'The United States is America?': a cultural perspective on READ 180 materials

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READ 180 is a reading program primarily designed for both struggling readers and English language learners (ELLs) in the United States. In this paper, we report findings from a qualitative study that investigated how four adolescent ELLs responded to using READ 180, particularly in relation to their cultural needs. Findings from the study showed that READ 180 provided some culturally responsive interaction and activities, principally in terms of thematic units, but was unable to respond to the unique cultural needs and background knowledge of each ELL to facilitate reading development. We discuss the implications of these findings for culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum planning.

Keywords: cultural content; English language learners; immigrant learners; READ 180[TM]; United States

Introduction

While the Internet has been greatly developed as a resource used for educational purposes, a large amount of money has also been spent by school districts on software programs over the last decade (Oppenheimer, 2007). According to Oppenheimer (2007), elementary and secondary schools in the United States spent $1.9 billion on electronic curricular products in 2006. Additionally, sales in the electronics sector have increased 4.4% in 2005–2006, whereas overall growth in the instructional materials market was only 2.6%. These data suggest that the use of educational software has become more prominent in school curricula. To date, research on the effectiveness of educational software focuses solely on students' academic achievement and standardised testing. However, there is little research that explores how educational software influences students' learning experiences.

When planning a curriculum for English learners who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, teachers should acknowledge that students have different learning experiences from their American peers (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Beyond language learning, an appropriate, if not effective, curriculum for English language learning students should provide opportunities for those students to negotiate their cultural identities (Cummins, 1996; de Jong & Harper, 2007). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) found that students' 'funds of knowledge', or culture-specific knowledges possessed by

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the families and communities of Mexican students, could be connected to the classroom curriculum to facilitate learning (Moll, 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). The students' cultural and linguistic diversity were not abstract concepts unrelated to the classroom; instead, they became concrete forms of knowledge infused into the curriculum as a resource for learning (Moll, 2006). In contrast, a curriculum that is not culturally responsive is more likely to foster the assimilation of diverse cultures into the mainstream culture.

In this paper, we report findings from a study that investigated four middle-school, English as a second language (ESL) students' perceptions of the use of READ 180, a reading program designed by Scholastic, Inc. (2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) to meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs). If READ 180 was fully integrated into the curriculum of an ESL classroom and was culturally appropriate for English learners from diverse backgrounds, it would represent a significant technological advancement with the potential to promote learning for diverse students. Cummins, Brown, and Sayers (2007) note, however, that current research is not sufficient to demonstrate the overall effect of technology on students' academic achievement. In the case of READ 180, not all assertions regarding student learning made by the publisher, Scholastic Inc., are based on empirical research. This study seeks to make some contribution to addressing that information gap. It focuses on cultural aspects of READ 180 and specifically asks the following research question: How does the READ 180 reading intervention program respond to middle-school ESL students' cultural backgrounds? We will argue that the materials provide only a generic representation of immigrant experiences that does not adequately echo the identities of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Read 180

READ 180 is a reading program designed by Scholastic, Inc. (2009a) to meet the needs of struggling readers, including both ELLs and students with learning disabilities. While some ELLs may be identified as struggling readers, however, their reading needs are different from those of native-English-speaking students who are struggling readers. For example, Bernhardt (2005) reminds educators that unlike L1 students, L2 students' reading development is affected by their first language; that is, their L1 literacy knowledge, as well as their knowledge of L2, influences their L2 reading experience. Unlike L1 students who have reading disabilities, many L2 readers may have acquired literacy skills in their native language, but may lack the cultural and linguistic knowledge necessary for comprehending English language text. In contrast, L1 students with learning disabilities have difficulty developing literacy skills in their native language. Although there are a number of research studies on the benefits of READ 180 for struggling readers with learning disabilities (e.g. Brown, 2006; Caggiano, 2007; Papalewis, 2004), there is a dearth of research that directly focuses on whether or not READ 180 meets the needs of ELLs in reading.

READ 180 offers reading instruction at three educational levels: elementary, middle, and high school. According to the Scholastic, Inc. website, the program has been sold to more than 7000 schools in the United States (Scholastic, Inc., 2009b). As it was designed to meet the needs of ELLs, the READ 180 software offers an additional language translation feature for use with videos and vocabulary definition. The language translation feature includes Spanish, Cantonese, Haitian Creole, Hmong, and Vietnamese (Scholastic, Inc., 2009b).

The READ 180 program consists of 90 min of instruction and comprises whole-group (20 min), small-group rotations (three rotations, 20 min each), and final whole-group instruction (10 min). The three rotations include computer, teacher, and an individual workstation. During the three, 20-min rotations, one-third of the students learn with the topic

CDs while using the computer; one-third of the students learn with student books in a small group using student materials with the teacher (e.g. rBook, a student textbook with thematic units, and LBook, a workbook for ELLs to practice specific language skills); and the final third of the students choose paperback books to read silently.

READ 180 provides instructional materials and resources for both teachers and students. The teacher resources for the middle-school level include instructional resources, such as an rBook Teacher's Edition and the resources necessary for teachers to differentiate instruction and assessment. The overall package for teacher use includes professional development materials and an installation guide (Scholastic, Inc., 2009c). Student materials include rBooks, LBooks, the READ 180 software (including nine different topic CDs), paperback books, and audio books (Scholastic, Inc., 2009d).

Theoretical framework

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has informed the field of education regarding the importance of cultural congruence in teaching and learning, the need for cultural diversity in educational content materials, and how teachers use students' background knowledge to inform instruction and learning (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2000, 2002). CRP is based on the belief that the academic difficulties experienced by marginalised groups of students, such as ELLs, are due to the incongruence between a White, male, privileged pedagogical paradigm (McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 1997) and a paradigm that reflects the culturally diverse backgrounds and knowledge of students (Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992). A White, male, privileged paradigm suggests that dominant White male culture is valued, taught, and reinforced in the culture of schooling. In contrast, a culturally diverse paradigm suggests that students of colour possess unique cultural knowledge, although that knowledge is not always valued by the mainstream school culture. When these two paradigms are incongruent, student learning is hindered (Au, 1998; Moll et al., 1992).

Ladson-Billings (1995) further argues that CRP perceives education as a political act in which teachers can 'help students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge the inequalities that schools perpetuate' (p. 469). Such inequity is the result of unequal distributions of cultural capital, with certain types of cultural capital (e.g. English as a first language in the US context) being favoured over others (Bourdieu, 1986). To counter the coercive power structure that this unequal distribution of cultural capital creates, CRP teachers must be aware that these sociopolitical forces contribute to learning difficulties. For example, research has documented how ESL students can be marginalised by forms of public education that place the learners in a context that is socially and politically incongruent with mainstream education (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999).

The concept of CRP suggests that teachers and schools must counter the coercive forces that devalue nontraditional students and provide a space for those students to express their understanding of the world. Using this framework to guide our investigation, we explore the ways in which the content of READ 180 reflects, or does not reflect, the cultural backgrounds of the ELLs using it, and how ELLs perceive the cultural relevance of READ 180.

Methodology

Research setting

This study used a qualitative research design to explore how ELLs in an ESL classroom in Florida, United States perceived the cultural relevance of READ 180. Although we

acknowledge that the role of the teacher is crucial to making a curriculum relevant to the lives of students, we believe that accumulating information on students' perspectives on READ 180 materials is also critical. The study took place in a middle-school ESL classroom where the school had purchased the READ 180 package for use during the 2004–2005 academic year. Since the school had implemented READ 180 for several years at the time of this study, we believe that this provided a potentially information-rich case that would help to answer our research questions (Patton, 1990). We received permission from the principal and informed consent from both the teacher, Ms. Anderson (a pseudonym), and student participants. While the teacher had recently been assigned to teach the ESL class, she had just begun to incorporate READ 180 into her curriculum that year.

We collected data from November 2008 to the end of January 2009, using multiple data collection techniques. The techniques included student interviews, field notes from classroom observations (conducted by one of the researchers in the classroom), and archival data (publisher-related materials, student reading logs, and worksheets), in order to triangulate findings. The primary data source consisted of six sets of 30-min individual interviews with each of four students, identified as ELLs and receiving ESL services at the time of the study. Interview questions focused on the students' perceptions of: (a) their experiences with using READ 180 (e.g. Tell me about the immigrant lesson that you just learned with Ms. Anderson.); (b) the ways in which using READ 180 engaged them in reading English (e.g. How did you like the book, *Love Letters*, you just read?); and (c) the overall value of the program to them as ELLs (e.g. If you could change READ 180, what would you change?). Secondary data included 30 h of classroom observation and student documents. Observation primarily focused on the books, and the sections of books, that students chose to read. Student reading logs, where students reflected on READ 180 reading materials, were collected on a weekly basis and were used to foster conversations during the interview process. The student reading logs were an ancillary tool that informed subsequent interviews with participants for the following week. Thus, interview questions were specifically adapted to each student.

Finally, we used grounded theory to analyse the interview data by making constant comparisons in the three-stage (initial, focused, and selective codes) coding process (Charmaz, 2006). Data generated from the interviews were broken down line by line and grouped into the four broad issues that are used in the Findings section to follow: (1) understanding the immigrant experience; (2) identity conflict; (3) lack of culturally relevant materials; and (4) failure to connect with learners' prior knowledge. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, we also conducted member checking by presenting the findings with each participant, as well as peer review, by sharing the data analysis procedure with other qualitative colleagues (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Additionally, we presented the negative case examples to expand our view of the focus of the study and to allow new dimensions to emerge from the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Descriptions of participants

Criteria sampling was used to recruit study participants who were four eighth grade ELLs in the same ESL class, which was comprised of 17 students at the sixth to eighth grade level. This ESL class was culturally and linguistically diverse as the students represented 11 countries (or areas, e.g. Puerto Rico) and spoke eight different languages. We chose four students who volunteered to participate in this study: Eva and Isabel, already mentioned, both from Puerto Rico, Marco from Chile, and Xiao Nan from China (all names are pseudonyms) (Table 1). All of the students shared some commonalities: they were all 13 years

Table 1. Demographics of the four participants.

Participants	Gender	Grade	Age	Country/region	US citizen	Time in the United States (until December 2008)
Eva	Female	8	13	Puerto Rico	Yes	5 years
Isabel	Female	8	13	Puerto Rico	Yes	4 years
Marco	Male	8	13	Chile	No	14 months
Xiao Nan	Male	8	13	China	No	8 months

old, enrolled in the eighth grade, had arrived in the United States with their parent(s), and were receiving ESL instruction from Ms. Anderson during the period of the study. Much additional information about the participants, including their respective lengths of stay in the United States, their self-reported family background including literacy practices and home use of technology, and observations on their personality traits (e.g. shy/outgoing, serious), is contained in the interview reports to follow.

Findings

Understanding the immigrant experience

Culture shapes the ways in which one thinks and acts. In the learning context, what one brings from one's own culture influences the process of constructing new knowledge. Findings from this study showed that in one important respect, READ 180 did meet the students' cultural needs – by echoing their immigrant experiences in the United States. This was observed in the *New Americans* lesson and was also described by participants in the interviews and logs. The portrayal of difficult life experiences was familiar to these ELLs, and they were intrinsically interested in learning about them. The *New Americans* lesson of READ 180 responded to ELLs' cultural background by providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their immigrant experiences in the United States. Indeed, all four students were interested in learning about similar, difficult life experiences that other immigrants had encountered.

The participants described how some of the challenges they encountered were similar to those portrayed in the lesson: speaking limited English and experiencing an isolated social life. Isabel, for example, described the life of a teenage girl featured in READ 180 materials, who came to the United States as an immigrant:

> It [READ 180] said that everything she is going through, like, she doesn't know about English and she wants to go back. Because she is an immigrant and all that, and starting all over is like hard for other people and I think that's the one. (Isabel)

Eva also endorsed the way in which READ 180 portrayed the arduous lives of immigrants. She noted, 'Yeah. When you are new to a country, it's hard and tough', echoing her life experiences when she first came to the United States. Xiao Nan agreed, stating, 'Their [immigrants'] life is tough'. Isabel also stated that, 'the first year it was hard ... I didn't know much English'. Marco added, 'Like you don't have friends. [There is] nobody to help'. Eva added that, 'Making friends is hard too'. Referring to newcomers who try to keep up with their peers, Eva explained, 'You wanna do good but you just don't know what they [peers] are doing'.

All these four middle-school ELLs faced challenges when they arrived in the United States, that were similar to the experiences featured in the *New Americans* lesson. They

were interested in learning about other immigrants who came from other countries and understanding how they had acclimatised to life in the United States. For example, feeling that he was not alone, Marco described his interest in learning about immigrants: '[It's] good 'cause I learn more [from] immigrants [who] are coming here'. Marco continued:

> They [READ 180] talk about how it's like to be an immigrant here; [it] was really hard. The [airplane] flight was really long and everything [they said was] right. It was long. [Making friends is hard, too.] Really hard to fit in.

Learning about the experiences of other immigrants also seemed to support the ELLs by affirming their own immigrant identities. Isabel said that it was 'really cool to learn about other immigrants' and know 'how [what] they go through'. She learned that people from different countries have different experiences as they immigrate to the United States. The materials, particularly the *New Americans* lesson, encouraged them to engage with the software, by connecting the content of the lesson to their own cultural experiences. However, as we shall see, other aspects of the language of the immigrant lesson also created some identity conflict for the learners.

Identity conflict

Although READ 180 connected with students' immigrant experience, it frequently described situations in ways that were in sharp contrast with the experiences of the learners and posed a conflict of identity for them. Identity conflict refers to the ways in which adolescent ELLs viewed their identities in contrast to the 'culturally relevant' materials in READ 180. Although the *New Americans* lesson invited adolescent ELLs to explore the idea of their 'immigrant' identity, Xiao Nan and Eva were uncertain as to whether they could be classified or labelled as immigrants. The READ 180 program defined 'immigrant' as 'a person who moves from one country to another' (Scholastic, Inc., 2005, p. 9). This assumption meant that all ELLs were from countries outside of the United States. However, Eva, a Puerto Rican permanently residing in the United States, stated, 'I don't know if I am considered an immigrant 'cause Puerto Rico is kind of a territory of the USA'. In other words, Eva realised that she is a US citizen rather than an immigrant. In contrast, Isabel saw herself as an immigrant from Puerto Rico who was in transition to becoming a mainland citizen. She enjoyed learning about immigrants. 'I like it [the immigrant lesson] 'cause I'm an immigrant'.

Although both Eva and Isabel came from Puerto Rico to the United States, the ways in which they perceived their immigrant identities differed. Offering a different experience again, Xiao Nan, a short-term visitor, did not perceive himself to be an immigrant. He stated, 'I don't think I am because what they [READ 180] mean is people who settle down here'. Perhaps as a result of not considering himself an immigrant, Xiao Nan had no interest in learning about immigrants: 'I don't care what it says. ... I don't care. Really, I don't. It's [The immigrant lesson is] just an article'.

In the end, the materials in READ 180 created some internal conflict among the ELLs by using language that created difficulties for some learners in identifying with the situations described. Although Marco enjoyed learning about immigrant experiences, he specifically disagreed with the way READ 180 used the terms 'America' and 'the United States' interchangeably. In a confused tone, he questioned, 'Why do they [READ 180] say that [the] United States is America?' He further stated, 'I was born in America'. While in Chile, he learned that America is a geographical designation rather than a

country's name. His confusion demonstrated the sociopolitical implications of using the term 'America' to refer uniquely to the United States:

> I don't get this stuff. They [READ 180] say, like, 'Welcome to America!' They should say 'United States', not 'America'. It makes us … our country, like, a little bit, like, lower. We [The United States] are higher. You [Chile] are lower. (Marco)

While Marco was aware of the use of the term 'America' to refer to the United States, he also saw his identity as a Chilean as a way of affirming his personal identity as an 'American'. In other words, he considered himself to be both a Chilean and an American.

In addition to using the term America to refer to the United States, Marco felt that READ 180 was trying to force him to assimilate into the 'American' way of life. He stated:

> It says, 'here in America, we do this stuff and this stuff and this stuff, too, since we are in America, not in other countries'. It does put, like, that stuff. And I don't like [the way they say it]. Other people don't like it.

He recalled a conversation that he once had with a friend of his who came from Honduras, ''cause I have asked people. I used to ask, "Hey, where are you from?" "Honduras". "Do you like when people say, 'Welcome to America', since we are already in America? Do you like that stuff?" "No, I don't"'. Despite his limited English, he was clear about expressing how he and his friend felt hurt by not being considered 'Americans'. In essence, the READ 180 program conflicted with their cultural identities.

Lack of culturally relevant materials

The lack of specific, culturally relevant materials was another indication that READ did not sufficiently differentiate the learning needs of the ELLs in this study. The program content had little specific connection to the student's own culture. Eva, for example, explained that the materials could be misleading because they were culturally generic, and tended to over-generalise information about her culture. There was very little representation of each student's culture or country. For example, Xiao Nan said that he could not connect READ 180 with his own native Chinese culture, 'I have not learned about China yet'. What he had learned from READ 180 was 'all about American culture'. He used an example from a READ 180 lesson: 'I learned how to do collage into an art. I find it [collage] very interesting. And it's my first time to see it'. The topics were common to American students but not to him. Marco also said, 'I read a lot of books from READ 180. There is no book related to Chile. … So I haven't heard anything about Chile'.

Similarly, Eva could not relate READ 180 to her Puerto Rican culture: 'they [READ 180] don't really talk about my country'. She further explained, 'There isn't so much about Puerto Rico. I just learn it from my Mom and what I remembered from Puerto Rico'. In contrast to Eva's view, however, Isabel noted, 'I have been learning a lot from my culture from READ 180'. She explained that in the book *Quinceanera Means Sweet 15*, the main character was from Puerto Rico. From Isabel's point of view, READ 180 did provide culturally relevant materials for her. Isabel perceived *Quinceanera Means Sweet 15* as a representation of her Puerto Rican culture, even though quinceanera is a common celebration in Hispanic culture[1].

Eva's view underscores how READ 180 uses a generic representation of Hispanic culture and language. She noted that many people from South and Central American

countries speak Spanish: 'Sometimes they [READ 180] use it [my culture] for other countries 'cause they speak Spanish, so basically almost the same thing but sometimes it doesn't'. She was aware that her culture differs from other Hispanic cultures but stated that the READ 180 program over-generalised the 'culture' of Spanish speakers. She explained that words in Spanish 'could mean different things that you really don't know' in different Spanish-speaking countries. Eva also acknowledged the general nature of the representation of culture in the immigrant lesson: 'It [READ 180] just talks in general, like how many people from different countries' come to the United States as immigrants.

Failure to connect with learners' prior knowledge

Learning occurs when instruction becomes connected to ELLs' prior knowledge or previous experience (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). However, the objective of READ 180 to offer learners a culturally relevant curriculum was often hindered because topics were unfamiliar to ELLs and did not provide opportunities for them to utilise their particular background knowledge for learning. The ELLs thought that READ 180 provided topics related to extreme sports in one unit in order to capture the attention of its readers. Both Eva and Isabel, however, described feeling scared or afraid when they read about these extreme sports in the software program. Eva had never snowboarded in her life: 'Because I don't see the snow when [until] I was two years old and I never [went] snowboarding in my life'. She felt that snowboarding was a dangerous sport and that one had to practice as much as one could, and 'gear up', in order to snowboard safely. Likewise, when watching a video clip about kayaking, Isabel said, 'I'm a girl who is interested in sports a lot but I would never do kayaking. It's scary!' Even though her selection of the kayaking topic in the reading program is the result of her interest in sports, she felt that kayaking was actually life-threatening to her. An alternative interpretation of Isabel's reaction, of course, is that READ 180 may be more oriented to boys' preferences, with a focus on adventure in representing sports lessons.

As they reflected on some of the topics they had read about in the READ 180 program, the four adolescent ELLs used words such as 'scary' or scared (Eva, Isabel, and Marco), 'emotional' (Isabel), 'gross' (Marco), and 'yuck' (Marco) to express their negative responses. On the surface, their responses indicated that some of the materials made them feel emotionally uncomfortable. On a deeper level, however, some of these topics were detached from their actual life experiences. For example, Marco described one of the books that he had chosen to read entitled *Oh! Yuck!* from Scholastic, Inc., featuring common practices in other countries, such as mummification or eating live food, that would disturb people in other parts of the world. In reflecting on what he had read, Marco wrote 'Really gross!' and 'Really yuck!' In an interview explaining his notes, Marco stated:

> In notes, I put 'Mummys = [means] no organs'. They have no organs. Okay, next day I read *Oh, yuck!* then that's how I am finishing it. The worms are really awesome. They crawl, they … they are under the ground and then some people eat those and then they giggle.

In relation to a scene in a simplified READ 180 version of *Moby Dick*, where people were stabbing the whale, Marco said how 'bloody and awful' it was. Thus, although topics such as these in READ 180 did capture the attention of all four ELLs in this study, in many cases they subsequently could not relate the topics to their own life experiences.

Discussion

Clearly, to the extent that READ 180 is integrated into the ESL curriculum, it represents a form of technological learning that has at least the potential to transform education. However, some students expressed cultural conflict and questioned the cultural/linguistic appropriateness of the materials. While researchers (Bigelow, 1999; Ndura, 2004) have described the cultural bias embedded in the student materials, both printed and nonprinted, this study supported their claim by providing evidence that students were sometimes made aware of their 'invisibility' by READ 180 instructional materials that seemed to have been constructed from a mainstream perspective (Ndura, 2004, p. 146). ELLs were 'invisible' in that their unique cultural experiences and backgrounds were not reflected in the READ 180 program.

Research indicates the importance of affirming the cultural identity of immigrant children as a way to meet their cultural needs and to promote their literacy engagement when learning a second language (Cummins, 2001; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Cummins (2001) notes that the degree of incorporation of ELLs' native language and culture into the classroom curriculum can be a significant predictor of academic success. This point is reinforced by the fact that the ELLs themselves are aware of how important it is that both learning experiences and learning materials they encounter would reflect and validate their cultural identity and cultural perspectives. As Isabel stated, 'It's important to know where you are right now but it's also important to know about your own culture'. She also expressed a sense of pride in her multicultural experiences and recognised them as resources that not all individuals share: 'I have more stories to tell people [as a result of my experience here in the US]'. Similarly, Marco said, 'I would like to have people know about Chile and the culture'. He expressed his cultural needs through the books that he chose to read, such as *From amigo to friends* (Garcia, 1997) and the READ 180 book, *The star fisher*, both of which were about immigrant children in the United States. From a culturally responsive teaching perspective, it might be said that these students expressed their cultural needs through attempts to negotiate their cultural identities as they engaged with the READ 180 content (Banks, 2007; Cummins, 1996, 2001; Cummins et al., 2007; Gay, 2000). Providing opportunities for them to negotiate their identities with the existing world is the essence of culturally responsive teaching. Clearly, the material in READ 180 did not always facilitate that.

The ELLs in the present study, however, did value some aspects of the *New Americans* lesson in READ 180. In fact, this lesson demonstrated both opportunities and challenges for the negotiation of identities by these young participants. It invited the students to become aware of immigrant trends within the United States in a way that allowed them to reflect upon their own immigrant experiences. Learning about the experiences of other immigrants seemed to reassure these ELLs about their own immigrant identities. However, the study also shows that READ 180 failed to further explore the complexities of the immigrant experience. For example, the software consisted of general representations of immigrants that were more concerned about life in the United States than about the lives of fellow compatriots back in their own native countries. As Nieto (2004) notes:

> What is 'American' is neither simply an alien culture imposed on dominated groups nor an immigrant culture transposed indiscriminately to new soil. Neither is it an amalgam of old and new. What is 'American' is the result of interactions of old, new, and created cultures. These interactions are neither benign nor smooth. (p. 319)

The complexity of the situation faced by new immigrants derives not only from their experiences in the United States but also from their experiences in their countries of origin. Presenting their immigrant experiences in the new country only, without exploring their past stories, seemed to devalue their home culture and may create tensions for them as they try to integrate into American society.

The study also revealed that students resisted the asymmetrical power relations between the United States and other countries located in the Americas, such as Chile (Freire, 1990; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This echoed Bourdieu's (1986, 2000) notion that language is indeed a form of accumulated symbolic capital. Using 'America' and 'United States' interchangeably was a form of symbolic violence which made one student feel emotionally hurt (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999). The experiences of Marco and Xiao Nan suggested that they both had a strong sense of self and of their respective cultures, whereas the messages that they were receiving from the READ 180 materials undermined their confidence by oversimplifying the immigrant experience, ultimately making it generic. This kind of schooling experience often leads to resistance on the part of ELLs as Nieto (2004) explains:

> Although students from dominated groups might partially internalize some of the many negative messages to which they are subjected every day about their culture, race, ethnic group, class, and language, they are not simply passive recipients of such messages. They also actively resist negative messages through more positive interactions with peers, family, and even school. (p. 321)

This quote illustrates how Xiao Nan's and Marco's resistance can be understood as a way in which they actively sought to maintain their pride in their cultural identities.

Based on their experiences with READ 180 materials, and on their responses to their own immigration statuses, Marco, Xiao Nan, and Eva showed that the meanings of the terms 'immigrant' and 'America' are both culturally and politically shaped (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999). As an expression of their cultural needs, all three students wanted their individual, unique, and reflective identities to be made clear, rather than to have the learning materials they encountered categorise them all as 'American immigrants'. Students' cultural needs were not met because there was a discontinuity between the READ 180 materials and the participants' life experiences. This finding is especially important since READ 180 is marketed as a program that offers culturally and linguistically diverse materials for students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The types of topics offered in the READ 180 software package and the ways in which the participants described these topics illustrated the ways in which the program did not respond to ELLs' cultural needs or their prior knowledge and experiences. Topics such as extreme sports reflected the dominant group's leisure activities and were distant from the ELLs' cultural knowledge or their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132). Such a curriculum for immigrant ELLs fails to facilitate the formation of the kind of links between prior knowledge and new information which is crucial to learning (Bransford et al., 2000). A curriculum such as that described by Moll et al. (1992) instead integrates students' knowledge into the curriculum, thereby promoting links to new information.

The findings from this study also raised the issue of adopting reading materials made by corporate companies for mainstream adolescent learners. As Lamme (2003) notes:

> Since most children prefer books about their own culture and experiences, it is important to provide minority students with large numbers of books by minority authors and about minority issues . . . It is impossible for teachers to tailor their classroom libraries to accommodate individual children's book preferences if the books are pre-selected by an outside corporation. (p. 39)

The ways in which the students in this study described some of the READ 180 books support Lamme's (2003) criticism. Even if some of the READ 180 books contain texts from minority authors in a modified form, this is no substitute for introducing ELLs to classic texts, which reflect in an authentic form their own culture and experiences.

Drawing from our findings, we suspect that READ 180 was primarily designed to build reading skills in native-English-speaking dysfluent readers rather than for ELLs. Bernhardt (2005) emphasises, however, the need to distinguish between a reading problem and a second language problem. ELLs, particularly those who are beginning readers, can be easily miscategorised as disengaged readers or struggling readers. Simply observing student behaviours, without developing an awareness of the personal views and experiences of such students, can limit teachers' opportunities to understand the challenges to successful learning that ELLs face.

Conclusion

Although the position we have argued for here was based on a study comprised of only four participants from one ESL class, the preliminary insights they provide may inspire ESL teachers to critically examine some of the issues involved in adopting READ 180 for ELLs and more generally to reflect more deeply on what it means to be culturally inclusive. We draw two implications for language educators from our study. First, a reading program that teaches 'how to read' should invite all learners to 'read the word' but also to 'read the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987). When topics are introduced, teachers may open a dialogue that allows learners to think critically about social issues. Topics should allow learners to reflect on their lives as adolescents and on the social and psychological aspects of being adolescent learners. Second, a lesson about immigrant experiences is certainly an opportunity to engage ELLs in exploring their identities. As language educators in the United States, it is of little assistance to us to note that all of our new-arriving students are 'immigrants'. These four newcomers revealed in their interviews that their experiences and identities were unique. This reality contrasts with the more generalised definitions and descriptions of 'immigrants' which are common in textbooks and software programs. Educators should keep in mind that social constructs such as 'immigrant' or 'America' are not objective and static; rather, they are subjective, dynamic, and relate to a student's cultural experiences. Discussing these concepts with students can be a great opportunity for teachers to understand ESL students' perceptions and experiences in the United States. Teachers would be wise to understand and respect the ways in which students perceive their immigrant statuses. Future research could use a critical theory research paradigm to investigate the cultural and linguistic assumptions or biases which underlie the development of content materials such as those in READ 180.

We believe that the integration of educational software and technologies for language learning and literacy development is still at an early stage (Roblyer, Vye, & Wilson, 2002; Smith, 2005) and, in particular, that the challenge of designing educational software and technologies for culturally and linguistically diverse students is only beginning to be addressed (Oppenheimer, 2007; Shaughnessy, 2003). The voices of the students in this study suggest that language learning is ideological as well as educational, and that the essence of promoting cultural diversity through language learning lies in the capacity of learners to respond to cultural experiences from multiple perspectives (Woolard, 1998). Regardless of whether teachers choose to adopt READ 180 or not, it is highly desirable they would constantly strive to scaffold the lessons and draw parallels with students' lives. An effective teacher would also supplement the curriculum, using additional materials that address specific student interests and life experiences.

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Note

1.   *Quinceanera* is a well-known celebration for girls who have turned 15 years of age, which is a significant event within the Hispanic culture.

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