



An Interview with Maria Paula Ghiso

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ABSTRACT

On April 6th three members of the Manhattanville College Literacy Department, Mary Coakley Fields (MCF), Katie Cunningham (KC) and Courtney Kelly (CK) interviewed Maria Paula Ghiso (MPG) of Teachers College, Columbia University about her work with Emergent Bilinguals. Included below is a transcript of the conversation. The audio file is available the Language and Literacy Spectrum website.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

María Paula Ghiso is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her scholarship investigates literacy in multilingual and transnational contexts. Through collaborative inquiry with teachers and students, María Paula strives to support schools in being more attuned to children's linguistic, cultural, and experiential knowledge in the curriculum. María Paula is a former New York City dual language teacher and has facilitated professional development on language and literacy learning in a range of contexts. She has published in venues such as *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Teachers College Record*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Language Arts*, *Harvard Educational Review*, and *Journal of Literacy Research*. She is a co-author of the forthcoming book from Teachers College Press, *Partnering with immigrant communities: Action through Literacy*.



MCF: We are here with Maria Paula Ghiso, Assistant Professor of Literacy at the Teacher's College at Columbia University. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us.

MPG: Thanks for having me

MCF: I am Mary Coakley-Field

CK: I'm Courtney Kelly

KC: And Katie Cunningham

MCF: The three of us are from the Literacy Department in the School of Education at Manhattanville College. We so enjoyed your presentation on learning from immigrant students and families in the literacy curriculum at Manhattanville College's Changing Suburb Institute Annual Educational Forum a few weeks ago. I've heard from so many of my colleagues at the college as well as teachers and principals how helpful they've found it. So many expressed that



they felt urgency and momentum to get started implementing practices that honor and support emergent bilinguals. We thought our readers would also like to hear about your research and insights, so thank you again. Some of your recent work centers on supporting immigrant children in the literacy curriculum. Could you tell us a little bit about what led you to pursue this line of inquiry?

MPG: Sure. I think a lot of my work with thinking about education and equity in relationship to language learners and emergent bilinguals was sparked in part from my own childhood experiences as a Latina immigrant to New York City public schools. When I first came to the US, I was in an English only pull-out classroom where I received ESL instruction because I had been labeled as “limited English proficient.” And I also attended an Argentinian school on the weekends where I was seen as someone who qualified as being “advanced.” There was a real disconnect between the two contexts. In one for example, the southern hemisphere had a history and intellectual tradition; we read a lot of literature from the region and studied Latin American history. In the other context my background was an obstacle to overcome in pursuit of school achievements. So for me, moving across these two worlds really sensitized me very early on to the situated nature of curricular practices and content. The differential readings of my ability underscore to me how whether students succeed or not is not only a function of an individual’s aptitude but more about how the learning environment is organized to value and learn from a range of intellectual and cultural identities. It was moving across these two worlds, what Walter Mignolo might call “border thinking”, that enabled me to see both contexts through a comparative lens. I was as bilingual teacher for a few years before I got my doctorate, and as an educator I felt that disconnect as well. I was very lucky to be in a dual language school that valued children’s multilingual practices. At the same time, some of the programmatic demarcations of the bilingual program didn’t fully align with the more fluid language practices of the children. And I felt that even for myself, I had to reign in some of my bilingual capacities based on whatever the language of instruction was for the day. It made me think about how bilingual schools are designed to protect the minoritized language, but that can sometimes exist in tension with what students are bringing, their multiple languages, their multiple cultures and identities. Ultimately, it’s important for schools to have a robust understanding of community knowledge and interests.

MCF: Great.

CK: Hi, Maria Paula, this is Courtney. When you presented a few weeks ago at Manhattanville, you shared with the audience about a photography project with emergent bilingual students that you worked on recently. Can you tell us about the goals of this project, how did you set it up, and can you tell us about what you found?

MPG: This project stems a bit from a dissonance of practice. I was doing professional development in a school and the children were writing non-fiction texts, and they were invited to write about something they were experts in. The teachers, good teachers, provided some models that were already there in the curriculum. The children seemed to take it up in what originally felt like a superficial way, and they weren’t producing the kind of work that teachers imagined students would produce. And then there’s the dominant discourse around the learning of immigrant children, that they’re “lacking background knowledge.” So there was a tendency to say that the children didn’t have anything to write about, and I knew based on my own experiences and my relationships with the children that there was a lot that they had to write



about. Yet I didn't know what a much better quote “writing model” might be, that that would inspire the children to do their own writing and tap into their experiences and expertise.

The project was designed to learn more about what the children were doing outside of school and think about creating a space within the day-to-day curriculum where they could utilize that knowledge, where they could bring those topics and interests to the forefront of the curriculum. I was very lucky to partner with a professor here at Teacher's College, Patricia Martínez-Álvarez, who works with bilingual education, and also with a bilingual teacher at the school the school principal, who over the years created the space for us to collaborate with them on the project. They were very open to that work, to say, ‘How might we make the parameters of writing instruction a little more permeable to what children's own topics of inquiry are?’ For students who are acquiring English, photography seemed like the perfect way to represent what else they knew. The main goal of the project was really to center their knowledge in the curriculum, including their bilingual literacies.

One of the characteristics of most bilingual programs is that the children are working with one language for a particular time of the day or week and then switching to the other language in order to give the minoritized language a lot of focus and status in the classroom. But this project invited children to use all the languages and all the modes of literacy they knew: they could draw, they could do more traditional print-based writing, there were some digital pieces, and they could write in any language. Dr. Martínez-Álvarez and I designed the instruction, and so we followed the language of instruction—when the language was English we would facilitate in English and when it was in Spanish we facilitated in Spanish. The children knew we spoke both languages and we encouraged them to speak in any language they wanted, and to add multiple languages within a single piece. One of the interesting findings was that it invited a lot of critical discussion about language use, language proficiency, and language hierarchy to help children think about what they know about these two languages, who speaks what language, how might you be judged for speaking a particular language and to really think about the use of being bilingual in their neighborhood and the larger world.

I think for me, the other big finding of that work is what I wrote about in one piece I called the “Literacies of Interdependence,” making visible about all the literacy work that is happening in out-of-school spaces in these neighborhoods that we could characterize as “transnational local”, a term used by José Saldívar. Children from many parts of the world, from various histories, who navigate many different borders, are coming together in the US both in classrooms and in those out-of-school locations we might think of as apart from learning, that we might not even know children are spending all this time in, but which actually are resources of cultural knowledge and also of multilingual literacy practices. One example would be the neighborhood Laundromat. All the work that is happening there with children contributing to the daily labor of keeping the family going, but also all the literacy work that is taking place, the cultural maintenance, the transnational knowledge that children foster in these places that teachers often times don't know students are visiting or what they're doing there. I count myself in that category of needing to know more about children's out-of-school experiences. These transnational local places are meaningful to the children and could also become a site of inquiry, could become a topic that they write and read about. They are not usually found in the school curriculum, but are a rich source of knowledge for children.

CK: Thank you, Maria Paula, for a such thorough and thoughtful answer that will really give our readers and listeners insight into the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of blending in school and out-of-school



literacy. In this issue, we're considering the complexity in how we define diverse learners. What are some of the complexities to consider when working with diverse immigrant students in the literacy classroom?

MP: I think that one of the things that my research has taught me is that what is happening outside of school is vitally important to teachers when they're thinking about creating curriculum for immigrant children in the classroom. A lot of the families that we work with are enduring conditions of precarity. They are very vulnerable to social, economic and even educational inequities in the larger system. For immigrant families, that's also exacerbated when they have undocumented immigration status. Some of the families that we're educating do. These were topics that the children really brought into classroom curriculum, but that we don't often talk about in schools. It's important to know that they're dealing with those things that they also know a lot about that.

Some of the things to consider when working with diverse learners is being mindful of the category of the category of language learner, the category of emergent bilingual is a constructed category that actually holds many, many different histories and experiences together and many different language varieties and language proficiencies. And we need to learn about that diversity. Just because we know somebody is from an immigrant background: Where are they coming from, what's their history, what are their day-to-day lives, what are the things they're concerned about, what's the advocacy that's happening in communities that we need to learn about because often that might get missed. There is a lot of activism that is already going on. They are many ways in which families are advocating for educational access, even at the time that they're very vulnerable to certain policies.

For example, thinking about the previous educational history that children and families bring: one of my students, Estrella Olivares-Orellana, is doing her dissertation on the testimonials of students who have been labeled as "SLIFE," students with limited or interrupted formal education. And she really has troubled that term by putting it in a global context. We may think of it in terms of "interrupted schooling" when youth come here to the United States, but they may not have opportunities because of educational and economic issues to study beyond a certain grade level. So families may come to us and not have a certain skill that the schools would want them to have in order for them to participate in the ways that are valued in school. There may also be different cultural models of participation. I think that understanding all of that is important, but also knowing that we want to be mindful that these understandings don't shade into the dominant deficit framing of students and families. Families may have not have had the privilege of going to school in their home countries or having particular literate practices valued in school, having graduated from a certain grade level, for example. They also bring very valuable knowledge, such as rich oral practices that are actually not in opposition to school but very much related to it. Children, for example, engage in translation practices for their families, and scholars have written about how that mirrors the academic work that is happening in schools. I think learning about all these issues and the complexity of immigrant students and emergent bilinguals' lives and not seeing them as a monolithic block—that's essential. And then thinking about what are the ways that I might invite this particular student, this particular family to really participate and be honored in the literacy curriculum in my own classroom and in my school.

KC: Thank you so much. I think that is so incredibly helpful for our readers and listeners. We were delighted to see that your new book, **Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action**



through Literacy, is coming out this month from Teacher College Press with Gerald Campano and Bethany J. Welch. Congratulations on that wonderful work!

MPG: Thank you so much!

KC: We were hoping you could tell us a little bit about the book.

MPG: The book is based on a research partnership that is now in its sixth year in Philadelphia, in an area that has a lot of immigrant families and also a long-standing African American and Irish community. The African American community was very influential in desegregating the schools and the church. Gerald Campano from the University of Pennsylvania have been partnering with a Catholic church that has a school and a community center. Bethany Welch is the director of the community center there. I think that one of the aspects that drew us to the this site was the way that even though we hear a lot about strife and conflict in diverse neighborhoods or among different groups, this was a place, when Gerald and myself first got involved with it, where people were working across, cultural and linguistic boundaries, institutional boundaries to think about a vision of educational justice and immigrant rights. In the project, we've worked to develop processes of partnering that honor the knowledge of community members and strive to "research with" rather than just conducting research "about" on "on" them. We've created a number of nested inquires, in partnership with the input and interest of community members at the parish, which a number of doctoral students from the University of Pennsylvania's Reading/Writing/Literacy Division have helped facilitate, and which are described in the book. Along with doctoral students I taught and researched a class with Latina mothers and young children where they were learning language but also investigating critical issues and co-designing curriculum. Gerald Campano and I are currently involved in a study there that is bringing together representatives from all of these cultural and linguistic communities to think about what are the strengths that they draw on in advocating for their children's education, what are some of the obstacles they experience, and what we may do to take action on that. It's brought to light a lot of the ways that families are already advocating for their students, the networks that they have and build, and also the obstacles they are facing, as well as the idea that we can take action on those things. One inspiration is about democratizing research processes. Appadurai talks about the right to research, that everyone has a right to research their own inquiries, situations, questions, and so research is not something that should only come from the outside, from universities, it's not just is knowledge manufactured elsewhere, but it's built with community members, with schools, with teachers, with community organizations. I think that one of the interesting things for me has been that even though this research takes place outside of school, there is so much of what you might consider "school" learning that is happening outside of school. We can't think of school and the community as so dichotomous—there is a lot of movement across different advocacy communities and different contexts as people mobilize language and literacy for social justice ends. We're partnering with folks at the site to continue that work and we've been very blessed to learn from and with them.

KC: Thank you so much. Partnership is a major component of what we do here at Manhattanville and is a big priority I know for many New York communities, both within cities and in suburbs, so thank you for those wonderful insights. Just as a final question, we were hoping you could synthesize some main considerations that you'd like readers, especially teachers, to consider when planning literacy curriculum that honors and supports immigrant students. Or in other words, what are your hopes and dreams for teachers and children in their classrooms that you'd hope listeners aspire to?



MPG: Well, I think that teachers and schools already have a lot of strategies and ideas about how to support immigrant students from the curriculum. We know a lot from bilingual education about different strategies to support how students access the content even while they're still learning the language. How can you diversify the curriculum to have more visuals or to be more performative and more interactive so that we just don't depend on students' verbal proficiency to understand what they know and to help them engage with the content? Teachers and schools already have so much of this knowledge there, and for me it's about mobilizing those strategies or those approaches that we already have to help include children in the curriculum and to make their knowledge feel valued in the classroom and be visible. How might we help in small or big ways to have children from immigrant backgrounds or who are emergent bilinguals be a vital part of the class, someone who is seen as an expert and not just someone who needs to be remediated? That could include, for example, helping that student teach a lesson in their own language, as one of the fifth grade teachers that I worked with in an inquiry group did so that other children can see the student not just as someone who doesn't know the language but as someone who knows much more and could teach us a lot about the world and about other languages. How could we make all the languages and experiences of our students more visible in the classroom space, whether its diverse books or featuring writing in different languages, the way you might label areas of the classroom in an Early Childhood setting? And then how can we modify or adapt the curriculum so that child is not left out, but is an integral part. Even if they're very emergent in their language proficiency, helping them be seen as part of the class and not kept aside. Their language proficiencies will grow in English and we also want to maintain whatever languages they're coming with, which may be more than just one additional language, it may be others. But cultivating a classroom or a school where children see themselves in the curriculum, where they see their languages, where they see their cultures, and where their families and ways of knowing are present. That could work a lot of different ways, and that can happen even when teachers have a particular curriculum that they need to teach. Because it can happen in the cracks of the curriculum, it can happen in the environment, it can happen in the transition time, it can happen in adaptations to an existing curriculum, so that we're bringing in slightly different texts or we're inviting kids to bring in images from their lives or texts from their lives. So I think it doesn't involve, necessarily, a complete revamping. I would love for that to happen, and I think teachers, together in communities of inquiry can think about what might be changed or what might be redesigned in our schools. But even from day one, teachers can even just ask about students' histories, about their lives, about their languages and find out a lot more that may be under the surface. Also challenging ourselves to know that whatever we might see on the outside of a child is not the whole child. However they're performing themselves to be in that particular classroom isn't the totality of their existence or their experience or their knowledge. Knowing always that there are other things there and going on a quest to find out what some of those things are help build relationships. Teachers already have this orientation and know a lot about what approaches they can put in place to learn more about their students so this is just an extension of that.

MCF: Thank you so much for these amazing insights and ideas about honoring the experiences and knowledges of emergent bilingual students as we create and implement a literacy curriculum. We have so enjoyed getting to talk to you, thank you so much for your time.

KC: Thank you Maria Paula!

CK: Thank you!



MPG: Thank you all for speaking with me. It's wonderful and inspiring to be in conversation with great educators such as yourselves. Thank you so much