

LESSONS LEARNED IN NEPANTLA: CRITICAL TRANSLANGUAGING LITERACY PEDAGOGY IN A DUAL LANGUAGE BILINGUAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

While the challenges that educators faced during the COVID-19 pandemic are widely acknowledged, there is little scholarship that highlights the positive lessons. This manuscript documents the experiences of an individual dual language bilingual education elementary teacher that was a part of a longitudinal qualitative study of United States educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. She named the ways that her literacy pedagogy in the emergency virtual learning portion of Spring of 2020 changed to reflect translanguaging pedagogy due to the suspension of monolingual standardized testing expectations. The teacher's experiences are a call to action to dismantle strict language barriers in dual language bilingual education in service of bi/multilingual children being able to draw on and develop their full linguistic repertoires.

Keywords: Biliteracy, Elementary, Dual Language

Introduction

While the challenges that educators faced during the COVID-19 pandemic are widely acknowledged (Onyema et al., 2020), there is little scholarship that highlights the positive lessons. Drawing on principles of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), we share the stories of one teacher out of a larger longitudinal study into the experiences of U.S. elementary teachers of multilingual learners during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). We frame teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic as teaching in a space of nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015). Anzaldúa conceptualizes nepantla as an in-between space where tensions and contradictions are embraced (Anzaldúa, 2015). In this case, the beginning of the pandemic is a space where teachers simultaneously were required to meet some pre-existing schooling expectations while also due to the cancellation of state standardized testing (TEA, 2020) unexpectedly found themselves in a place where they are freed from the monoglossic language ideologies embedded within standardized tests and the impact they have on their pedagogy. In this liminal space the spotlighted teacher enacted critical translanguaging pedagogy (García & Wei, 2014) in a way that previous monolingual testing expectations did not facilitate. In particular, we highlight the potential of translingual writing pedagogy and the impact it had on students in virtual learning in Spring 2020. We use the term translingual writing to represent the ways that students write across their linguistic repertoire (Horner et al., 2011). Bi/multilingual writers utilize their full

linguistic repertoire throughout the writing process (Velasco & García, 2014; Gort, 2012) and draw on writing strategies that are unique to bi/multilinguals (Cumming, 1990). Given this, we share how a 4th grade dual language bilingual education (DLBE) teacher in Texas, Sol, adapted her writing instruction during Spring 2020 in response to virtual learning and the decreased monolingual demands on teachers and students. We explore how she took advantage of the comparative freedom in the early stages of the pandemic to enact translanguaging pedagogy and highlight the composition possibilities and linguistic flexibility that Sol and her students demonstrated. We showcase how she can be used as a model for thinking expansively about language and learning from her students' full linguistic repertoires. We ask, what can be learned from a teacher's critical translanguaging literacy pedagogy in the space of nepantla in the initial phases of the COVID 19 pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

Nepantla

Nepantla, described by the Nahuatl people as “the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 237), is an Indigenous concept to describe spaces of disturbances and changes (Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Alemán, Jr., et al., 2013). Those who find themselves in these liminal spaces are ascribed as nepantleras/os as they “negotiate and shift between the overarching goals of the educational partnership and the everyday realities of parents, students, and institutional constraints” (Alemán, Jr., et al., 2013, p. 329). Nepantleras/os experience frustration and discomfort as worlds collide (Alemán, Jr., et al., 2013; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 2015). Through nepantla, Anzaldúa (2015) emphasizes the ability to “balance contemporary society's world views with the non-ordinary worldview, and to move between them to a space that simultaneously exists and does not exist” (p.28). Nepantla, as a conceptual tool, can transform into an epistemic space where teachers can “theorize the messiness” (Alemán, Jr. et al., 2013, p. 329) to find healing, validation, resiliency, and *conocimiento* among the frustrations and discomfort when perspectives clash (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). “As such nepantla is also a bridge to possibility, a bridge to aspirations; a bridge one crosses voluntarily and involuntarily to draw from the rivers of lived and learned experiences” (Burciaga, 2007, p. 147). In this sense, nepantla is a space, an instrument of “emancipation and empowerment” (Alemán, Jr., et al., 2013). Nepantla shapes our understanding of the possibilities that the in-between space of emergency virtual instruction during the COVID-19 provided because of the suspension of standardized testing in Spring 2020.

Translanguaging Pedagogy

Alongside, nepantla, we frame our work using García and Wei's (2014) understanding of translanguaging pedagogy as “building on students' language practices flexibly in order to develop new understandings and new language practices, including those deemed ‘academic standard’ practices,” (p.92). As a language theory, translanguaging makes sense of how bi/multilingual students utilize their full linguistic repertoire (García & Wei, 2014). It rejects the

idea that bi/multilingual individuals' linguistic repertoires are simply multiple monolingual repertoires and challenges notions of "standard" language, defined as a singular appropriate way to use language (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). García and colleagues (2017) identify three elements of translanguaging pedagogy: stance, design, and shifts. First, teachers who hold a translanguaging stance believe that bi/multilingual students' language practices are intertwined. Second, through translanguaging design, teachers develop units and assessments that support how students fluidly move across their linguistic repertoire. Finally, teachers make translanguaging shifts based on students in the moment languaging choices. In all, these three elements ground a way of thinking, planning, and acting in the classroom that sustains bi/multilingual children's language practices and identities. We used García et al.'s (2017) three tenets of translanguaging pedagogy (stance, design, shifts) to understand the teacher's specific actions and frame our findings around how these three tenets are present in this space of nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015) that COVID-19 provided.

Literature Review

The temporal location of this study (Spring 2020 to Fall 2020) was defined by "dual pandemics" (Yeh et. al., 2022) and it is vital to understand how they impacted education. First, in March, COVID-19 largely transitioned educational and work activities to remote platforms (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Second, in May, the killing of George Floyd at the hands of a White police officer, along with hate crimes and micro-aggressions against Asian American Pacific Islander communities ignited an exigence for racial justice (Cheng & Conca-Cheng, 2020; Endo, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2021a) adds nuance to the "dual pandemics" characterization and adds economic and environmental pandemics to generate "four pandemics." Against this backdrop, teachers and students were challenged to continue teaching, learning and engaging from home. Aside from inequitable access to technological infrastructure, engagement from home was impacted by motivation, familial obligations, financial stress, feelings of isolation, worry and fear (e.g. Audrain & Basile, 2024; Yeh et. al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted dismal flaws in our educational system, yet also offered an opportunity for a "hard re-set" propelled by elements of culturally relevant pedagogy: student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). While White normed definitions of knowledge acquisition often took a deficit orientation to the learning that occurred in the home and made way for concerns about declining academic performance through narratives of "learning loss" (e.g. Bomer, 2021; Robbins & Cipollone, 2023); there is cause for hope (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). For instance, Robbins and Cipollone (2023) argued for a community engaged pedagogies and restorative justice as authentic mediums toward a hard re-set. Within the context of Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE), scholars such as Fránquiz et al., (2021) re-positioned the focus on "learning loss" to argue that this was a generative time to reimagine schooling and learn from the "innovation and resilience of teachers, parents, and educational stakeholders" (p.1). Oliveira and Kentor (2023) took up this charge through a qualitative exploration of how educators redefined their work through their intersectional identities by operationalizing care and empathy. Other scholars highlight how DLBE educators facilitated communication, support, and linguistic access to target language students and families (Flavin et.

al., 2024). Hamman-Ortiz (2024) argues that the actions that took place at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic constructed a “critical translanguaging space.” We argue that critical translanguaging spaces can serve as fertile ground for Ladson-Billings’ (2021b) “hard re-set” and our study adds to this knowledge base.

Translanguaging as a Pedagogy

Across the past two decades, the field of education has become increasingly familiar with translanguaging, both as a language theory and a pedagogy (e.g. Baker, 2011; Cangarajah, 2011; García et al., 2017; MacSwan, 2017; Salmerón, 2022; Williams, 1994). While translanguaging pedagogy has become popularized, at times the impact has been diluted as some work focuses more on the mechanics of translanguaging as a pedagogy, at the expense of highlighting the critical epistemological implications of translanguaging (e.g. Mendoza et al., 2024). For example, consider Infante and Licona’s (2021) qualitative exploration of translanguaging as a pedagogy in a bilingual middle school science classroom using ethnographically informed data collection alongside discourse analysis. Infante and Licona (2021) highlight translanguaging as a linguistically responsive teaching strategy (Lucas & Villegas, 2013) to facilitate emergent bilinguals’ acquisition of science knowledge and practices and do not emphasize the ideology implicit in the teacher’s choices or the sociocultural context of their instruction. While such studies make important contributions to what translanguaging pedagogy looks like in practice, there is a danger that their findings will be interpreted as apolitical in nature. Given this, there has been a call to (re)center criticality in research on translanguaging pedagogy by explicitly addressing issues of power and ideology and not primarily focusing on the language of instruction (Qin & Llosa, 2023). Our study takes up this call by showcasing how a teacher was able to subvert the traditional linguistic demands that were placed on her students and herself because of the power of monolingual standardized testing. We highlight how the critical nature of her translanguaging pedagogy challenged rigid notions of language separation and assumptions about what counts as “academic language.” We pay particular attention to the affordances of the unique sociopolitical context within this space of nepantla and contrast them with past challenges to translanguaging pedagogy.

Methods

Context

We draw from a subset of data from a longitudinal interview-based study of elementary educators of multilingual learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in Texas, Georgia, New York, and Maryland (Spring 2020 to Spring 2021). Specifically, we focus on Sol, a Texas 4th grade dual language teacher who is a Spanish English bilingual first generation immigrant from Mexico who identifies as queer and Latinx. Sol had been a teacher in Texas for 10 years when the COVID-19 pandemic started. We chose to highlight Sol because of the unique way that translanguaging pedagogy was present in her interviews. One reason for this could have been her prior experiences. The first author observed her grade team planning meetings in the Fall of

2018. As a part of this study, the first author provided professional development on translanguaging pedagogy to the grade team. This topic was initiated based on the 4th grade teachers' interests. The professional development was adapted from materials available through the CUNY NYSIEB Initiative on Emerging Bilinguals. In particular, "Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators" (Celic & Seltzer, 2013) was used to frame how translanguaging pedagogy is applicable for teachers in DLBE and English dominant settings. The professional development focused on fostering a multilingual ecology and designing instruction that promotes translanguaging. Sol's interviews reflect the degree that she was able to implement translanguaging pedagogy in the following years.

Sol's geopolitical context had implications on her experiences as a Latinx educator teaching primarily linguistically marginalized learners. Sol taught at an elementary school in one of the largest urban districts in Texas. The 20 students in her fourth-grade one-way dual language education classroom were a diverse group of transnational Latin American students (Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Cuba), in addition to first and second generation Mexican Americans who were born in Texas. Texas has a rich history of bilingual education and requires K-8 teachers in transitional and dual language programs to have a bilingual generalist certification that demonstrates their biliteracy skills (Sikes & Villanueva, 2021). In addition, Texas has a bilingual testing policy, offering the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STARR) for Spanish Language Arts and STARR assessments in Spanish for science and mathematics (Sikes & Villanueva, 2021; Tabaku et al., 2018). In Spring 2020, as part of its pandemic response, the STAAR standardized assessment was canceled (Texas Education Agency, 2020). This is a critical change that paved the way for major shifts in Sol's pedagogy.

Data Sources & Analysis

In a virtual two-hour semi-structured interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2015) in the Fall of 2020, Sol shared how she experienced the emergency virtual learning portion of Spring of 2020. The interview began with broad questions that addressed Sol's personal identity and how she views herself as a teacher (i.e. teaching trajectory, motivation for teaching, philosophy of literacy instruction). The next part of the interview began with the open-ended prompt of "Talk us through the spring 2020 semester." This allowed Sol to shape the story she told based on her self-driven priorities. The follow-up questions we asked focused on her literacy instruction, critical conversations with her students, the role of technology, teacher collaboration, and sustaining her classroom community. In the final part of the interview Sol reflected on her goals for the fall 2020 semester. Sol was interviewed two more times in the 2020-2021 school year. Given the unique impact of the lack of standardized tests in Spring 2020, this analysis focused on that time period. See Appendix A for the interview protocol.

For data analysis, we integrated principles of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clanadin, 1990) and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015), and engaged in recursive cycles of in vivo, inductive, concept, and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2015). From the analysis of a larger set of teachers, we identified major themes across how the teachers experienced the initial phases of the pandemic. These themes represent humanizing and dehumanizing actions and can be found in a separate analysis. Within those themes, the theme of translanguaging was present in Sol's

interview. To engage in a micro-analysis of the role of translanguaging in Sol's experience, the first author re-coded her interview using García et al.'s (2017) three components of translanguaging pedagogy: stance, design, and shifts. Concluding this analysis, the data was re-read through the lens of nepantla, and additional nuance was added to the conceptualization of translanguaging pedagogy in this unique context. The final analysis phase was ensuring that Sol felt well-represented through member checking. Sol responded "Well, you just made me cry in public. Thank you so much for making me a part of this. Gracias, gracias, gracias for seeing and hearing me."

Researchers' Positionalities

The first author is an early career professor at a public minority-serving institution. She is a former teacher of elementary multilingual learners and prepares teachers to meet their students' diverse needs. She taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic and was a mother to a young emergent bilingual child. On one level, she can understand the challenges that emergency online instruction presented to the lives of educators, parents and students. However, it is vital to recognize that the flexible structure of her position in higher education resulted in her having an experience that vastly differed from the realities of the public elementary teachers in this study. She is a bilingual third generation Texan (English & Spanish) who identifies as being bicultural, Mexican American and White. She has known Sol for six years. This position as an insider/outsider informed her deep respect and empathy for Sol's plight and her determination to tell her stories.

The second author identifies as Mexican/Chicano, born and raised in the New Latinx South. A former dual language bilingual education teacher, he is a doctoral candidate at the same public minority-serving institution as the first author, where he coaches and instructs pre-service and in-service teachers in literacy and dual language bilingual education. At the wake of the pandemic, the second author lived in a multi-generational home with his family where he experienced first-hand how his sisters and their children transitioned to emergency online instruction. As a first-year doctoral student, he experienced the sudden shift from face-to-face instruction to virtual classes. As a coach, he saw how pre-service and in-service teachers navigated and contended with the abruptness, nuances, and successes/triumphs of teaching virtually.

The third author shares an affiliation with the aforementioned public minority-serving institution as a doctoral student while simultaneously serving as a dual-language immersion bilingual educator. Like the second author, she identifies as Mexican/Chicana and originates from the New Latinx South. Her student teaching experience was suddenly disrupted in March 2020, just as she was about to begin her teaching career, significantly influencing how she prepared for her first year in the classroom. Simultaneously, she entered a graduate program, facing the same uncertainties and challenges described in this study, both as an educator and a student. The shift to virtual teaching demanded rapid adaptation to new instructional methods and virtual engagement with her community. Today, she continues to navigate the ongoing changes and dialogues in the post-pandemic teaching landscape, drawing on the resilience and adaptability developed during that challenging period.

Findings

In the context of emergency remote instruction during COVID-19, both Sol and her students experienced freedom to transcend monoglossic ideologies of linguistic purism and separation that were previously upheld by testing and firmly at odds with the linguistic complexity of their worlds. Sol's translanguaging pedagogy nurtured a community of translingual writers that honored her students' linguistic brilliance and potential in a time riddled with uncertainty and loss. Her pandemic pedagogy not only facilitated her students' linguistic flexibility and creativity, but in turn also offered healing from both the trauma of school sanctioned language loss and the trauma caused by the pandemic. She did so by engaging in translanguaging practices in three ways: through her stance, in the moment shifts in her practice, and through her instructional design. We elaborate on each of these dimensions below. It is important to note that often the examples do not neatly fit into just one of the three categories. We acknowledge this complexity and in such cases we made the choice about how to frame Sol's actions.

Translanguaging Stance

Sol's translanguaging stance was initially visible in an anecdote she shared from Fall 2020 where she challenged the school's policy of assessing students in math in English, regardless of their linguistic repertoire. In this case the school assessed a newcomer from Mexico and determined that "he's super low in math. Like his math is just bad." She took the initiative to test the student in Spanish and he scored 100%. She talked to the administration and said "Listen, this student is not low in math. This student doesn't know any English." She was told that she still needed to give math instruction in English and found ways to subvert this policy by previewing English lessons in Spanish. In the spring of 2020, she took advantage of the decreased oversight to follow her intuition as a teacher. She explained that

In the transition in the spring, I was like, 'I don't care what language you wanna use. We're just—we're gonna talk through the lesson and, like, the content—the little bit of content that we still managed to do is what we're gonna focus on, not on the language of instruction, per se.' That's how I approached it in-in my online classroom."

Sol's approach reflects a deep understanding of the need to draw on students' full linguistic repertoires as they develop their competencies across languages.

Translanguaging stance is also visible in Sol's conceptualization of the language choices that authors make in their writing. For example, she reflected that "some writing needs to be in one language or the other or however. But for writer's workshop in fourth grade, it should be however the writer can communicate the idea that it wants to communicate." When Sol emphasized "however the writer can communicate the idea," she was highlighting the importance of linguistic flexibility to composition. Sol also had a keen understanding of the importance of students' conceptualizing the role of the audience of their writing. While it is vital that students recognize the monolingual demands of certain writing pieces, this does not mean that all writing should be monolingual.

Translanguaging Shifts

Reflective of her translanguaging stance, Sol made subconscious shifts in her languaging in this space of nepantla where she found herself suddenly unencumbered by traditional monolingual demands that were related to standardized testing preparation. Sol noted that she was “usually pretty good at this [binding her languaging by the target language].” At this point in the year, students had selected to take their fourth-grade standardized tests either in English or Spanish. Their selection influenced how they were prepared such that the class was divided into the “English” kids and the “Español” kids. Sol recalled the influence of removing that binary:

So it was—it was really interesting, going back to removing the STAAR. It was like, okay. Then we are gonna—you're gonna speak in whatever language you wanna speak. So then it was a lot more of a mix of language. Like translanguaging. You know? Like, they would just talk however, they wanted to talk. I caught myself doing it more too.

Translanguaging was an act of resistance towards dominant monolingual expectations in schooling. It is imperative to note that Sol associates with her students when she described how both of their language practices shifted to include more translanguaging. In considering the impact of this space of nepantla, Sol reflected that “we created this space online where throwing in whatever language we wanted to say was validated and was honored...the importance of any language is to communicate. So if you're communicating, you're communicating correctly and strongly.” In the past Sol had faced strict linguistic expectations for instruction. Virtual learning was a space for Sol to engage in normally unsanctioned activity to foster students’ intellectual growth and positive self-conceptions. In this space of nepantla, the students no longer felt shamed for their languaging, rather, they received the clear message that all language is valued.

Translanguaging Design

Finally, translanguaging design was evident in how Sol took advantage of the latitude afforded by the cancellation of the state standardized test to plan ways for her students to use their full linguistic repertoire. As a dual language teacher, the removal of monolingual standardized testing requirements presented a unique opportunity for her to design instruction that sustained her students’ complex linguistic repertoires. Sol reflected, “Once we learned that they were not gonna have to take the test. I was like, “Okay. You're gonna pick your genre. You're just gonna write.” Moving beyond the difference in genre flexibility, this transformation also facilitated linguistic flexibility. Sol shared that her students would “throw full sentences [in English], and then the next sentence in Spanish, and then a random word and then the whole explanation in the other language.” One way her students used this newfound linguistic freedom opportunity was through crafting plays. Sol described them as “actually very powerful. Like, one was about teen pregnancy. One was about ICE deportations. Very powerful pieces that I was not focused at all anymore on, like, the grammar or the this or the that. It was, like, more, like...the context of the stories.” Throughout these shifts, Sol remained faithful to the writing process and

planned her instruction around a recursive cycle of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. She elaborated that “it was really interesting to see how their writing flow was better because they were able to use both languages.” Her students wrote differently from when, despite their writing’s audience, they were required to compose monolingually. Sol had a holistic understanding of developing her students as writers in a way that focused on their craft, not a limited focus on their monolingual language proficiency. Fostering her students’ translingual writing explicitly challenged monoglossic language ideologies that are pervasive in schooling. As a result of these shifts, Sol found that writers’ and readers’ workshop felt qualitatively different. She recounted that,

Writers’ workshop and readers’ workshop transformed to something different, but it gave us space to really escape reality, right, both with the reading and the writing...with writing, it's, like, create or say or whatever. So they were both good spaces for disconnecting a little bit from everything that was happening around us.

Positioning writers’ and readers’ workshops as a “space to really escape reality” is indicative of the possibilities that were present in this space of nepantla. It functioned as a bridge for us to be able to see what is possible when both teachers and students are given greater autonomy in their languaging.

Conclusion

Sol’s online translanguaging pedagogy interrogated monoglossic language ideologies that are endemic within schooling. We found that in terms of translanguaging stance (García et al., 2017), Sol challenged dominant language ideologies by valuing written and oral translanguaging that was previously unaccepted. Translanguaging shifts (García et al., 2017) were evident through in the moment examples of how Sol fostered her students’ translingual writing and engaged in translanguaging herself. Finally, through translanguaging design (García et al., 2017), Sol focused her pedagogy on developing her students as writers in a way that prioritized their craft, not a limited emphasis on their monolingual language proficiency that was dictated by a student’s standardized test language selection. Sol’s enactment of translanguaging pedagogy within this space of nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015) exemplifies a commitment to critical translanguaging pedagogy that reflects a focus on honoring and sustaining children’s full linguistic repertoires.

Our study contributes to the gap of research on translanguaging pedagogy within the affordances and constraints of the emergency virtual learning phase of the pandemic. While we acknowledge the limitations of focusing on a single teacher in terms of being able to determine how representative her beliefs/practices are in the broader context of dual language bilingual education teachers, such generalizability was not our goal. Rather, we frame Sol’s experiences as a call to action to dismantle strict language barriers in dual language bilingual education in service of bi/multilingual children being able to draw on and develop their full linguistic repertoires while sustaining positive self-conceptions. It is important to note that one rationale behind strict language barriers is preparing children for the monolingual linguistic demands of

standardized testing. In the context of Ladson-Billings' (2021b) call for a "hard reset" on education, we encourage the field to review what it means to assess students. There are a myriad of issues inherent to standardized testing, such as the lack of objectivity, exacerbation of existing educational inequalities, and the facilitation of surveillance of teachers and students for adherence to limited notions of teaching and learning (e.g. Au, 2022; Bach, 2020). In her interview Sol imagined proponents of standardized tests staunchly resisting changes with questions such as "How else are you gonna measure what the kids know?" or "How else are you gonna measure how good a teacher is if you don't test?" She concluded that "It's not about you [teachers]. And it's not about what they [students] know." She recognized that standardized testing was not serving its stated purpose and contributed a great more harm than good.

We see our current moment as an opportunity to learn from this previously unimaginable suspension of standardized tests to holistically support students' language and literacy development within dual language bilingual education. In the school context, we envision shifts in how writing is conceptualized. While we acknowledge that students must be prepared to write monolingual products, we echo the myriads of scholars who emphasize the importance of students writing for authentic audiences and the value of translanguaging throughout the writing process (e.g. Durán, 2016; Salmerón, 2022; Velasco & García, 2014). At a practical level, this could look like teachers planning writing units with translingual audiences in mind and supporting students' translingual writing with translingual mentor texts. Teachers could also give students assignments that explicitly require them to authentically represent their home language practices. For instance, students could write "Where I'm from" poems where they are encouraged to include examples of authentic languaging from their homes. Such practices could also be modeled at the pre-service teacher education level to prepare students with a translingual orientation towards literacy pedagogy. All educational stakeholders have a role to play and we urge the reader to consider what actions they could take.

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