

Commentary on “Cultivating cross-cultural connections through language learning circles in early childhood programs”

Joy L. Hernandez^{1,*}

¹Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
23529, United States

*Author for correspondence:
Email: jrodr027@odu.edu

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Commentary

This commentary critically engages with the article “*Cultivating Cross-Cultural Connections Through Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Programs*.” The article addresses a significant issue in early childhood education by exploring how Language Learning Circles (LLCs) facilitate linguistic and cultural awareness, focusing on Spanish language exposure. Through critique and analysis, this commentary examines the article’s theoretical frameworks, such as social constructivism, multiple intelligences theory, bilingual language development, and culturally responsive pedagogy through critique. Furthermore, the commentary explores the broader implications of LLCs on health and well-being, including their potential influence on cardiovascular health and overall child development. This analysis aims to provide insights into the multifaceted benefits of LLCs within early childhood settings, considering their role in nurturing language acquisition, cultural empathy, and holistic development in young learners.

Critique and Theoretical Framework

The article draws upon various educational theories and best practices in early childhood education to support its main argument. The LLCs are grounded in Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory, which emphasizes learning through social interactions and guided participation [1]. The LLCs align with this theory by promoting peer interactions and involving families in learning, thus enhancing language acquisition and cultural understanding. Additionally, the immersive and experiential nature of LLCs is supported by Piaget’s constructivist theory, which posits that children learn best through active exploration and play [2]. The emphasis on songs, storytelling, and games as means to acquire language and cultural knowledge reflects the constructivist approach to learning through engagement and hands-on experiences.

The concept of LLCs also incorporates elements from culturally responsive pedagogy [3], highlighting the value of cultural diversity in teaching practices and curriculum content. This aligns with Paris’s [4] call for culturally sustaining pedagogy, which moves beyond acknowledging cultural diversity to actively sustaining and valuing students’ cultural and linguistic heritages. The family involvement in LLCs further aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, acknowledging the interconnection between home and school environments [5].

Social Constructivist Theory and Collaborative Learning

Vygotsky’s [1] social constructivist theory emphasizes that learning is inherently social and is constructed through interaction with more knowledgeable others—teachers, peers, and

family members. LLCs in early childhood settings are practical manifestations of this theory, where language acquisition and cultural learning occur through collaborative activities, such as songs and storytelling. The LLCs embody Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” where children learn language and cultural nuances slightly beyond their independent capabilities but within reach when scaffolded by teachers or peers [1]. This social context aligns well with the critical period for language development, where social interaction is crucial for language acquisition and cognitive development [6].

The importance of guided participation in LLCs further ties into the concept of “apprenticeship in thinking” as framed by Rogoff [7], where children learn through observing, participating, and interacting with skilled members of their community. In LLCs, these experiences are enriched by engaging with diverse cultural elements, leading to an enhanced understanding of both language and culture.

Constructivist Play and Cognitive Development

Piaget’s constructivist theory [2] stresses active exploration and play as foundational to cognitive development. LLCs, with their focus on experiential learning through play, songs, and storytelling, fit into Piagetian principles that suggest language learning is most effective when children are actively involved in manipulating their environment. This immersion helps children construct their knowledge and linguistic understanding, as they assimilate new vocabulary and cultural norms through engaging and familiar activities.

Play-based LLCs also support Piaget’s stages of development, particularly the preoperational stage (ages 2-7), where children engage in symbolic play and begin to understand language as a system of symbols. The use of hand movements, visual aids, and play in LLCs supports this developmental stage by making abstract concepts more concrete and accessible [2].

Multiple Intelligences Theory and Diverse Learning Approaches

Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences [8] expands the understanding of how LLCs cater to various learning styles. By incorporating music, physical movement, and interpersonal engagement, LLCs reach beyond traditional verbal-linguistic methods of language learning and tap into musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences. Music, particularly, is a strong component of LLCs, activating musical intelligence while simultaneously reinforcing linguistic and social-emotional learning [9]. This multisensory approach facilitates holistic learning, allowing children to engage with language and culture through various modalities that suit their unique learning preferences.

Bilingual Language Development and Cognitive Benefits

Cummins’ threshold hypothesis [10] and interdependence theory provide additional depth to understanding how LLCs support bilingual development. According to the threshold hypothesis, a certain level of proficiency in both languages is necessary for the cognitive benefits of bilingualism to manifest. LLCs, by exposing children to Spanish and its associated cultural context, help children achieve higher levels of language competence, leading to cognitive advantages such as enhanced executive functioning, problem-solving, and metalinguistic awareness [11].

Cummins’ interdependence theory suggests that the development of one language supports the acquisition of another. The LLCs’ emphasis on family engagement reinforces this idea, as parents play an active role in reinforcing the language learned in school at home, bridging the gap between languages and enhancing bilingual development.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy

Gay’s [3] theory of culturally responsive teaching emphasizes that effective education is rooted in acknowledging and valuing students’ cultural backgrounds. In LLCs, children’s cultural heritage is not just acknowledged but actively integrated into learning experiences, supporting Gay’s call for curriculum and teaching practices that reflect and celebrate cultural diversity. Paris’s [4] concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy takes this further by urging educators to sustain students’ linguistic and cultural practices rather than just adapt to them.

LLCs create spaces where children’s cultural identities are validated through language and traditions, encouraging self-esteem and a positive sense of cultural identity. Such practices not only help children navigate multicultural societies but also foster a sense of belonging and empathy toward others’ cultural experiences, promoting inclusive social development.

Ecological Systems Theory: Family and Community Engagement

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory [5] argues that a child’s development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, with family and school being two of the most crucial. LLCs’ efforts to involve families in the language-learning process align with Bronfenbrenner’s view that close ties between these environments (mesosystem) enhance child development. By equipping families with songs and language activities that can be practiced at home, LLCs create a cohesive learning environment that extends beyond the classroom, reinforcing language skills and fostering consistent cultural engagement [12].

The Impact on Holistic Development and Health Outcomes

The integration of language, culture, and physical movement in LLCs extends beyond cognitive and social benefits to influence overall health outcomes. The emphasis on socio-emotional development, empathy, and inclusivity is critical for stress management, which in turn impacts cardiovascular health. According to Shonkoff et al. [13], early life experiences influence physiological stress responses, with positive socio-emotional environments fostering resilience and reducing stress, which are protective factors against cardiovascular diseases [14].

Additionally, the physical activities inherent in LLCs—such as dancing, play, and movement—promote cardiovascular health and physical fitness. Janssen and LeBlanc [15] found that regular physical activity in children is associated with a range of benefits, including better heart health, improved mood, and enhanced cognitive function. The inclusion of music, which has been shown to have calming and stress-reducing effects, further enhances the potential for LLCs to contribute to cardiovascular well-being [16].

Relationship to Cardiology and Cardiovascular Disease

Although the article's primary focus is on linguistic and cultural development in early childhood, connections can be drawn to cardiology and cardiovascular health, particularly through the lens of social determinants of health and the role of early-life experiences on long-term well-being. Research has shown that early childhood experiences and environments are foundational to overall health outcomes later in life, including cardiovascular health. Socioemotional skills developed through LLCs, such as empathy and inclusivity, have a relationship with positive health behaviors, stress management, and overall mental well-being [13]. This in turn can influence cardiovascular health, as early-life stress and lack of social support are significant risk factors for the development of cardiovascular diseases (CVD) [14].

Moreover, programs like LLCs that involve family engagement and build social connectedness contribute to healthier social environments. Social integration and support are associated with lower rates of CVD and better health outcomes [17]. By fostering a positive and inclusive school climate, LLCs contribute to developing the child's social networks, which are critical to emotional well-being and stress reduction—factors linked to heart health.

The use of music and physical activities in LLCs, such as games involving movement, also has physiological benefits. Music-based activities can lower heart rates, improve mood, and reduce stress [16], all of which are beneficial for cardiovascular health. Physical play, an integral component of LLCs, promotes physical activity that supports cardiovascular fitness and overall well-being in children [15].

Commentary and Reflections

The article successfully illustrates the benefits of early language exposure and its broader implications for social, cognitive, and emotional development. It positions LLCs as an innovative approach that promotes bilingualism and cross-cultural understanding in young learners, which are critical skills for thriving in a multicultural society. The incorporation of music, play, and cultural artifacts supports an engaging and holistic learning experience that nurtures not only language skills but also cultural empathy and inclusivity.

However, there are additional aspects worth exploring to strengthen the theoretical grounding and practical applications. Theoretical links could be further drawn to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, specifically how music, movement, and interpersonal learning through LLCs cater to varied learning styles [8]. Moreover, a deeper examination of bilingual language development theories, such as Cummins' threshold hypothesis and interdependence theory, could provide further insight into how children's first and second language skills support one another [10].

In practice, the article could benefit from exploring how LLCs are implemented in classrooms with diverse linguistic backgrounds and the challenges educators may face in creating culturally responsive and linguistically rich environments. Additionally, research on the long-term effects of early language and cultural exposure on children's academic, social, and health outcomes would provide a comprehensive view of the significance of such programs.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The article “Cultivating Cross-Cultural Connections Through Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Programs” emphasizes the value of LLCs in fostering cultural and linguistic inclusivity in early childhood education. Activities such as songs, games, and storytelling, LLCs enhance language acquisition, cognitive development, and cross-cultural empathy.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives from social constructivism, multiple intelligences, bilingual language development, and culturally responsive pedagogy offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the benefits of LLCs. These language learning circles promote linguistic and cultural learning and contribute to cognitive growth, socio-emotional well-being, and the development of empathy, helping to shape culturally aware and healthy individuals.

For further research, examining the long-term effects of LLCs on bilingual proficiency and cultural competence is essential. Exploring the connections between language learning, socio-emotional development, and health outcomes—particularly cardiovascular health—would provide a holistic perspective on how early childhood education interventions affect overall well-being through life. Investigating these relationships would shed light on the potential for LLCs to impact language development, cultural competency, and physical health into adolescence and adulthood, offering deeper insights into the multifaceted role of early language and cultural exposure.

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