Language and Literacy Brokering: Becoming “Linguisticians” through Parent Interviews

We are linguisticians. We are researchers who study language.

— Cecilia Silva, MSL Research Team

Lilliana (all student names are pseudonyms) sat with one leg tucked under her, her chair angled so that she could see both the teacher at the front of the room and her tablemates. Her face was quiet and reflective, but her eyes were bright and alert. She watched Cecilia, one of the adults working in the classroom, lead a discussion about the research data the class had collected during student-led parent interviews. Suddenly, Lilliana jumped from her chair and said, “We need a data manager.” She proceeded to the front of the room and began to help her classmates organize the data they had collected. Each student had interviewed a parent the night before and, in class, transcribed onto sticky notes the information about specialized words and the languages their parents used at work. Lilliana explained how certain responses fit together and directed classmates to place their sticky notes in particular columns on the chart paper. Cecilia stepped back and let Lilliana take the lead. This self-assured leader had been identified by her school system as an English Language Learner (ELL) and had not excelled academically. In this classroom, however, she was a leader, a researcher, and an effective communicator of knowledge.

Lilliana and 40 other fourth and fifth graders from an urban school district in Texas participated in the three-week Mathematics, Science, and Language (MSL) Summer Program at Texas Christian University (TCU). The MSL Summer Program, a joint effort of the Fort Worth Independent School District (Fort Worth ISD) and professors from TCU and Tarleton State University, gathered ELLs from across the district for an enriched learning experience that supported language development in the context of meaningful activities related to mathematics and science.

The examples captured in this article were part of a multiyear, in-depth study of classroom practices to support mathematics and science content development as well as language acquisition for ELLs (Weinburgh & Silva, 2011, 2012; Weinburgh, Silva, Malloy, Marshall, & Smith, 2012; Silva, Weinborn, & Smith, 2013). For this article, we focus exclusively on the parent language interviews—one of the investigations students conducted during the MSL Summer Program. Data for this study included interviews with two of the professors participating in the program (Cecilia and Molly), students’ journal entries, class-created charts, and videotaped lessons associated with the explanation and debriefing of the parent interviews. (The interviews occurred at home and were recorded by the students using digital recorders.)

We believe this study highlights the extensive linguistic resources students bring to the school setting. With episodes from the classroom, we offer teachers of ELLs a glimpse of how this valuing of students’ linguistic knowledge lays a foundation for future language development. Furthermore, we build on the emerging and developing language skills of the ELLs while calling attention to the language capital of their families. Through the use of student-led parent interviews, teachers recognize and appreciate parents as assets in their child’s language development. To this end, the parent interview experience provided the MSL students with an overt example of how linguistic resources present in their own families converge with the linguistic demands inherent in most academic settings.

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Literature Review

The MSL Summer Program during which the above scene occurred was grounded in social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The team believed that learning is a social process and is influenced by the social context in which it occurs (Bodrova, 1996; Jaramillo, 1996; Palincsar, 1998). Through interactions with peers, teachers, and others in the environment, the learner constructs meaning. Learning, therefore, is “socially mediated” (Bodrova, 1996, p. 9). The MSL team of researchers (Cecilia, Molly, and Kathy) and teachers (Ritu and Janet) relied heavily on prior research related to social language (Gee, 2002, 2004), the 5R Instructional Model (Weinburgh & Silva, 2012), and funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

Gee (2002) contends that children do not just learn English; rather, they acquire the language they need to fit specific social purposes. As children are socialized into a language community, they develop distinctive ways of using language, as well as thinking and acting. These distinctive ways of using language serve to identify members of particular social groups to “outsiders” as well as to influence the speech of someone wishing to be identified as a member of that group. Gee refers to these distinctive ways of using language as Discourses, with a capital D. Throughout their lifespan, children acquire a number of Discourses or ways of using language. Since these Discourses serve different purposes and occur in a variety of contexts, all of which are important, one discourse is not superior to another.

The primary Discourse—the socially accepted way of using language to identify oneself or to be identified as a member of a particular social group—usually develops within the home as children interact with families, their main socializing unit. Secondary Discourses are acquired as children interact with other social groups, including those in school and work settings, where they develop language that is more specialized for the context in which it occurs. Children enter school as knowledgeable and competent language users who skillfully use language to act and interact within their primary Discourse community as well as within the various secondary Discourse communities in which their families socialize.

As ELLs enter school, they are expected to develop proficiency in the language of schooling, a secondary Discourse they encounter in this new setting (Gee, 2002, 2005). This requires that teachers incorporate aspects of the practices of secondary Discourses into their classrooms. To achieve this, they provide ELLs with an understanding of how language forms and functions construct meaning across various school disciplines (Scarcella, 2003; Snow & Ucelli, 2009). This also necessitates that teachers become explicit in terms of what they teach and what they expect students to learn (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002).

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One way teachers can explicitly support students’ language development is by focusing on the language that emerges within the context of science inquiry (Weinburgh & Silva, 2012; Weinburgh et al., 2012). Building on the language ELLs bring into school settings, teachers and students explore the Discourse of the science classroom using features of the 5R Instructional Model: reveal, replace, reposition, repeat, and reload (Weinburgh et al., 2012). A teacher reveals words for which the students have no conversational counterpart, such as the name of a piece of equipment. A replacement is when the teacher makes use of the conversational language the students bring into the classroom to provide them with more precise scientific words, such as replacing “pile of sand” with “alluvial fan” in an erosion lesson. Reposition moves from discourse to Discourse, or the way scientists talk to each other. Repeating goes beyond the word level to include repeating manual operations and cognitive concepts. Last, reloading is the coming back to words introduced during a lesson to strengthen student understanding. This model uses strategies for making language explicit within context. By situating explicit language instruction within the context
Discussions about how the contexts of the conversation (e.g., participants, goals, setting, etc.) affect word choice commonly occurred in the MSL classroom. For instance, when the students used the word *motor* to describe part of the wind turbine, Molly explained that scientists use the word *generator* because it more precisely reflects that mechanical energy is being converted to electrical energy. Word walls served to display the words that emerged through the science activities and were used to help the students develop an awareness of language. As students manipulated and sorted words, they began to see how familiar language that they used in everyday contexts—*motor*, *guess*, *try*, and *ruler*—took more specialized meanings and forms in the science classroom—*generator*, *hypothesis*, *fair test*, and *voltmeter*.

The MSL teachers already embraced the funds of knowledge concept (Moll, et al, 1992) when planning and implementing lessons. Students knew their cultural and linguistic contributions were valued. The curriculum and the teachers situated the students as experts by acknowledging students’ language brokering skills. As new immigrants, they continually navigated the linguistically complex worlds of school, transportation, medicine, and housing, and the MSL teachers drew upon this knowledge often. What was not readily apparent to the students were the funds of knowledge possessed by their parents. The student-led parent interviews described below further situated the linguistic and cultural capital of the parents within the classroom curriculum and encouraged the students to value their home language as a resource for navigating the language demands of school.

The interviews also provided the team with the opportunity to recognize many students’ ability to engage in translanguaging practices (García, 2009). As bi- or multilingual speakers, they were frequently called upon to support their own families as translators. To complete the interview assignment, many of the children interviewed the parents in their home languages. In order to share the data they had collected with all of their classmates, this process involved translating the interview questions from English to the home language, conducting

**Language Capital**

Like the term *social capital*, the term *language capital* describes emerging, developing, and secure understandings of multiple and varied aspects of language that contribute to their successful use by an individual or group of individuals. Rather than privileging the language of schooling over other forms of language, the MSL team emphasized language as a tool for communicating within and across contexts and with and between various audiences (Orellana, Martínez, Lee, & Montaño, 2012). Throughout the MSL Summer Program and particularly with the parent interview assignment, the MSL team aimed at explicitly supporting students’ awareness of and development of a meta-language to discuss how social groups and contexts affect language choices.

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Critical to this body of research are the curriculum innovations that occur when teacher perceptions of households change as a result of recognizing families’ linguistic, cultural, and cognitive funds of knowledge.
wind energy was converted into electricity, ratios, models, scaling, and other mathematical and scientific concepts appropriate for the designated grade level. The overall focus of the curriculum, however, was for the fifth graders to plan and implement investigations.

Texas is one of the few states that has not adopted the Common Core State Standards, therefore the state’s standards, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS, 2010) guided all curricular decisions. The TEKS call for fifth graders to engage in “investigations using scientific processes” (p. 15). Therefore, the teachers approached teaching through inquiry, prompting students to find answers to questions through experimentation. Throughout the MSL Summer Program, the teachers encouraged the use of the Discourse of science and mathematics to describe the inquiry process. The students talked about collecting, organizing, managing, and analyzing data. They used a wide variety of research instruments to collect data. Finally, they learned how to communicate their results using language, charts, graphs, and mathematical representations.

Understanding and Valuing Language

The MSL Summer Program team understood the importance of oral language development for ELLs, so they created an environment that encouraged conversation. The “noise” in the classroom came from student talk rather than teacher talk, with students often turning to a partner to share or discuss at their tables of four. The teachers promoted risk taking by valuing partially correct responses and by ensuring that each child felt heard. The teachers’ use of phrases such as “Tell us more” and “What do you think?” allowed space for students to refine their oral communication skills.

The goal of the program was to develop language skills while immersing students in content-rich learning experiences. They developed the language of science and mathematics by engaging in the work of scientists and mathematicians. One teacher’s use of the phrase, “Jose is the designated speaker and has the floor now. Listen to what
he has to say” punctuated the buzz of student talk, reminding students to listen to their peers. More than a classroom management tool, this technique provided opportunities for these ELLs to gain confidence speaking in front of groups because they knew their opinions and ideas would be heard and valued.

In order to build a community from the very first day of the MSL Summer Program, the students interviewed each other and the MSL team. They learned that their peers were from ten different countries and that they spoke Arabic, French, Spanish, Nepali, Burmese, Karini, Kareen, and Chin. The group discussed each student’s experiences and expertise from outside of the school setting and highlighted them as assets or language capital. This interview served as the introduction to how language and culture would be treated in this summer experience. All would be valued and celebrated.

Throughout the three-week MSL Program, the students learned how to be researchers in science, researchers in mathematics, and researchers of language. In science, the students used investigative principles—a series of fair tests to determine the tilt, number, orientation, and placement of blades—to determine the best design for a wind turbine. As mathematicians, they learned about place value, the use of decimals, and how to calculate mean and median in order to understand data. Mathematics, therefore, became a tool for interpreting information from the experiments. Furthermore, the students developed an awareness of how graphs, charts, and other mathematical representations were used to communicate findings and were critical to the Discourse of mathematicians.

Finally, as linguists, they continued to use investigative principles to study language. To help students understand how language is situated in the social context in which it occurs, the teachers and researchers used the students’ experiences with clothing. Similar to the way they have special clothing to wear to different events—cleats to play soccer, fancy dresses to attend a quinceañera or other...

Gee (2004) contends that language is situated in context. His classic example of “The coffee spilled; get a mop,” “I spilled the coffee; get a broom,” and “The coffee spilled; can you restack it?” illustrates that the word coffee has multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. One context is not superior to another, simply different. Now consider the homes of your students. How might you use Gee’s analogy to recognize, accept, and value the language knowledge your students bring from home? How might the complexity of the home language be utilized to help students learn more about English?

With a colleague or grade-level team, brainstorm ways that parents of ELLs can be highlighted as assets in the language-acquisition process. Consider the following questions:

- What do you know about the ELLs’ home language(s)?
- What do you think you know about the parents of the ELLs?
- What additional information might be helpful?
- How can you gather that additional information?

Following the brainstorming session, formulate a plan for learning more about the language capital of the parents of the ELLs. Remember that home/school connections should be bidirectional. Consider the following options or devise your own:

- Interview the parents during parent/teacher conferences.
- Send home a short survey.
- Write interview questions as a class and have students conduct the interviews for homework. Discuss the responses as a class.

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parties—people use specialized language in different contexts. One set of clothes is not better than another; rather, the clothes reflect the context of the event.

Not yet having a term for those who study language, the students relied on their understanding of how language works and coined a new term, “linguistician”—a combination of “linguists” and the suffix “ician” (one who studies a particular subject or topic). Cecilia explained the new word this way, “We’ve come to the notion that we’re thinking like scientists, and mathematicians, and linguists. And, this year, [the students] started playing with language, [so] we had linguisticians instead of linguists.” The notion of studying language, much as a scientist studies the subtle features of phenomena, served as a gateway for building upon students’ linguistic resources and their language capital while further refining their use of the English language.

As a language educator and nonnative English speaker, Cecilia knew (and helped the rest of the team understand) that language is situated, and that each context requires a different type of language and sometimes designates a different meaning (Gee, 2002). For example, two girlfriends shopping at the mall may use the word model to describe showing off a new outfit while an engineer would use the word model as a scaled-down representation of a building.

As a science educator, Molly understood the importance of specialized language and developing the Discourse of science. She knew that scientists need a common language to communicate about scientific principles and scientific results, and she continuously supported that notion throughout the MSL Summer Program. For example, she encouraged students to use hypothesize rather than guess when engaging in an investigation. They identified the parts of the wind turbine (blades, generator, tower) rather than by vernacular language (propellers, motor, and stem). The team encouraged precision in language use by revealing, replacing, repositioning, repeating, and reloading key vocabulary constantly and consistently (Weinburgh, et al., 2012).

Similarly, as a mathematics educator, Kathy emphasized the use of appropriate terminology when discussing mathematical concepts. For example, when reading the voltmeters to determine the electrical output of the turbine, students used the precise language of three and seven tenths rather than three point seven. Students learned to express the relationships in scale between models and the actual wind turbines as ratios.

Not only did the teachers and researchers continuously support the students in becoming aware of and using the specialized language of scientists and mathematicians, but they helped the students understand that their parents adopted the same principles. For example, the work context requires a different type of communication than visiting the local market with friends and neighbors. Specifically, the parent interview allowed students to gather information about the specialized language their parents used at home and in their professions.

Parents as Assets

To encourage parental involvement, in addition to a parent day, the team incorporated parent interviews conducted by the students. The impetus for adding a parent component was three-fold. First, from a pragmatic standpoint, the school district’s central office needed evidence of parental involvement for a Title III report. Second, relating to social development, the parent interview was designed to make the parents shine in the eyes of their children. Finally, from an academic standpoint, the parent interview was chosen to highlight the use of specialized language in multiple contexts.

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Undergirding their desire to feature parents as assets were the team’s attempts to combat the negative attitudes toward nonnative speakers that often exist in schools and the community (Cargile, Maeda, Rodriguez, & Rich, 2010; Hidalgo, 1986; Lindemann, 2005). Cecilia explained the perceptions of the general public in this way, “When talking about minority parents in general and ELLs in particular, the general public sees their lack of the
power language, English, as a deficit. They feel that if someone doesn’t speak English, and can’t come and talk to them, that person is less than them.” Molly continued, “If one isn’t being thoughtful, the default might be that if a person is not speaking the language, then they are not a full-fledged member. They can’t enter into some of the most basic things.” To push back against this perception, the MSL team included the family as a source of instruction, information, and support, and set out to celebrate parents as assets (Brown & Spang, 2008) not as nonentities.

The Parent Interview

On the sixth day of the MSL Summer Program, Cecilia introduced the parent interview. She referenced the notion of a big question that guides inquiry just like they were using in the mathematics and science investigations. In terms of language development, the team’s goal was to help students use language as a tool for making and communicating meaning in multiple contexts (Orellana et al., 2012). They wanted students to see that this principle was not just true for themselves but for all people in society. Therefore, the question that guided the parent interview was, “How do your parents use language in different contexts?” More specifically, the class was interested in gathering information about what languages the parents speak at work and what specialized language they use that is unique to that context.

Ritu and Cecilia guided the discussion about the interview questions and protocol. Cecilia began, “Today you are going to be researchers who study language. We’ve decided that we are linguisticians. We are researchers who study language. You will be interviewing your parent, or cousin, or an adult in your home.” Ritu recognized that definitions for adults needed to be clarified, “What does adult mean?” The students decided that for this activity, an adult was someone who was “18 years or more.”

Cecilia continued, “The first question we are interested in asking your parent is, ‘What language do you speak at home?’ But not all of your parents speak English, so you will probably ask them in the language they speak.” She turned to Antoinette and asked, “What languages do your parents speak?” She replied that they speak French. “So you will ask this question in French,” Cecilia explained. She continued, “Mohammed reminded us that we are also interested in languages they speak in other places, like at work. It will be important to ask your parents about the words they use at work that are different than the words they use at home. Turn to a partner and create a list of possible questions.” The questions were then compiled and voted upon. This brief exchange required students to use language as a tool for making and communicating meaning in a variety of social contexts. After negotiation, the interview questions were:

- Question 1: What languages do you speak at home?
- Question 2: What languages do you speak at work?
- Question 3: When you speak with people at work, how are the words you use different from the ones you use at home? (see Fig. 1).

The interview assignment not only offered the opportunity for students to grapple with the notion of a specialized language in different contexts, but it also echoed the idea of inquiry. As researchers of language (or linguisticians), the students needed tools to gather data in a systematic and objective...
way. Recording the interviews provided hard data to which these young researchers could return. Trying to conduct an investigation without the proper equipment leads to frustration, so the MSL teachers and researchers provided the tools necessary for students to be successful in this task. Each student left campus with a small digital recorder and their list of questions. Some might question the wisdom of sending home such expensive pieces of equipment, but the MSL researchers decided that sending home the equipment would send a powerful message to the students, parents, and others that the students and the assignment were important and that the students were trustworthy.

All students returned the next day eager to discuss the data and move to the next phase of the investigation. Having gathered the data, they were ready to organize the results so that they could then interpret the findings. Many of the students, as we discussed earlier, translated the interview questions into their native languages (see Fig. 2) and then listened to their recordings and made notes about their parents’ responses. The students were familiar with this kind of data analysis, and they had utilized the recorders in this manner throughout the MSL Summer Program. After they recorded field notes in their notebooks (see Fig. 3), they shared their data in small groups. Once again, talking and listening were valued and encouraged as tools for learning (Bodrova, 1996).

As the discussions ended, Cecilia gave the students sticky notes and asked them to record the language their parents spoke at home. Some parents did not use just one language at home, so some responses included two languages, like “some English and some Spanish.” With little guidance, the students moved to the front of the room and placed their “data” on a blank piece of chart paper. At first, this was a random positioning of the sticky notes (data) that appeared rather messy (Weinburgh & Sawey, 2011). At one point, a large group of students was crowding around the chart trying to place their sticky notes. It was as this time that Liliana recognized a need and offered to be the “data manager” so that the data could display a pattern. She helped her peers decide if the English/Spanish response should go in the English column, the Spanish column, or in a column all its own. She guided them to place common responses together to form a bar graph with the sticky notes (see Fig. 4).
A discussion of the preliminary findings ensued. The students shared the words that their relatives used at work. From those responses, the students hypothesized where their peers’ parents worked. For instance, when Amar shared that his mom used the words “charging” and “packing” at her work, his classmates hypothesized that she might work for a cell phone company that charged and packaged cell phones. It turned out that she worked at a local grocery store. A discussion about the multiple uses of the word “charging” then occurred. The key point about how meaning is situated in social contexts was once again reinforced (Gee, 2002).

In another example, Lorenzo shared that his dad used words like “sweets, register, reservations, and menu.” Drawing upon their prior knowledge and associating the known words of *menu* and *sweets* with places of business, his classmates hypothesized that his dad worked at a bakery or some kind of restaurant that sold desserts. After each incorrect guess, Lorenzo smiled slyly and shook his head no. Following several minutes of discussion, Lorenzo explained that it was not the kind of sweet that you eat, and Janet asked how his kind of “sweet” was spelled. She then explained to the students that a “suite” was a fancy room at a hotel. From this discussion, the students determined that Lorenzo’s father worked at a hotel. Lorenzo’s comment about suites not being the kind that you eat was particularly noteworthy. Because he possessed a working definition of both *suite* and *sweet*, he recognized the confusions of his fellow ELLs and provided a linguistic “hint.” This interaction showed the growing sophistication of Lorenzo’s language capital.

Over the course of the next 45 minutes, the students learned that relatives worked in construction, retail, service, and the home. One parent worked as a translator. To close the lesson, Cecilia reminded students that this exercise once again highlighted the notion of specialized language for different contexts (Scarcella, 2003; Snow & Ucelli, 2009) and that they possessed the language skills for making meaning in multiple contexts. The ideas that language is situated and that one context did not have to be privileged over another were becoming shared understandings for these young ELLs.

**Linguisticians: Students View Themselves as Researchers Who Study Language**

Throughout the MSL Program, the ELLs learned a great deal about science and mathematics. They could explain the best design for a wind turbine. They could calculate the mean and median and display the results of various voltmeter readings using graphs. They could even represent through writing and illustrations how wind energy was converted to electricity.

Possibly not as obvious were the linguistic understandings the students developed and refined. Certainly, the students expanded their vocabularies with regard to scientific and mathematical terms. They could even unpack the linguistically dense sentences that often appear in science textbooks into smaller, more manageable units of meaning. They internalized the notion of language capital and their ability to engage in translanguaging practices.

Of particular interest was the idea of teaching students to be linguisticians. New immigrants, like the majority of the MSL participants, knew that their jobs were to learn to read, write, hear, and speak English; they knew they had to acquire a large vocabulary. However, no teacher, no matter how talented, would ever be able to teach these ELLs all the words they would ever need to know. Instead, the MSL team approached the language acquisition task as a form of inquiry, an investigation of sorts—one in which the linguisticians had to gather data, note patterns, grapple with discrepancies, and, in the end, organize the ever-growing body of knowledge (see Fig. 5). The parent interview was just one example of how this concept played out day after day and how the home language was honored. As we contemplate the effectiveness of the MSL Program, we argue that when given a system for looking at language, the Lillianas of the world will develop a self-extending system of language by...
which they can expand and extend their capacities for learning language.

**Building on Language Capital: Implications for Instruction**

As is common practice, these students were language brokers for their families. Graff and Short (2012) noted that requiring students to be put in the position of mediating the connections between two cultures and two languages might be viewed as punitive. However, the practice is generated out of a pressing need to communicate (McQuillan & Tse, 1995) and therefore has great value. Furthermore, as individuals who learn to navigate complex communication skills within even more complex situations, these language brokers acquire important skills.

Typically, language brokering is perceived as a tool for helping parents and families understand and navigate the dominant culture. The MSL research team reframed that idea. They treated language brokering (i.e., the parent interview) as a tool for helping ELLs learn more about the cultural and linguistic competencies possessed by their families who were nonnative English speakers (Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008) while facilitating the analysis of language practices. While the MSL team capitalized on and emphasized the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) through student-initiated parent interviews, the same principle could be applied in any classroom serving ELLs. By taking the time to learn about students’ families, educators are apt

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**FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS**

For a thorough review of the literature related to language brokering, read:


For pieces of children’s literature that focus on immigrant’s language brokering, see the list offered by:


For ideas on strengthening home/school connections, read:


For information about the academic language of science and how to support it in the classroom, read:


For more information about the 5R Model of Language Acquisition, read:

to recognize the cultural capital of parents who are doctors, lawyers, and engineers but ignore the skills and contributions of parents who are not in positions of power or prestige. Simply shifting from a deficit model to one that acknowledges the assets of the child and the family opens opportunities for using language brokering as a tool for learning about the students as individuals.

Finally, the notion of teaching students how to be “linguisticians” has implications for instruction. The MSL team taught students how to be researchers in science and in mathematics, but they also helped students understand how to look at language like a researcher. Studying language by gathering data, by paying attention to how it works, and by testing out developing theories is a practice that can be likened to the old adage about teaching a man to fish. The MSL team believed the idea of creating “linguisticians” has more potential than any language program in which teachers isolate words or front-load concepts because it gives students a strategy that allows them to continue learning about language beyond the classroom walls. It creates a self-extending system for learning language.

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**References**


**Robin Griffith** is an assistant professor of literacy education at Texas Christian University and can be reached at r.griffith@tcu.edu. **Cecilia Silva** is a professor of bilingual/multicultural education at Texas Christian University and can be reached at c.silva@tcu.edu. **Molly Weinburgh** is a professor of science education at Texas Christian University and can be reached at m.weinburgh@tcu.edu.