

## Article

# Anthropological Pathways to Cultural Understanding: “Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Bilingual Education in the U.S.A.”

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a literature review that employs an anthropological perspective to investigate the role of Language Learning Circles (LLCs) in fostering early bilingual development and cultural identity among Hispanic children in the United States. As the Spanish-speaking population grows, the need for culturally grounded language education becomes more urgent. LLCs, rooted in educational and anthropological traditions, serve as structured, dialogic spaces where language learning is tied to cultural practices such as storytelling, music, and rituals. Drawing on theories of language socialization, cultural artifacts, and communicative competence, this paper situates LLCs within broader anthropological discussions on identity, belonging, and community building. By highlighting how LLCs promote linguistic diversity, foster cross-cultural understanding, and employ inclusive teaching methods, the article offers insights into how early childhood education can serve as a powerful site for cultural transmission and resistance. Special focus is given to the implications for Hispanic families navigating bilingualism and educational equity in the U.S.

**Keywords:** Linguistic anthropology; Language socialization; Cultural artifacts; Early childhood education; Bilingual education; Spanish language; Cross-cultural empathy; Hispanic identity



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## 1. Introduction

This literature review, with potential applications, aims to highlight the role of LLCs as culturally responsive teaching tools. Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship in education, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, we examine the theoretical foundations, practical frameworks, and sociocultural contexts in which LLCs are situated. Specifically, this review emphasizes how LLCs can support language development, identity negotiation, and cultural affirmation among Hispanic children in the United States. The paper focuses on how LLCs function at the intersection of community-based language learning, educational equity, and broader anthropological questions about language socialization, belonging, and identity in diasporic contexts.

Although grounded in educational research, this work is designed to engage linguistic anthropologists studying how language reflects and shapes social worlds. We situate LLCs within a tradition of anthropological inquiry that examines how language practices in institutional and informal settings shape power, identity, and social reproduction [1,2]. By viewing LLCs as a type of language socialization [3], we connect this educational intervention with anthropological theories of communicative competence, narrative practice, and cultural transmission.

As discussed in this paper, LLCs refer to intentionally structured, dialogic spaces that emphasize reciprocal language exchange, storytelling, and cultural affirmation. These circles are typically facilitated by educators or community leaders and focus on collective participation in learning through multilingual interaction, visual supports, and culturally relevant texts. Although the terminology and practice have evolved, LLCs draw from Freirean pedagogy, [4,5] Native American talking circles, and bilingual education reforms. Some LLC implementations have been documented in bilingual classrooms, heritage language programs, and early childhood educational settings [6,7],

although few studies explicitly refer to them as “LLCs”. The term is emerging and adaptable, reflecting a community-centered approach rather than a fixed curriculum.

Importantly, this synthesis limits its focus to the sociocultural and linguistic experiences of Hispanics in the U.S., a group for whom language often sits at the heart of family ties, cultural identity, and educational opportunities. Research has documented the linguistic marginalization of Hispanic children in monolingual English classrooms [8,9], as well as the systematic exclusion of Spanish and Indigenous languages from formal educational settings. By highlighting the potential of LLCs to promote a sense of belonging, linguistic pride, and academic involvement, this paper responds to a growing body of scholarship supporting culturally sustaining pedagogies in Hispanic communities [10].

## 2. Language as a Cultural Practice

Language is not merely a set of abstract rules for communication; it is deeply intertwined with culture, history, and identity. This understanding of language as a cultural practice is crucial in early childhood education, where the connection between language learning and cultural immersion is vital for the holistic development of children [7,11,12]. One of the core principles of LLCs is the idea of language as an embodied cultural practice. This concept draws on anthropological insights that emphasize how culture is transmitted not only through language but also through embodied actions, rituals, and social interactions [13–15]. In LLCs, integrating physical activities such as songs, rhythmic movement, gestures, and storytelling is not just a pedagogical tool for language acquisition, but also a way of connecting children to the lived cultural experiences embedded in these linguistic forms.

### 2.1. Marcel Mauss and Techniques of the Body: Embodied Language Learning

Marcel Mauss’s [14] influential work on “techniques of the body” offers a foundational framework for understanding the embodied aspects of cultural practices. Mauss argues that culture is not just learned through intellectual means, such as reading or listening, but also through physical interaction with the environment. “Techniques of the body” describe how individuals acquire and internalize cultural knowledge through physical actions, gestures, and bodily movements. These techniques are culturally specific and vary across societies, shaping how people move, speak, and interact [15,16].

In the context of LLCs, embodied language learning is essential. Language is acquired not only through repetition of words or phrases but also through participation in culturally meaningful physical practices [12,17]. For example, in many Spanish-speaking communities, children learn songs and accompanying hand gestures to reinforce language and culture. The song “Vamos a Recoger” (“Let’s Pick Up”) exemplifies this integration of verbal and embodied practice. Commonly used during cleanup time in preschool classrooms and community programs, this song combines Spanish lyrics with synchronized hand motions, actively engaging children in the learning process.

The physical aspect of the song reinforces the meaning of the words by connecting language with coordinated action. In Hispanic cultures, cleanup routines are often communal, reflecting values of cooperation, responsibility, and collective effort [7,10]. When used in LLCs, such songs not only build Spanish vocabulary related to cleaning and organizing but also instill cultural norms of collaboration and social harmony. As Mauss’s [14] concept of “techniques of the body” suggests, embodied practices like these help children internalize cultural values beyond language—their bodies become mediums for learning social norms, identity, and cultural belonging.

### 2.2. Storytelling as a Cultural Act: Connecting Language and Identity









Storytelling is another key activity in LLCs that demonstrates how language is deeply embedded in cultural practices. As a form of oral tradition, storytelling remains a central means of transmitting social norms and values across generations [18,19]. In Hispanic communities, storytelling serves as a vital educational tool during early socialization, allowing children to acquire not only language but also cultural knowledge, values, and historical narratives that shape their identities [20,21].

According to oral tradition scholars such as Finnegan [22,23] and recent cultural education researchers, storytelling is more than a mode of communication; it is a form of performing culture and constructing meaning [24]. Throughs, children are introduced to moral lessons, social customs, and shared histories central to their cultural identity. For example, in many Latinx communities, folktales such as “La Llorona” (the Crying Woman) and “Cenicienta” (Cinderella) are used to convey lessons about family, respect, and morality, which are transmitted intergenerationally to reinforce communal values [25].

In LLCs, storytelling becomes a dynamic linguistic and cultural space where children learn new words and sentence structures while unpacking the cultural meanings embedded within those expressions. A teacher might tell the story of “La Llorona” using basic Spanish vocabulary. As children absorb new linguistic forms, they engage with the larger cultural narrative of caution, loss, and parental guidance embedded in the story. In this way, storytelling is not merely instructional it is a sociocultural tool that connects children to their heritage and fosters internalization of values and norms [10,26] in LLCs that promote active participation from children. In many Hispanic traditions, stories are not only told but performed, integrating physical movement, expressive gestures, rhythmic sounds, and audience interaction [27,28]. This embodies a participatory approach that aligns closely with Mauss’s concept of cultural learning through the body and reflects recent findings in embodied cognition and early learning [12,15]. Through their engagement in storytelling, children use language contextually—not just to communicate but to enact and embody their cultural worlds [29].

Here is an ideal activity to incorporate Storytelling with children and their families (Table 1. “Storytelling with children and their families”).

Table 1. Storytelling with children and their families.

| Section                                                                                                | Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|-------------|------|-------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|-------|
|  Activity Title       | Storytelling Around the Circle: Exploring Culture Through Language and Tradition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Focus Area           | Anthropological Pathways to Cultural Understanding<br>Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Bilingual Education (Spanish and English)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Target Age Group     | Children age 3–6                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Learning Objectives  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop bilingual vocabulary (Spanish/English)</li><li>• Cultivate cultural awareness through storytelling</li><li>• Foster active listening, empathy, and group participation</li><li>• Introduce anthropological concepts like tradition, family, and belonging</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Materials Needed   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Traditional Hispanic folktale (e.g., <i>La Cucarachita Martina</i>, <i>El Conejito Blanco</i>)</li><li>• Visual aids or felt pieces</li><li>• Cultural props (e.g., maracas, scarves, dolls)</li><li>• Storytelling carpet or circle space</li><li>• Bilingual word cards (e.g., <i>casa/house</i>)</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Activity Procedure | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Circle Warm-Up Song (5 min): Sing a bilingual welcome song using maracas.</li><li>2. Storytelling (10–15 min): Read or perform the story with gestures and visual aids. Pause to highlight key Spanish words.</li><li>3. Cultural Object Exploration (5 min): Pass around items and ask questions about their use.</li><li>4. Vocabulary Action Game (5–10 min): Children act out bilingual word cards (e.g., <i>bailar/dance</i>).</li><li>5. Reflection (5 min): Prompt with questions to connect story themes to children’s lives.</li></ol> |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Extension Ideas    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invite a family member to share a folktale or lullaby</li><li>• Create a “My Family Storybook”</li><li>• Dramatic play with cultural props or costumes</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
|  Sample Vocabulary  | <table><tr><td>Spanish</td><td>English</td></tr><tr><td>abuela</td><td>grandmother</td></tr><tr><td>casa</td><td>house</td></tr><tr><td>comida</td><td>food</td></tr><tr><td>cantar</td><td>sing</td></tr><tr><td>bailar</td><td>dance</td></tr></table>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Spanish | English | abuela | grandmother | casa | house | comida | food | cantar | sing | bailar | dance |
| Spanish                                                                                                | English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
| abuela                                                                                                 | grandmother                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
| casa                                                                                                   | house                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
| comida                                                                                                 | food                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
| cantar                                                                                                 | sing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |
| bailar                                                                                                 | dance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |         |         |        |             |      |       |        |      |        |      |        |       |

2.3. The Role of Songs and Rhythms in Embodied Language Learning

Music and rhythm are essential parts of LLCs, serving not only as teaching tools but also as embodied cultural practices. In many Hispanic communities, music serves as both entertainment and a powerful medium for conveying shared memories, social norms, and cultural values [30,31]. From an anthropological and educational perspective, songs are cultural artifacts that encode language, emotion, and identity [6,24]. In LLCs, musical activities like singing “La Vaca Lola” (the Cow Lola) go beyond basic linguistic exposure—they immerse children in participatory cultural experiences rooted in intergenerational traditions. This popular children’s song not only introduces foundational vocabulary (e.g., animals, sounds, sentence structures) but also evokes emotional tones and social narratives familiar within many Hispanic households.

Building on more recent applications of Blacking's [32] theory of music as essential to human socialization, LLCs integrate rhythm and coordinated movement to promote collective engagement and the internalization of both language and cultural values [33,34]. As children sing and move together, they are not merely acquiring vocabulary—they embody meanings such as joy, cooperation, and communal identity, all of which are embedded in musical performance. This aligns with key insights in educational anthropology, where ritual and performance are viewed as powerful settings for cultural transmission [12,35].

Rhythm also plays a critical role in language development. Scholars in linguistic anthropology and cognitive science have emphasized that rhythmic entrainment enhances children's sensitivity to prosody and phonological patterns, which supports early language acquisition [36,37]. In LLCs, combining rhythmic repetition, gesture, and verbal expression fosters linguistic fluency and a sense of cultural belonging. Through this dynamic integration of music, movement, and meaning, LLCs exemplify how language learning is a holistic, embodied, and socially grounded process, particularly significant for Hispanic children navigating bilingual and bicultural identities in the U.S.

#### 2.4. Cultural Artifacts as Learning Tools

Cultural artifacts, such as maracas, traditional games, and visual aids, play a vital role in LLCs by offering tangible connections to the intangible cultural practices of Hispanic communities. Often integrated into language learning activities, these artifacts serve as physical embodiments of cultural heritage. UNESCO [38] defines cultural heritage as “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.” In LLCs, these cultural tools bridge linguistic development and cultural identity in early education [10,28].

Take, for example, the maracas—a type of percussion instrument traditionally made from hollowed-out gourds filled with seeds or beads and rooted in Afro-Caribbean and Latin American musical traditions. Children who use maracas in music-based LLC activities engage with the rhythmic structures foundational to many Hispanic cultures. This experience supports embodied learning and the internalization of phonological patterns central to early language acquisition [12,39]. Maracas help reinforce beat, cadence, and repetition, key components of musical engagement and oral language development [37].

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's [13] concept of thick description offers a valuable lens for interpreting how cultural tools, such as maracas, are used in LLCs. Rather than viewing them as mere instruments, LLCs contextualize maracas within communal traditions such as celebration, storytelling, and music-making. This approach reflects broader social values, such as belonging, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and expressive identity. Through engaging with such culturally meaningful tools, children not only develop vocabulary and phonemic awareness but also participate in cultural practices that affirm their identities and connect them to their heritage [21,24,40].

#### 2.5. Cultural Practices and Language: A Holistic Approach to Learning

Integrating language with cultural practices in LLCs reflects a holistic approach to learning that aligns with contemporary anthropological views of language and culture. In linguistic anthropology, language is understood not merely as a tool for communication but as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge, social roles, and identity [2,24]. This sociocultural perspective is especially relevant in early childhood education, where learning is deeply embedded in cultural and social interaction [12,35].

Within LLCs, language is never taught in isolation. Instead, it is woven into the community's cultural practices, rituals, and values. Through embodied and participatory activities like singing, storytelling, call-and-response, and rhythmic movement, children acquire language as part of a lived cultural experience [15,21]. This approach not only supports vocabulary acquisition and oral fluency but also deepens children's understanding of cultural identity. When children learn Spanish through culturally meaningful practices, they are welcomed into a broader community that honors collaboration, oral tradition, and intergenerational connection [7,41].

This culturally grounded model of language learning is particularly significant in the U.S., where children from Hispanic backgrounds often face pressures to assimilate into English-dominant environments, which can result in language loss and cultural disconnection [8,42]. LLCs provide a protective and affirming space where children can maintain ties to their heritage, reinforcing their bilingualism and cultural self-concept. For non-Hispanic children, LLCs cultivate cultural empathy, curiosity, and inclusive worldviews, key qualities for navigating an increasingly diverse and interconnected society [10,43].

### 3. Language, Socialization, and Identity Formation

Language acquisition is intrinsically linked to the process of socialization. From birth, children are immersed in dynamic social interactions where language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a means of establishing relationships and participating in community life [44,45]. Language, therefore, is more than a medium for transmitting information; it is foundational to learning how to be a member of society [46]. Through everyday conversations, storytelling, and culturally grounded routines, children internalize social roles, cultural norms, and values [12,21]. This process plays a crucial role in shaping their sense of self, sense of belonging, and relationships with others, key dimensions of identity development [2,47].

In the context of LLCs, where language acquisition is intentionally framed as a culturally immersive experience, the socialization process becomes even more profound. LLCs create environments where children do not merely learn a language such as Spanish; they are actively socialized into the Hispanic community's cultural practices, values, and traditions [7,48]. These learning spaces provide children with opportunities to perform and embody language through storytelling, singing, communal routines, and culturally significant artifacts.

This article also draws on Pierre Bourdieu's [49] concept of *habitus*, as a system of dispositions shaped by history and social context, to understand how participation in LLCs contributes to identity formation. When children engage in these culturally rich language practices, they internalize not only linguistic patterns but also ways of thinking, feeling, and being that align with the cultural frameworks of their communities [24]. Moreover, family engagement strongly reinforces this process, which plays a critical role in sustaining both linguistic development and cultural socialization across home and school contexts [41,50].

#### 3.1. Bourdieu's Concept of *Habitus* and Its Relevance to Language Learning

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* remains central to understanding how socialization influences identity formation, particularly through language. *Habitus* refers to the deeply internalized dispositions, habits, and orientations that individuals develop over time through repeated experiences within specific social and cultural contexts [51]. These dispositions are not explicitly taught but are formed through interaction with caregivers, peers, and educators, shaping how individuals perceive and respond to the world. *Habitus* is not static; it evolves through ongoing social practices and adapts to different "social fields", such as home, school, and community [19,21].

In the context of LLCs, *habitus* helps explain how children internalize the Spanish language and the broader cultural values surrounding its use. Children immersed in culturally responsive, Spanish-rich environments are not simply learning vocabulary and grammar. They actively absorb the norms, values, and expectations of the Hispanic community's cultural practices [6,52]. Language serves as a medium through which children enact social behaviors, understand their roles within the community, and develop a sense of cultural belonging. Practices such as traditional songs, storytelling, and cooperative classroom routines—like group cleanup accompanied by culturally familiar music—communicate values of family, mutual respect, and collective responsibility [41,50,53].

Bourdieu's theory further emphasizes that language is not a neutral tool but a bearer of symbolic power and social meaning [49,54–56]. In LLCs, using Spanish in educational spaces affirms the legitimacy of students' home language and cultural identity, particularly for bilingual or heritage Spanish speakers [10,57]. For these children, the classroom becomes a space where the language of home is validated and extended. For children from non-Spanish-speaking backgrounds, LLCs provide an opportunity to develop cultural awareness and linguistic empathy by engaging in a cultural-linguistic field that differs from their own [12]. In both cases, the development of *habitus* through culturally grounded language experiences supports the formation of identity, critical consciousness, and inclusive learning [58].

#### 3.2. Socialization through Language: The Role of LLCs

Language learning is inherently a social practice. As children acquire language, they simultaneously learn how to engage with others, navigate social hierarchies, and fulfill societal expectations [24,45]. In LLCs, language acquisition is closely tied to cultural socialization, where learning the language of a specific community also involves adopting its cultural norms, values, and traditions [12,59,60]. Children are immersed in linguistically and socially meaningful practices in these settings that shape their developing identities and worldviews [10,47].

Language learning in LLCs is embedded within a broader cultural practice framework that extends beyond formal instruction. Activities such as singing traditional songs, performing folkloric dances, or participating in cooperative classroom routines—like collective storytelling or cleanup—are not simply language exercises; they are culturally

situated acts that embody shared values and beliefs [7,27]. These practices function as powerful tools for socialization, enabling children to internalize the roles, expectations, and relational norms that are central to their cultural community [21].

In this sense, LLCs serve as dynamic sites of cultural transmission, where children access and accumulate social and cultural capital. As conceptualized by Bourdieu [51], cultural capital encompasses the dispositions, knowledge, and skills acquired through participation in culturally valued practices. In LLCs, children's acquisition of Spanish contributes to this broader accumulation of cultural capital, equipping them to engage meaningfully within their immediate communities and the broader sociocultural landscape [6,52]. Ultimately, LLCs prepare children to inhabit a multilingual, culturally responsive world that values diversity, community collaboration, and equity in learning [61,62].

### 3.3. *The Role of Family Engagement in Language Socialization*

An essential component of the socialization process within LLCs is family engagement. Linguistic anthropology and educational research continue to emphasize the central role of family involvement in supporting language ,97ment, especially for children from bilingual or multilingual households [7,50]. Family engagement ensures that language learning extends beyond the classroom and becomes part of a continuous, home-school learning ecosystem [63]. This is particularly important in bilingual education contexts, where the language of instruction (e.g., Spanish in LLCs) may not match the dominant language of the broader community or educational system.

Current research highlights how family engagement reinforces children's identity formation's linguistic and cultural dimensions [17,21]. When families actively participate in the language learning process, they help children make meaningful connections between school-based instruction and home-based cultural knowledge. For instance, when Spanish-speaking parents reinforce classroom lessons at home through conversations, songs, or storytelling, they help maintain linguistic continuity while affirming cultural pride and identity [41,42].

In LLCs, family engagement can take many forms. A common practice involves providing families with bilingual resources—such as newsletters, storybooks, or take-home activities—which allow them to participate in their children's language learning in meaningful ways [64]. These materials support families in extending language-rich interactions into the home and validate the cultural and linguistic assets they bring to their children's education. Additionally, bilingual events such as cultural festivals, Spanish-language story hours, or parent-child workshops create opportunities for families to share their heritage with the school community and build stronger connections between home and school practices [65,66]. While educators typically take the lead in preparing translated materials and organizing events, these moments also provide spaces for reciprocal cultural exchange and foster a sense of belonging and pride among families.

Family involvement in LLCs is particularly impactful for children navigating bilingual environments, as it legitimizes both their home language and the language of instruction. Studies show that when families are meaningfully engaged, children experience greater affirmation of their cultural identity, which contributes to stronger language development, self-esteem, and academic outcomes [10,67,68]. This kind of engagement can counteract linguistic marginalization and support the development of a dual-language identity for children from Spanish-speaking homes in English-dominant environments.

Furthermore, family engagement in LLCs can buffer against the risks of linguistic isolation, particularly in communities where Spanish is not widely spoken. When families maintain cultural and linguistic practices at home and participate in school-based language initiatives, they provide children with critical emotional, cultural, and cognitive support. This holistic approach ensures that children not only gain fluency but also integrate the language into their broader social identity, making language learning a significant and affirming experience [12,24].

### 3.4. *Identity Formation and Cultural Pride*

As children learn a new language, they simultaneously develop their sense of self and place within the world. Language, as a social and cultural construct, plays a central role in shaping identity through the ways individuals use and are positioned by language in day life [2,47,69]. In the case of LLCs, learning Spanish is not solely about acquiring linguistic competence but also about engaging with and embodying a cultural identity. For children from Hispanic backgrounds, LLCs create an affirming space to explore their heritage, build cultural knowledge, and develop pride in their linguistic and cultural roots [7,48,62]. This identity formation is deeply tied to self-esteem and a strong sense of belonging, both essential for positive development [17,21].

Incorporating family involvement into this process further strengthens children's emerging cultural identities. Research in bilingual and dual-language education has consistently shown that when children see their home languages, stories, and cultural practices validated in the classroom, they are more likely to form positive self-concepts and develop

cultural pride [41,64]. Family engagement in LLCs bridges home and school, reinforcing the sociocultural values that children learn and helping them navigate their dual identities across different settings [42,50].

For non-Hispanic children, LLCs also provide meaningful opportunities for developing intercultural empathy and awareness. Through culturally immersive language learning, children engage with Hispanic communities' values, traditions, and lived experiences, gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity [10,12]. By learning Spanish in a culturally immersive setting, these children not only gain insight but also break down cultural barriers and learn to promote inclusivity [70].

#### 4. Language Learning as Cultural Resistance

In the United States, English has historically functioned not only as the dominant language of communication but also as a mechanism of cultural and social power. For many marginalized communities—primarily Hispanic communities—the dominance of English has contributed to linguistic exclusion, cultural erasure, and structural inequities in education [6,7]. As scholars of language and power argue, language can serve as a tool of domination that reinforces hierarchical relationships between dominant and minoritized groups [71,72]. In this context, bilingual education models, such as LLCs, offer more than just language instruction; they provide a means for cultural resistance and empowerment. By promoting bilingualism, affirming Spanish alongside English, and centering culturally sustaining pedagogy, LLCs disrupt the hegemonic assumptions of English monolingualism and reaffirm the cultural and linguistic rights of Hispanic communities [10,42].

This section examines how LLCs facilitate cultural resistance through language, enabling Hispanic communities to reclaim their narratives, assert their linguistic agency, and counter the silencing of their contributions to American society. Through a focus on community language practices, multilingual storytelling, and culturally grounded rituals, LLCs become sites of resistance to linguistic assimilation and instruments of cultural affirmation [7]. In this way, bilingualism becomes more than an academic goal—it becomes a political act that challenges linguistic imperialism and affirms the value of cultural pluralism in early childhood education [24,73].

##### 4.1. Language as a Tool of Power and Cultural Domination

Edward Said's [74] seminal work on Orientalism offers a critical framework for understanding how language operates as a system of power. He argued that language is not a neutral tool but a mechanism through which colonial powers construct and maintain dominance, shaping representations of the "Other" to serve political and cultural agendas. Building on Said's insights, contemporary scholars have highlighted how language policies and ideologies perpetuate racial and cultural hierarchies, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial societies [71,72]. In the U.S., English has long served as a vehicle of cultural hegemony through assimilationist practices such as "Americanization" and English-only education, which have systematically marginalized non-English languages, including Spanish [6,42,75].

These dynamics are especially evident in the experiences of Hispanic communities, one of the country's largest and most linguistically diverse populations. Despite the widespread use of Spanish, Hispanics often face overt and covert pressure to assimilate linguistically, resulting in generational language loss and diminished cultural recognition [7,73]. Educational policies and media representations frequently erase or misrepresent Hispanic contributions to U.S. society, reinforcing English monolingualism as the normative standard [76,77].

In this context, promoting bilingualism through programs like LLCs represents a form of resistance against linguistic domination. LLCs affirm Spanish as a language of knowledge, community, and cultural pride, challenging deficit perspectives and advocating for linguistic equity [10,42,78]. By valuing and sustaining heritage languages in early childhood education, LLCs play a critical role in dismantling the ideological supremacy of English and re-centering linguistic and cultural diversity as vital components of inclusive schooling [7,24].

##### 4.2. Language Learning Circles (LLCs) as a Platform for Cultural Resistance

LLCs offer a unique space where language acquisition is framed not solely as an educational goal but as an act of cultural resistance. By teaching Spanish in a context that honors its cultural and historical depth, LLCs empower children to connect with their linguistic heritage and resist assimilationist pressures embedded in English-dominant schooling [6,7]. The early introduction of Spanish in LLCs challenges the ideological narrative that English is the exclusive path to opportunity and mobility in the United States. Instead, LLCs promote bilingualism as a resource for cultural knowledge, economic access, cognitive development, and social equity [10,73].

LLCs also serve as platforms for Hispanic communities to assert cultural sovereignty and reclaim their stories. In these multilingual, multicultural settings, children learn not only grammar and vocabulary but also the lived values, traditions, and histories embedded in Spanish. Storytelling, music, dance, food, and intergenerational projects immerse children in cultural practices that deepen their sense of belonging and affirm their cultural identity [27,48,79,80]. Through this process, LLCs cultivate cultural pride and resilience among young learners, offering a counter-narrative to broader societal tendencies to undervalue or erase Hispanic contributions [42].

By integrating cultural practices into language instruction, LLCs disrupt dominant narratives that associate English with intellectual authority and cultural superiority. Instead, they position Spanish as a language of thought, creativity, and community that deserves respect and institutional support. This vision of bilingual education reimagines national unity not through linguistic homogeneity but through inclusive practices that embrace the linguistic and cultural diversity of the U.S. [12,24].

#### *4.3. Cultural Resistance through Bilingual Education*

Promoting bilingualism in LLCs is a form of cultural resistance, challenging the legacy of linguistic assimilation that has historically marginalized non-English languages in the United States. When implemented through asset-based approaches, bilingual education challenges linguistic imperialism by contesting that English is the sole language of access, power, and academic legitimacy [6,7]. Instead, LLCs center linguistic diversity as a strength, empowering historically marginalized communities to assert their identities and resist systemic pressures of assimilation [10,42].

Research consistently shows that children educated in both their home language and a second language develop enhanced cognitive flexibility, academic achievement, and socioemotional well-being [27,73,81]. Bilingual education also fosters intercultural competence and empathy, encouraging students from different backgrounds to appreciate linguistic and cultural pluralism [12,48]. LLCs exemplify these outcomes by integrating culturally responsive teaching with meaningful language acquisition, fostering cognitive development and cultural affirmation [82].

For Hispanic communities, learning Spanish in an affirming educational environment counteracts the stigma often associated with speaking Spanish in English-dominant spaces. Many Spanish-speaking students have experienced linguistic discrimination or been led to believe that their language lacks value in academic or professional contexts [42]. LLCs actively dismantle these harmful narratives by framing Spanish as a language of intellectual, historical, and cultural significance. Activities such as storytelling, traditional songs, folkloric dances, and indigenous narratives help affirm the legitimacy and richness of Hispanic cultures, thereby resisting the cultural hierarchies that prioritize English-speaking traditions [24,83].

#### *4.4. Empowering Marginalized Communities through Language*

The concept of cultural resistance through language learning is particularly significant for historically marginalized groups excluded from mainstream power structures. For Hispanic communities in the United States, language serves as a means of empowerment, enabling individuals to affirm their identity, sustain cultural heritage, and participate in broader social and political movements [6,7,80]. LLCs allow children to engage deeply with their linguistic and cultural roots, fostering a strong sense of agency and belonging through community-based, culturally sustaining practices [10,71].

The empowerment that emerges from bilingualism extends beyond linguistic proficiency; it nurtures cultural pride, resistance to assimilationist pressures, and a sense of self-determination [12,48]. By affirming Spanish and English as valuable resources, LLCs create inclusive and affirming learning environments that enable students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to thrive. In doing so, bilingualism in LLCs acts as a form of resistance to the dominant culture's tendency to marginalize or erase the contributions of non-English-speaking communities [24].

Contemporary frameworks echo Said's [74] argument that reclaiming language is inherently tied to reclaiming power. In LLCs, the teaching and celebration of Spanish affirms the right of Hispanic communities not only to exist as linguistic and cultural minorities in the U.S., but also to shape their narratives and futures. This form of cultural empowerment extends beyond classroom walls, contributing to the broader movement toward a multilingual and inclusive society that challenges the ideology of English-only normativity [42,71].

#### *4.5. The Role of LLCs in Building a More Inclusive Society*

LLCs are not only acts of resistance against linguistic marginalization; they are also affirming spaces where cultural diversity is celebrated and woven into the fabric of education and community life. As the United States becomes increasingly multicultural and multilingual, the ability to navigate multiple languages and cultural contexts is emerging as



a critical asset for future generations [12,84]. By promoting bilingualism and cultural inclusion, LLCs help foster a more equitable, socially cohesive society where linguistic diversity is recognized as a strength rather than a barrier [6,10,82].

Through participation in LLCs, children from Hispanic communities are not only developing Spanish proficiency they are also gaining the tools to engage with the world through empathy, inclusion, and cultural awareness [48]. This approach prepares children for life in a globalized society where linguistic and cultural pluralism is not just common, but essential [85]. By nurturing environments that value and celebrate language differences, LLCs contribute to building a more just and inclusive society, where diverse cultural communities can participate equally and proudly [17,42].

## 5. Implications for a Multicultural Future

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to navigate diverse cultural contexts and communicate across linguistic boundaries is an essential competency. The rapid pace of globalization means that today's children will inhabit a world that is not only multicultural but also multilingual, where collaboration across languages and identities is vital for social, academic, and economic success [86,87]. As Arjun Appadurai [88] argues in his work "The Capacity to Aspire," individuals need the imaginative capacity to envision meaningful futures and navigate complex cultural and political landscapes. This capacity, the ability to aspire, is foundational to agency, opportunity, and equity in a globalized society.

LLCs, which blend language acquisition with cultural immersion, are critical tools for cultivating this capacity. By providing children with both linguistic and cultural fluency, LLCs promote not only bilingualism but also global competence—the ability to understand, appreciate, and act across cultures [7,12]. LLCs support the development of children's intercultural awareness, curiosity, and empathy, thus laying the groundwork for educational equity and aspirational growth [10,89]. In this way, LLCs do more than teach a second language; they prepare children to thrive in a globally interconnected and culturally rich world.

### 5.1. Arjun Appadurai's "Capacity to Aspire" and Global Competence

Arjun Appadurai's [88] concept of the "capacity to aspire" remains a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how education can prepare children for a rapidly shifting global landscape. Appadurai contends that the ability to envision and pursue future possibilities is not solely an individual trait but a culturally mediated and socially conditioned capacity, dependent on access to symbolic, material, and social resources. In today's globalized world, learners must be equipped to imagine opportunities beyond their immediate cultural or linguistic environments and to navigate pluralistic, interconnected societies [86,89].

In language learning, the capacity to aspire can be interpreted as the ability to see oneself as a global citizen—someone who can engage meaningfully with others across linguistic and cultural divides [7,87]. Through bilingual education, children not only gain communicative competence but also expand their cultural horizons and develop new dimensions of identity [90]. As Paris and Alim [10] argue, culturally sustaining pedagogies empower learners to explore, maintain, and evolve their cultural and linguistic heritages within educational settings, strengthening their aspirations and agency.

LLCs serve as dynamic spaces where children acquire language while developing the social, cognitive, and emotional skills needed for global citizenship. By engaging in Spanish-language learning embedded within Hispanic cultural traditions, children develop an appreciation for cultural pluralism and the linguistic diversity that shapes global communities [12,17]. Thus, LLCs teach vocabulary and grammar and cultivate the aspirational mindset and intercultural competence essential for thriving in an interconnected world.

### 5.2. The Role of LLCs in Developing Global Competence

Global competence is the capacity to communicate and collaborate with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to understand and appreciate cultural perspectives, and to engage meaningfully with pressing global issues [87,89,91]. This competence encompasses key dimensions, including cultural awareness, language skills, perspective-taking, and navigating complex social and global systems [86,92]. LLCs effectively cultivate global competence by integrating language acquisition into culturally immersive, dialogic educational settings.

**Cultural Awareness:** One of the primary benefits of LLCs is that they nurture cultural understanding through experiential learning. Storytelling, music, dance, and art provide children with multisensory experiences of Hispanic traditions, enabling them to internalize diverse cultural narratives and practices [17,52,93]. This immersion type enhances children's awareness of how cultural practices shape values, behaviors, and global relations, preparing them to act with cultural sensitivity and respect.

**Linguistic Proficiency:** LLCs promote Spanish language development not simply as a communicative skill, but as a cognitive and cultural tool. Learning another language enhances children's mental flexibility, problem-solving, and metalinguistic awareness, all essential for multilingual environments [84,94]. Language learning in LLCs thus strengthens children's ability to communicate across boundaries while fostering intellectual openness and critical thinking.

**Perspective-Taking:** Language learning in LLCs also nurtures perspective-taking—the ability to view the world from another person's cultural and emotional standpoint. By engaging with cultural narratives and values embedded in Spanish language instruction, children begin to understand the social contexts and lived realities of others [12,95]. This fosters a more profound empathy and the capacity to engage with complex global issues from multiple perspectives—a key attribute of globally competent individuals.

**Social and Emotional Skills:** Collaborative learning environments in LLCs foster the development of social-emotional competencies, including empathy, cooperation, and intercultural communication [87,96]. As children engage in group storytelling or bilingual peer interactions, they develop the interpersonal skills necessary to work respectfully and effectively with others, preparing them to address global challenges such as migration, inequality, and climate change through collective action [66].

### 5.3. *LLCs as Catalysts for Cultural and Linguistic Hybridization*

The multicultural world that children will inherit is not one of neatly compartmentalized cultural practices and languages. Instead, globalization fosters cultural hybridity—an ongoing blending and reshaping of multiple cultural and linguistic traditions [7,89]. LLCs are particularly effective in preparing children for this multicultural reality by integrating Spanish instruction with cultural practices that span global and local traditions [86,87].

LLCs immerse children in the understanding that cultural identity is dynamic, and language is a living site of cultural exchange. As learners engage with Spanish and Hispanic cultural practices (e.g., storytelling, music, traditions), they're encouraged to see themselves as part of a broader, interconnected world that values linguistic and cultural diversity [53]. This experience fosters global citizenship, enabling children to understand that their actions, ideas, and identities both shape and are shaped by a worldwide network of people and cultures [12,89]. By emphasizing the fluidity of cultural and linguistic boundaries, LLCs equip children to navigate the complexities of a multicultural future with curiosity, empathy, and adaptability [10,95].

### 5.4. *Laying the Foundation for a More Inclusive Society*

At the core of LLCs is the idea of inclusivity—creating educational environments where diversity is actively celebrated, and children are empowered to learn from and about one another's cultures. This inclusivity extends beyond fostering linguistic diversity; it emphasizes social cohesion, empathy, and mutual respect as critical skills for global citizenship [10,86]. In a globalized world, these values are essential for building bridges across cultural and linguistic divides, and LLCs serve as foundational spaces where children can develop inclusive mindsets from an early age [12,89].

By promoting linguistic and cultural diversity, LLCs build a more equitable and inclusive society where differences are acknowledged, respected, and celebrated. Such inclusivity is paramount in today's multicultural context, where social polarization and cultural misunderstandings often stem from a lack of intercultural awareness. Research indicates that early exposure to culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive environments can help reduce prejudice and foster empathy-driven relationships across cultural lines [95,97,98]. LLCs thus serve as catalysts for cultural awareness and social harmony, helping children grow into compassionate, inclusive members of a 52, society.

## 6. Conclusions

LLCs are not just structured educational methods aimed at teaching language; they are dynamic cultural environments where children are encouraged to explore and understand the complexities of their identities and those of others. By blending language learning with cultural practices, LLCs create a space where linguistic education extends beyond vocabulary and grammar, serving as a pathway to deeper cultural understanding. These circles facilitate not only the development of language skills but also foster empathy, inclusivity, and cognitive flexibility—qualities essential for building a more equitable society.

The belief that language is deeply connected to culture is at the heart of LLCs. Children learn Spanish not merely as a communication system but as a living, evolving cultural expression. Through storytelling, music, dance, and art activities, LLCs connect language learning to cultural heritage, enriching children's understanding of both the language and the cultural contexts in which it is used. This integration helps children appreciate the beauty of linguistic diversity

and learn the values, traditions, and perspectives embedded within it. The experience extends beyond the classroom, promoting respect and understanding for cultures different from their own.

In this way, LLCs serve as a unique platform for fostering inclusivity, allowing children from diverse backgrounds to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and to interact with peers from various cultural and linguistic traditions. This inclusivity fosters empathy, an essential trait for cooperation and teamwork in a multicultural society. Children develop a sense of belonging that transcends language barriers by learning and sharing in a collaborative, bilingual environment. They realize that differences are not something to fear or ignore but are vital to building stronger, more vibrant communities.

Furthermore, LLCs promote cognitive flexibility—a vital skill in today’s interconnected world. As children switch between languages, they become more skilled at understanding different perspectives and navigating complex situations. This ability to “think across languages” enhances their problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability—skills crucial in a rapidly changing global landscape. Cognitive flexibility goes beyond language acquisition; it also involves openness to new experiences, new ways of thinking, and the ability to easily navigate diverse cultural contexts.

Future research on LLCs could examine how these environments function as sites of cultural negotiation, particularly for bilingual and bicultural children. These children often live in contexts where multiple cultural influences shape their identities, and LLCs can provide a space for them to explore and negotiate these identities. In such settings, children can celebrate their cultural heritage while embracing new norms and practices, fostering a more nuanced understanding of themselves and others. Research could investigate how LLCs assist children in navigating dual identities, managing cultural tensions in bilingual and bicultural contexts, and how this concept influences their social and academic development.

From an anthropological perspective, LLCs exemplify how education can connect linguistic diversity with social cohesion. Instead of trying to assimilate children into a monolingual, monocultural framework, LLCs embrace and celebrate the variety of languages and cultures children bring into the classroom. In doing so, they create a space for cultural exchange and dialogue, where linguistic differences are viewed as assets rather than barriers, thereby contributing to a richer and more complex understanding of the world. This approach is not only an effective teaching method but also a vital social practice that prepares young learners to succeed in a multicultural society.

By emphasizing language as a cultural connector, LLCs help children realize that they are learning not just a new language but also how to engage with a multilingual, multicultural world. The ability to connect with others across cultural and linguistic boundaries is crucial in a globalized society, where cross-cultural collaboration and understanding are necessary to address worldwide challenges and promote peaceful coexistence. In this way, LLCs offer not only an educational space but also a cultural framework that nurtures future global citizens—individuals equipped with empathy, flexibility, and cultural awareness, ready to navigate the complex and interconnected world they inhabit.

## **Ethics Statement**

Not applicable.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

Not applicable.

## **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of the article *Anthropological Pathways to Cultural Understanding: “Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Bilingual Education in the U.S.A.”* are derived from previously published and publicly accessible linked articles. These sources provide the empirical and theoretical foundations throughout the study. <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/trtr.2358> (Introduces Language Learning Circles (LLCs) for preschoolers, focusing on Spanish, cognitive development, and cultural empathy). [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning\\_fac\\_pubs/268/](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs/268/) (An essay highlighting LLC methods—songs, games, movement—and their impact on cultural understanding in the preschool classroom). <https://doi.org/10.46439/Psychiatry.4.033>.

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