problem and live with it or else if they keep doing it, they getting beat down.

JLo: Okay, how do you feel Lupita, about it?
Lupita: I feel bad because, ’cause if that was me, I would be really sad because they didn’t let us, me pass to my house. Okay, what’s your name? What would you do, JLo?

JLo: I would feel bad, ’cause they are talking about talking down Black people and Puerto Ricans and Mexicans like that and I feel bad or Black people or American people, or Black people or Puerto Rican or other people like that, they’re talking down about them.

Mia: What would you say, Naila?
Naila: I think it would be rude to do that, that’s why I wouldn’t do it.

Mia: But what would you do like, what would you do if you were in that situation?

Naila: Punch ’em in the face [laughter].
Mia: I can’t believe you just said that and Lupita wants to say something.

Lupita: I think punching her in the face or fighting with her is not going to solve the problem.
Mia: What do you have to say about that?

Naila: Well I think . . . I think that’s just kind of right but if I was really, really mad, I would just knocked her out.

Although the girls began to temporarily suspend the literature circle roles, allowing for a conversation with each person speaking longer than usual, Mia resumed her role as discussion director, asking Naila what she would say. When Naila responds that she would not behave in a similar manner as the girls that Felita encountered, Mia prods her further. This time Naila responds humorously and says, “Punch ‘em in the face.” Lupita doesn’t laugh and explicitly reminds the group that violence is not an effective answer. Without concern for Naila’s pronunciation or word choice, Lupita tells the group, “I think punching her in the face or fighting is not going to solve the problem.” Naila partially agrees with Lupita, but still feels that the situation may warrant fighting. Mia, unsure of how to respond even though she also had wanted to resolve the problem with violence, returns to her role as director and looks to JLo for another alternative.

Mia: What would you do again, JLo?

JLo: I would get my friend or the Adopt-A-COP3 and solve the problem between us.

Mia: Very good answer and Lupita again, . . .

The girls talk it over but do not reach a consensus. Mia looks for additional solutions and JLo says she would look to a friend or police officer to mediate and solve the problem. The group struggles to express feelings of anger regarding the racism that Felita encountered as they continue to negotiate possible solutions. Medina (2001) provides an explanation from her research for the type of conversation that took place among the girls related to the critical encounter with racism in the story. She writes, “Traditionally classrooms are oriented toward ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ discourses where there is no space for either violence or emotional attachment. Both violence and emotions became central to the exploration of aspects of a social reality lived by Latinas/os, and more specifically, the U.S./Mexico border community. When the students are presented with narratives that represent some form of oppression, it is hard to approach it without emotion or maybe even violence” (p. 203).

As the girls continued in the literature discussion, Lupita provided additional prompts to encourage Mia and Naila to reconsider their stances.

Lupita: I would say if you fight with them that would make the problem worser, worse and you should have talk about it.

Mia: Hold on, here’s Naila again.

Naila: I would stop fighting and then just say, ‘You want me to bring my parents here so they can take care of the problem?’ and if you push my parents around I’ll have them call the police.

Lupita: Mia, I got a question for you, what else will you do instead of punching and fighting?

Mia: Even though I wanted to beat them up and stuff I wouldn’t ’cause you know that is wrong. If you live that way scared of these whatever they are, these kids then you know that’s not going to solve anything. You got to stand up for yourself and tell somebody, all right!

A profound change occurred in the literature discussion group after the critical encounter with a racially loaded social label. The four girls engaged in a different type of dialogue about what they were reading. Prior to the encounter, they took turns looking for small details about characters, events, and the evolving story lines. After the encounter, literature circle roles were abandoned for the most part and all members of the group constructed meaning by becoming active participants in the discussion. The girls expressed agreements and disagreements. Mia’s talk indicated she believed violence was a viable option as a response towards people who made racist remarks. However, in the course of the talk, the other girls offered different solutions, including bringing parents, calling police, telling someone. Interestingly, Lupita, the least proficient English speaker, did not waver and refuted the opinions of her peers, Mia and Naila, by stating, “I would say if you fight with them that would

3. Adopt-A-COP is a program where police officers mentor young people. COP stands for Community Organized Participation.
make the problem worser." Although Mia was the one accustomed to asking the questions to move the conversation, it was Lupita who asked, "What would you do, JLo?" and "Mia, I got a question for you, what else will you do instead of fighting?" As Lupita pressed Mia to change her original position, she was also asking her to reflect on her inferential reasoning. Lupita suspected Mia's deductions were flawed and worthy of rethinking. Ultimately, Mia did admit she still felt like beating up people who used racist language, but she acknowledged this as wrong and not the only solution for "standing up for yourself."

In our estimation, Lupita made a particularly powerful transition because she had participated the least in prior discussions. The critical encounter gave her the ability to use language, not just for its surface features, but also for communicating thoughts, taking positions, and questioning the inferential reasoning of others. The dialogue between Lupita and her fellow group members is evidence that students who are in the process of developing their proficiency in English can provide valuable support to their peers. Additionally, the girls produced extended discourse because it was a topic of interest. Short et al. (1999) also found that students engaged in extended discussion when they encountered experiences in books that related directly to their lives through topics such as "name calling, abuse, baseball, the homeless, racism, and summer camp" (p. 383). Research on second language acquisition has shown that students acquiring a second language gain oral fluency and confidence from opportunities to engage in periods of extended discourse (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 1999). This critical encounter provided a purpose for that kind of elaborated talk.

**Peer Mediation and Discussion Format**

In bilingual classrooms, success in supporting students requires the willing assistance of knowledgeable members of the community. Sociocultural theory has informed our understanding of social mediation as a way to support students in becoming full participants in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). In Figure 1, we show the pattern of talk used during the discussion meetings before the critical encounter with the racist label Felita's neighbors ascribed to her family.

Mia was a confident reader, English proficient, and in charge. In the role of discussion director, she thought of questions to ask Lupita, Naila, and JLo. The types of questions the girls were asked by Mia required locating and re-reading parts of the story. Little inferential reasoning was necessary. Figure 2 shows questions written on the discussion director role sheet created by Daniels (1994) prior to meeting in literature circles. Questions such as these addressed surface features of the text *Felita* (Mohr, 1979).

After the critical encounter described above, the types of questions and participation guidelines had changed. In Figure 3, we show how the format for talk among the four girls was altered in the discussion meetings after the critical encounter with the racist label. In the new configuration as demonstrated through the children's talk, the four literature circle roles are on equal footing. It did not matter that some of the girls were reading at a higher level in English because they were more proficient in the use of this code. The change in power distribution had to do with the willingness of second language learners of English, such as Lupita, to risk questioning the inferential reasoning of the discussion director. All the girls could make connections with the story and the protagonist. However, until they shared the same repulsion toward racist words and
acts, they did not cross the boundaries described on their participation role sheets. The critical encounter and the researcher’s question—“What would you have done if you were Felita?”—provided the catalyst for positioning themselves in a more equal and fluid conversation during literature circles. By asking the students what they would have done, the researcher functioned as mediator (Short et al., 1999), and the question redirected the students back into the story and the unjust events. They had to probe deeper regarding Felita’s problem and struggle to find meaningful solutions. The students’ interest in understanding the story and meaningful solutions motivated them to prioritize voice over roles, listen to one another, and identify their own reactions. Lupita took up the role of mediator by posing questions that forced Mia and Naila to reconsider their responses to Felita’s problem.

Critical Literacy—Reflecting on Self and Others

The girls reading Felita reported that they had changed as a result of participation in the new classroom practice of literature circles. Figure 4 is a sample of an evaluation of the literature circle process. In the statement, Mia describes how her perception of herself and of other students was altered by the experience.

I learned how to become a better group and share everything and discuss like a group, do everything as a group, but mostly I learned how to connect with them if they took things seriously or if they would be hurt inside if I laughed or something. (Student evaluation, 4/28/03)

Our findings indicate that Mia and the other three girls in the literature circle engaged in “grand conversations” instead of “gentle inquisitions” (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Initially, Mia’s interactions with members of her group mimicked a teacher-centered style. After the critical encounter and Lupita’s persistent stance, Mia was able to reposition her original view and role in the group. It is as if she came to understand that a student-centered style did not mean taking on a teacher-centered format. She learned that one individual did not have to maintain control of the conversation and participants’ feelings; voices of all group members were important for understanding the details of the story. It is this continuous cycle of communicational tension and resolution (Stone, 1998) that has been identified as an authentic and meaningful way to scaffold critical literacy development.

The transformation of the literature discussion group after reading about the racism encountered by the main character, Felita, enabled all four girls to participate in the discussion as equals and utilize a wide variety of essential skills such as listening, responding, reading, and imagining (Rosenblatt, 1995). Quality multicultural children’s literature provided students with multiple opportunities to explore societal issues and understand diverse perspectives. Collaborating to make sense of the critical encounters presented in Felita, the students functioned as mediators for one another. The four girls moved through feelings of anger to seek viable solutions to the discriminatory act they had read together. The incidences of peer mediation provided class members with a broader awareness of each other’s knowledge and abilities. As Naila stated in one evaluation, “I learned with my group that none of us are dumb” (student evaluation, 4/23/03).
CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined the literature circle experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students and a teacher who has established a permanent relationship of advocacy for and with them. Like Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003), we believe in learning contexts for students that promote positive relationships with supportive adults and peers. We agree that these key relationships with resourceful and caring adults constitute “the social capital to protect them from risk behaviors and forms of alienation and despair” (p. 233, emphasis in original). At times, we were as hesitant as Lupita in making visible how students associated their racial identities and corresponding beliefs in and through talk in literature circles. As bilingual Latina researchers, we chose not to ignore the differential relations of power that come into play when a dominant curriculum and the hegemony of English (Shannon, 1995) “talk down” the legitimacy of multicultural literature, African American vernacular, or Spanish in U.S. schools.

Another objective in this article was to understand students’ evolving understanding about cultures, languages, and perspectives through quality multicultural literature that was culturally specific. Reading and deep discussion of literature instills in children a love of reading, develops vocabulary, and assists reading fluency, among many other skills. Literature that reflects students’ lived realities offers additional support students’ understanding of these tensions and what they mean. Reading and deep discussion of literature circle experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students and a teacher who has established a permanent relationship of advocacy for and with them. Like Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003), we believe in learning contexts for students that promote positive relationships with supportive adults and peers. We agree that these key relationships with resourceful and caring adults constitute “the social capital to protect them from risk behaviors and forms of alienation and despair” (p. 233, emphasis in original). At times, we were as hesitant as Lupita in making visible how students associated their racial identities and corresponding beliefs in and through talk in literature circles. As bilingual Latina researchers, we chose not to ignore the differential relations of power that come into play when a dominant curriculum and the hegemony of English (Shannon, 1995) “talk down” the legitimacy of multicultural literature, African American vernacular, or Spanish in U.S. schools.

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When students are able to see their own lives in a text, they are more likely to identify critical encounters in their reading outside the classroom.

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**JAMES STRICKLAND—2006 CEL EXEMPLARY LEADER AWARD RECIPIENT**

James Strickland is recognized nationally as an instructional leader and as a distinguished author of several books, including *The Subject Is Writing* (edited with the late Wendy Bishop), *Engaged in Learning: Teaching English 6–12* (coauthored with Kathleen Strickland), and *From Disk to Hard Copy: Teaching Writing with Computers*, among others.

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During the last seven years, Strickland has delivered at least 10 keynote addresses. He is currently Professor of English at Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania. James Strickland continues to serve as a mentor, teacher, author, and editor, and he embodies all the values and ideals of leadership that qualify him to receive this year’s CEL Exemplary Leadership Award.