Contradictory Literacy Practices of Mexican-Background Students: An Ethnography From the Rural Midwest

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explores the contradictory literacy practices of 10 high school students of Mexican background from the rural Midwest. The author uses the term *Mexican background* to encompass both settled Mexican Americans and recent-immigrant *Mexicano*s. Literacy is investigated through English and Spanish in a sociocultural context. Findings reveal how Mexican-background students demonstrate different literacy practices in their homes and communities than those acknowledged at school. Educators in the school setting did not recognize Mexican-background students' linguistic proficiency. In school, Mexican-background students were viewed in terms of their limited-English status and were mostly enrolled in low academic tracks. At home, Spanish-speaking parents relied on their children's sophisticated translation abilities. Results indicate that the lost opportunities for effective literacy learning at school ignored the realistic responsibilities and potential of the Mexican-background students. Many of the adults in this small, rural, midwestern community failed to recognize the dynamic implications between literacy and identity that these adolescents navigated on a daily basis across multiple settings.

Introduction

Even with new accountability measures, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), educational goals have consistently fallen short of validating the cultural and linguistic background of minority students in the United States (Cummins, 1981, 1986, 2000; Fillmore, 1991; Macedo, 2000). Although many linguistic minorities share the belief that learning English is critical for their effective participation in U.S. society, they may not explicitly recognize the cultural barriers they may encounter in their attempts to learn English. Latino

populations continue to reflect significant demographic growth. By the year 2050, U.S. census data projections indicate that Latinos will account for about one quarter of the entire U.S. population (Day, 1996). However, educational success has not paralleled demographic growth for Latinos, who continue to drop out of school at a rate higher than that of Whites, Asian Americans, and African Americans (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000). Some of the educational barriers that Latino students encounter include how their second language (L2) needs correspond to their relationship for understanding the academic forms of English they encounter in the high school setting. Latino students are also segregated into instructional tracks that do not foster a positive contribution toward upward social mobility. To further complicate this educational miasma, the recent growth of English-only legislation has only served as another obstacle preventing educators from achieving a more complex understanding of the academic, linguistic, and cultural needs of linguistically diverse populations.

When discussing the phenomenon of school failure, one must not lump together all Latinos, but instead differentiate between the experiences of Mexican-background students (both those who have lived here for some time, and recent immigrants to the United States) and other Latino subgroups, because a specific focus on Mexican-background students can shed light on critical components of these youths' identity. For example, students of Mexican background are less likely to have graduated from high school than their Cuban or Puerto Rican counterparts, (Therrien & Ramírez, 2000). People of Mexican background represent about 21.6 million of the 32.8 million Latinos living in the United States (Therrien & Ramírez). The dropout rate for Latino students in general is about 28% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), but students of Mexican background who have recently immigrated to the United States (*Mexicanos*) are even more at risk of dropping out, with one study indicating a dropout rate of 90% (National Program for Secondary Credit Exchange and Accrual, 1994).

The midwestern United States is an especially unique setting because of the growing influx of *Mexicanos* who come in pursuit of an opportunity to work in one of the most productive agricultural economies in the world. Many Mexican-background families are also choosing to leave urban environments in favor of a less violent and a less hectic pace of life that can be found in small towns in the rural Midwest. However, the Midwest region has been poorly prepared to deal with what has been termed the "New Latino Diaspora" (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002), and the Midwest region contains the fewest number of teachers trained in bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL), so the region cannot well meet the unique linguistic needs of its growing Mexican-background population (Henke, Choy, & Geis, 1996).

Information for this article is drawn from a more extensive ethnographic study that identified literacy practices across home–school–community settings for Mexican-background high school students (Godina, 1998). In this

article, I focus on the interwoven literacy and identity discontinuities of Mexican-background students when they negotiate literacy tasks at school, at home, and in the community. The research questions that initially guided this study included: What were the Mexican-background students' literacy practices across home–school–community settings? How did the values and beliefs held by Mexican-background students and their families influence their literacy behavior and interaction with school personnel? And, what were the potential opportunities for effective instruction that were missed by school personnel?

One of the inherent challenges in conducting research is defining terms in a precise and descriptive manner. I use the term "Mexican background" to encompass the shared experiences between Mexican Americans, who have lived in the United States for a substantial period of time, and *Mexicanos,* who are recent immigrants. It was the students themselves who guided me toward these terms because those students who were recent immigrants from Mexico generally self-identified as *Mexicanos,* and those students who had lived in the United States for a longer period of time generally self-identified as Mexican American. Therefore, in this article, when I want to make a distinction between the two groups, I will use the terms Mexican American and *Mexicano* as described above. In this study, the Mexican American students were generally English dominant, and the *Mexicano* students were Spanish dominant.

Literature Review: Theoretical Perspectives on Literacy and Identity

Researchers have found that students of Mexican background participated in more literacy activities than have been perceived in mainstream educational settings (Carger, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Farr, 1994; Vásquez, Pease-Álvarez, & Shannon, 1994), especially when the definition of literacy was extended to include functional literacy tasks and took into account the informal social network that promotes such tasks. Moll (1992) has advocated an understanding of this social network, termed "funds of knowledge," as a method of enhancing teacher understanding of students of Mexican background. However, mainstream educational settings have been inherently limited in their ability to use more authentic contexts of instruction that could potentially benefit culturally and linguistically diverse students (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1986; Foley, 1990). On the other hand, progressive models of instruction that reflect a constructivist orientation have been criticized for maintaining a mainstream emphasis that does not serve the specific needs of diverse cultural groups (Delpit, 1995; Reyes, 1992; Valdés, 1996).

One facet of literacy in which the needs of Mexican-background students have not been adequately met is language. Spanish as a foreign language programs tend to teach the colonial (i.e., Castillian) version of Spanish in a high school setting. However, researchers have documented a dissonance between Castillian Spanish and the regional dialect spoken by students of

Mexican background (Hidalgo, 1993; Foley, 1990). Students enrolled in Spanish classes may also be influenced by negative cultural stereotypes associated with portrayals of Mexican culture (Mantle-Bromley, 1994). Also, most students who actually benefit from these classes are not students of Mexican background, but mainstream Whites (McLaughlin, 1985). Thus, the social perceptions related to Spanish as a foreign language instruction may constrain an authentic context for the literacy instruction of students of Mexican background.

Although language has been, and continues to be, an obvious source of concern for many educational researchers, it has not proven to be the sole cause of school failure. In fact, Ortiz's (1996) findings questioned whether it was a factor at all. Researchers have documented a number of factors that adversely affect the academic performance of Mexican-background students, leading to many of them dropping out of school (Falbo, 1996; Foley, 1990; Graham, 1985; Ortiz, 1996). Some prominent factors have included grade retention, low socioeconomic-status background, negative teacher attitudes, and low expectations. Social perceptions of Mexican-background students are an important factor in their effective participation in school.

Farr (1994) used an ethnography of communication framework to examine the writing of an adult community of 45 *Mexicanos* in Chicago and Mexico. Farr discovered that although many members of the *Mexicano* community learned to read and write through formal schooling in Mexico, others learned to read and write informally out of personal motivation. According to Farr, many of the *Mexicanos* were personally motivated to learn to read and write so that they could engage in letter-writing activities with family and friends in Mexico. The *Mexicanos'* interpersonal social networking was instrumental for informal literacy learning. Literacy was learned through intimate contact with close friends and family who shared what they knew about reading and writing. Farr reported that *Mexicanos* often managed their literacy obligations through social networking. For example, *Mexicano* adults engaged the services of *Mexicano* or Mexican American high school students who understood complex translations. On the other hand, Farr's (1994) findings, similar to Delgado-Gaitan's (1992), revealed that *Mexicano* children and their parents had problems with homework tasks. Farr ascertained that classroom teachers did not clearly communicate to students what was expected in the homework tasks. Farr (1994) concluded that the "functional" nature of *Mexicano* literacy allowed them to deal with "a variety of institutional demands and pursue personal, economic, and social goals to meet their own needs" (p. 40). Also, Farr identified functional literacy as a routine aspect of a *Mexicano*'s social existence.

Researchers also have identified a few models of excellence (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). Exemplary instruction for students of Mexican background generally is characterized by a sincere validation of the students' cultural and linguistic background, positive teacher expectations, high standards for academics, and parent participation (Lucas et al., 1990). Presently, models for

success remain the exception rather than the rule. An important factor for a successful educational program is the school's commitment to improving educational outcomes. That type of commitment stands in direct contrast to the belief that students have only themselves to blame for their failure.

Caste Theory

Ogbu (1992, 1998 [with Simons]) has observed that the academic performance of different racial and ethnic groups reflects a caste system that predetermines a course of failure for minorities who have been subjugated by the dominant culture. In the United States, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans are categorized as traditionally disenfranchised minorities who had no choice in their conquest and colonization. Ogbu classifies these cultural groups as "involuntary" minorities. Ogbu also contends that "voluntary" minorities, or minorities who choose to migrate and to seek a better life, experience initial, but not lingering, school failure. Ogbu claims that voluntary minorities enjoy more opportunities than stigmatized, involuntary minorities, who perform poorly in school and also fail to assimilate into the dominant culture. Ogbu and Simons (1998) further contend that Mexican immigrants who may reflect an initial positive voluntary minority status also subsequently suffer from the negative status surrounding their involuntary minority, Mexican American counterparts.

A critical component for understanding Ogbu's caste theory is the notion of "cultural inversion" that is used to describe how some minorities regard certain behaviors as inappropriate because they are emblematic of the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1992). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have documented the cultural inversion of African Americans insightfully and likened it to the "burden of acting White." For some African Americans, cultural inversion could include choosing to speak Black English instead of standard English as a sign of maintaining group solidarity with their peers. Ogbu (1992) contends that there is an integral relationship between cultural inversion and school failure. Involuntary minorities choose to maintain the cultural norms of their peer group rather than adopt dominant culture patterns of behavior that could foster success at school.

Other Theories

Cummins (2000) has criticized Ogbu's (1978, 1992) caste theory because it does not adequately account for social class differences. However, Ogbu's observations can be correlated with Willis's (1981) ethnographic research with working-class males and their high school failure. Willis observed two White male cultures working within the high school setting: the "lads," students who felt relegated to a working-class career, and the "ear'oles," students who valued education as a path toward upward social mobility. Willis focused his observations upon the lads, who viewed school and intellectual activities as an effeminizing process, viewed school as a lark,

and took any opportunity to disrupt instruction. Similar to the negative beliefs about school expressed by Willis's lads, involuntary minorities are socialized into negative beliefs that anticipate school failure. In contrast, the White students in the present study could also be compared to Willis's ear'oles because they were socialized into more positive expectations about their education. Mexican-background students' negative beliefs resemble an aspect of fatalism, which has been used to describe an acquiescence to a predestined marginalization (Hernández, 1973).

McDermott (1985) has derived a theory for school failure from anthropological examinations of minority populations; he contends that minority students who misbehave in school are attempting to reproduce their parents' negative status in the community. Through their misbehavior, minority students achieve a "pariah status" among their peer group. Pariah behavior mocks the conventions associated with the dominant culture. As minority students encounter consistent failure and lowered expectations in school settings, they lose interest in literacy and learning tasks and are subsequently characterized as being reading disabled or problem students. School failure is the ultimate result of negative interactions. McDermott's theory of pariah behavior supports Ogbu and Simons's (1998) demarcation of a negative dual frame of reference as detrimental for effective educational participation.

A common theme in Ogbu's (1978, 1982) caste theory for school failure is his focus on student behavior that places blame upon the victim. Foley (1991) observes that Ogbu cannot account for the success of involuntary minorities who are supposedly predestined for failure or the intracultural differences of the group. Foley's (1990) ethnographic research with Mexican American high school students contradicts Ogbu's caste theory because Foley found that social mobility was linked to class status, not just race and ethnicity. Foley (1991) also used the ethnographic work of Macleod (1995) to criticize Ogbu's caste theory. Macleod depicted African American students who maintained a desire for social mobility in a manner similar to their White peers.

Methodology

Four types of documentation informed the present study: interviews, observation across three settings, collection of literacy artifacts, and the use of key informants. All interview data was tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Observation data was documented through field notes. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection procedures in an iterative process that triangulated initial findings from across the different types of data.

Setting and Participants

Mexican-background families have settled in the Willow Grove community for over 30 years. (Pseudonyms are used to describe all participants and locales.) Willow Grove High School serves approximately 350 students in this region. Approximately 15% of the student body is of Mexican background,

and within this group about 3% are *Mexicanos.* Ten sophomore students (five males and five females) were selected from an initial pool of 25 Mexican-background students to participate as focal students. The male focal students were 16 and 17 years old, and the females were 15 and 16 years old.

The criteria used to select the focal students from the initial pool included grade level, language, family origin, ethnicity, and residence. I selected focal students from the same grade level so that I could more efficiently schedule in-class observations and interviews. Nine students had parents who were originally born in Mexico. One student had a father who was born in Mexico and a mother who was born in Illinois but whose parents were both Mexican. Focal students and their parents were all of Mexican background. I also selected focal students who lived in Willow Grove, rather than surrounding communities, at the time of the study.

All 10 focal students knew Spanish, although they had varying degrees of bilingual ability. Spanish-speaking proficiency was gauged through information provided by school personnel and informal observations based on my interactions with the students. Table 1 illustrates the general characteristics of the focal students.

Data Collection

Interview and observational data were collected during the formal data-collection phase from January 1996 through May 1996. I conducted two types of formal interviews: here-and-now constructions of recently occurring responses by the interviewee, and reconstructions drawn from past experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of the 10 focal students participated in four 45-minute, individual, semistructured, open-ended interviews, resulting in a total of about 30 hours of interview data. Secondary participants, who mostly consisted of parents, siblings, and teachers, were interviewed with less frequency than the focal students. A total of 20 hours of interview data were collected from secondary participants. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me. The initial formal interviews were more structured than later interviews. The initial interviews followed a protocol of questions, while subsequent interviews were more open ended. I also documented informal interviews through field notes. These informal interviews consisted of brief, unstructured conversations. I also conducted informal interviews with informants, two bilingual Mexican American adults from the community, who assisted me in the process of cross-referencing data.

After the initial interview, I conducted observations in the classroom, home, and community. During an initial background survey and interview, students self-identified the classes where literacy activities, such as reading and writing, were most frequent. The students identified "Practical English" (explained later in this article), English, Spanish, and science classes (in that order) as classes with the most literacy activities. I observed 45 classroom sessions at Willow Grove High School for a total of about 35 hours of classroom observations, which I recorded through field notes and audiotape. In addition,

Table 1

Background Information on Student Participants

Students	Age	Sex	Grade	Years in U.S.	Birthplace
Mexican American students					
Maria Elena	15	F	10	7	U.S.
Rodrigo	16	M	10	12	Mexico
Cindy	16	F	10	16	U.S.
Myrna	16	F	10	10	Mexico
Jose	17	M	10	17	U.S.
Sylvia	15	F	10	15	U.S.
Mexicano students					
Pablo	17	M	10	2	Mexico
Amanda	16	F	10	4	Mexico
Miguel	16	M	10	3	Mexico
Alfredo	16	M	10	5	Mexico

I chose four students (José, María Elena, Pablo, and Amanda) to shadow for 1 school day. These four students were selected because they represented a balance in terms of gender, Mexican American versus *Mexicano* identity, and English and Spanish fluency. The shadow activity helped to inform subsequent observations and interview questions.

I documented my observations in the community setting through field notes and photographs. Community observations occurred in areas of public domain that included markets, the public library, soccer matches, and fiestas in the park. Community observations entailed documenting social events that the families of Mexican background attended. Observing public venues was also beneficial for understanding the functional literacy practices unique to the Willow Grove community.

In the home setting, I conducted observations and interviews during appointments that resembled informal social visits. I visited eight of the family

homes between two and three times. Each visit ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours in length. The length of the visit generally depended on the willingness of the family to meet with me. However, two family homes had situations that made visits difficult: One family worked most of the day, and in another family, the father did not like other males visiting the family home. Thus, the two focal students from these families were interviewed outside of the home at the school cafeteria about home literacy, as was the mother of one of the students.

During home visits, families were asked to share literacy materials they frequently used. Home observations were documented through field notes and cross-checked through interview sessions with parents and focal students. I also collected student achievement data that described grades and test scores. I reviewed school data that described the school dropout rate, graduation rate, and report card statistics.

Data Analysis

Information from the observations was used to triangulate data, as well as to generate other interview questions. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection. I followed an iterative process that triangulated initial findings from across the different types of data. The students' literacy performance and participation were documented by triangulating data from personal descriptions, my observations, artifact collection, and interviews with secondary participants who knew the students, such as parents, teachers, and informants. Throughout the preliminary and final data analysis, the "constant-comparative method" was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A useful step in the analysis process was memoing classroom observations and interviews. The memo-writing task involved writing a brief narrative account of the particular observation or interview. I also implemented the unitizing task of the constant-comparative method to help me formulate analysis codes. During the data analysis process, two sets of codes were developed to distinguish between the interview and observational data. The general coding framework used to analyze the observational data combined two general coding schemes by Lofland (1971) and Lytle and Schultz (1991) to create a set of umbrella codes. I adapted the codes from Lytle and Schultz's "dimensions of adult literacy" and Lofland's coding scheme for guiding micro to macro levels of observation.

After Spanish-language data was transcribed and analyzed, compelling examples were revised for clarity and punctuation. The Spanish-language data is presented in a bilingual format. Spanish data is in italics and is followed by the English translation in brackets. Even though Spanish and English data were revised for ease of understanding, the revised presentation of the data adhere to the original meaning and intention of the speaker.

Findings and Discussion

Student Negotiation of the School Setting

Although the students were bilingual in Spanish and English, educators only viewed them in terms of their limited-English status. Students enrolled in a course titled "Practical English," but their learning of English in school ignored the real-life responsibilities these students shared at home. Many of the students had parents who were monolingual Spanish speakers and relied heavily on their children to translate documents, such as school reports, medical forms, tax forms, and bank statements. Sometimes the school's attempts to deal with the students' ESL and Spanish-speaking status were well intentioned but misguided. Instead of hiring teachers with bilingual or ESL training, or providing relevant in-service training, the school hired Spanish-speaking bilingual aides, without any educational training, to translate homework questions and tests for the students. One of the bilingual aides, Mr. Cox, said he had the students listen to lectures and instructions only in English because he believed this would allow students to improve their English:

> I translate very little during the class. I let them try to absorb what is going on and listen cause that is the best way to learn and not have me there gibber-jabbering and them just listening to my translation of what is going on, and not trying to understand in English.

However, this often backfired because the *Mexicano* students became frustrated and adamantly insisted that Mr. Cox speak Spanish and perform the duties he was hired for, namely translating schoolwork from English to Spanish. One student, Amanda Meza, said:

> *Sí, porque se supone que él está como para ayudarnos, como nosotros que no sabemos muy bien inglés. El está para ayudarnos, y a veces le digo, "Maestro ayúdeme en esta tarea." [El dice], "Pues, si no sabes es tu responsabilidad, éso es tu problema, tú hazlo." Y yo a veces pienso que esto está mal porque se supone que él está aquí para ayudarnos. Y, me debía ayudar pero no quiere a veces.*
>
> [Yes, because the assumption is that he is there to help us, we who do not know English very well. He is there to help us, and sometimes I will say to him, "Teacher, help me with this homework." (He says), "Well, if you don't know it, that is your responsibility, that is your problem, you do it." And I sometimes think that this is bad because it is assumed that he is here to help us. And, he should be helping me, but he sometimes does not want to.]

Since there was minimal communication and consensus between the aides for establishing an instructional procedure, the aides were left on their own for coming up with productive activities to engage the students in their

classwork and their learning of English. With this type of help, students were expected to read and complete the same types of texts and tasks in English as the other sophomore students. To make matters worse, the teacher relied on the bilingual aide to interpret and translate texts for the *Mexicano* students in a room apart from the rest of the class. Because of the segregated context of their education, most of the *Mexicano* students did not feel like they belonged to the learning community in the regular classroom. The *Mexicano* students felt neglected, did not respond to the aide's attempts to keep them on task, and were generally disruptive. The passive way in which both Mexican American and *Mexicano* students were supposed to learn the curriculum was compounded by the absence of Spanish–English reference materials, such as Spanish–English dictionaries, encyclopedias, or ESL textbooks. Teachers and administrators at Willow Grove High School shared the erroneous belief that providing such Spanish-language reading materials would prevent Spanish-speaking students from learning English, when in reality this practice particularly constrained *Mexicano* students' efforts to more efficiently learn new vocabulary in English.

Pariah Status Through Contentious Literacy and Language Play

Consistent with McDermott's (1985) observations related to how minority students can achieve status through pariah identity and behavior, the *Mexicano* males frequently argued, confronted, and otherwise verbally sparred with teachers through language play to avoid English literacy tasks. In terms of literacy, the male students' oral jesting indicated that they had a more sophisticated understanding of language than what they were given credit for by their teachers, who only viewed them in terms of their limited English abilities. I was particularly intrigued by the use of language play by Miguel and Pablo. For example, during one observation, the teacher, Ms. Rowell, walked into the room to pick up some grades from another teacher for the *Mexicano* students. Pablo loudly commented, "*Hola maestra* [Hello, teacher]!" in a sarcastic register when she entered. Pablo's teasing was his way of making a joke and addressing the irony of Ms. Rowell being his "*maestra*," or teacher, because in reality, she rarely spent any time with him due to the fact that she could not speak Spanish and preferred to relegate Pablo's instruction to an inexperienced bilingual aide.

On another occasion in the Spanish classroom, the teacher read vocabulary terms and came to the word "wait." Miguel jokingly asked if he had said *"buey,"* which sounded like "wait" but was the Spanish equivalent of "jackass." The Spanish teacher dryly repeated, "Wait." In a different class, Miguel asked for clarification of the vocabulary term "beach" and alluded to the word "bitch." Ms. Rowell responded to the question sincerely while the *Mexicano* males feigned interest and enjoyed their ruse. Ms. Rowell understood the derogatory allusion to "bitch," but this negative exchange only served to further alienate the *Mexicano* males from a more positive instructional relationship with Ms.

Rowell. Even worse, the potential for Ms. Rowell to become aware of the linguistic complexity of Miguel and Pablo's language play never occurred because it was limited to disruptive pariah behavior.

Ironically, the Mexican-background students' fluency in Spanish was informally validated through White peers who sought help with Spanish homework. Many Mexican-background students were enrolled in Spanish classes along with White peers, who took the class for college admission purposes. During study hall, many of the White students would ask the Mexican American and *Mexicano* students for help with their Spanish homework, according to Pablo Gómez:

> *Si está la bolita de Mexicanos y una de güeros, se vienen mejor a la de Mexicanos que a la de güeros. Quieren aprender español y se les hacen mas fácil juntarse con nosotros para que se les peguen las palabras en español. Practican con nosotros mismos en español.*
>
> [If there are a bunch of Mexicans and Whites, the Whites would rather come over to the Mexicans than to the Whites. They want to learn Spanish, and it seems easier for them to get together with us so that the words will stick with them in Spanish. They practice Spanish with us.]

The Spanish classroom held some positive features for Mexican-background students. The White students did not reciprocate by helping them learn English. However, despite these difficulties, some of the Mexican-background students did improve their English while at school. For example, one *Mexicana* female, Amanda, felt she was learning to write in English through her extensive note-passing. Note-passing was a consistent practice in many of the classrooms, especially among Mexican-background females, who passed notes to each other as soon as the teacher turned around. Amanda actually believed that she was learning English through her regular note-passing with her more English-proficient friends:

> *A mi nunca me gustaba a escribir esas [notas], se me hacía como, ridículo, pero luego mis amigas empezaron a escribir así notas, y a decirme "escríbeme para tras" y todo esto, luego yo también.*
>
> [For me, I never liked writing those (notes), it seemed ridiculous to me, but when my friends began to write notes and tell me "write me back," and all that, then I began also.]

I then asked her, *"Entonces sí le llevas a eso con las notas* [So you do like to go along with the notes]?"

> *A veces, es porque me gustan que me escriban porque ellas me escribén en inglés, y yo les escribo en español. Y, pienso que eso me ayuda un poco más a entender también.*

[Sometimes, it's because I like for them to write to me because they write in English, and I write back in Spanish. And, I think that this also helps me a little to understand (English) more.]

Finders (1997) has similarly examined how young adolescent females utilize written notes in a systematic literacy practice that is not acknowledged by the school setting. Finders describes how note-passing reflects a "hidden literacy" practice that serves as a communicative and social activity, but in Amanda's case note-passing offered another perspective on English literacy learning. While the note-passing did not constitute an accepted school practice, it did offer an authentic and practical form of instruction that was not present in her normal classroom instruction.

Student Negotiation of the Home Setting

The role of literacy was distinctly different for Mexican-background families than for monolingual-English White families. At home, the role of literacy entailed translation associated with the practical aspects of maintaining a household, raising a family, and being gainfully employed. Parents mostly remained distant from the school setting. Many of the Mexican-background males defined the world of literacy through its relationship with unskilled physical labor, which was an initial impetus for immigration and economic opportunity. Mexican-background parents were engaged in different literacy activities than their children because they were constrained by their obligations to work in the fields and factories of Willow Grove. Parents' labor roles precluded their ability and opportunity to establish an independent command of English, so they were less proficient in English than their children. However, parents also needed their children's knowledge of English to help them translate functional literacy items, such as business correspondence.

Parents readily deferred to teachers about the instructional needs of their children. However, the lack of communication between parents and teachers contributed to their children's marginalization. Some of the bilingual Mexican American males strategically used miscommunication to keep their parents misinformed about discipline problems and low grades. In comparison to females, males tended to be more inclined to preserve their pariah identity and behavior through the dishonest translation of school documents for their parents. Señora Ramírez, a student's grandmother, said:

No recibo las cartas de la escuela. Los muchachos se las llevan, las ven y se las llevan. Entonces yo les digo que se las enseñen a su mama, para decirle lo que dice, pero me imagino que ellos saben lo que dice. Yo no me había dado cuenta de nada, hasta que un día le pregunte a su mama, "¿Te dieron la carta de la escuela?" Ella dijo, "No." Después encontramos una carta hecha pedazos en la basura. Andaban mal en la escuela.

> [I don't receive the letters from school. They take them, the boys, they see them, and they take them. Then I tell them to show the letters to their mother, to tell her what the letter says, but I imagine they know what it says. I did not care much until one day I asked their mother, "Did they give you the letter from school?" She said, "No." Later, we found one (letter) torn up in the trash. They were doing bad in school.]

Ironically, even though educators at the school had a negative perception about the Mexican-background students' literacy abilities, educators extensively relied on the ability of both parents and their children to be able to translate their own documents from English to Spanish.

Parents believed that school held the key for their children's socioeconomic mobility, yet they had a limited background for understanding and advising their children about school. In many ways, Mexican-backgroun children acted independently from their parents in order to accomplish school-related business. For example, one parent told her son, *"Tu hazle como puedas* [You do it however you can]" when he told her about his problems at school. In terms of the students' literacy development, this meant that Mexican-background students were on their own for dealing with the school's expectations regarding mostly English assignments and communication. Farr (1994) and Delgado-Gaitan (1992) encountered similar evidence that revealed how Mexican-background parents shared a limited knowledge for helping their children with schoolwork.

Student Negotiation of the Community Setting

Pleasure reading

Reading for entertainment was another key role for the literacy of the Mexican-background students and their families. Culturally and linguistically relevant reading texts were acquired through outside sources, such as the delivery service provided by a small Mexican grocery store in an adjoining town. The *novela* [novella] and Spanish-language magazine texts were common features in many of the Mexican American and *Mexicano* homes, and they were read for entertainment by many of the focal students but were basically unnoticed in the school setting.

Language loss

In my observations, I encountered several Mexican American students who eventually decided to speak only English but lived in homes where their parents spoke only Spanish. Señora Mendoza was a parent who described the aspect of language loss among many Mexican-background families:

> *Es bien curioso. Cuando los niños crecen aquí, ya no quieren hablar español. Solo quieren hablar inglés. De repente deciden que van hablar una solo idioma. Los papas no les ayudan aprender que el español es bonito. Que también vale la pena aprenderlo. Muchas*

señoras han platicado de esa problema. Que sus niños no quieren interpretar, que no quieren ayudar. Que les dicen, "¿Acompáñame, para [saber] que dice el doctor?" Y el niño dice, "Yo entiendo, pero no te puedo decir en español." Y se sienten así como muy frustrados, "¿Ay, como es posible?"

[It is very curious. When the children grow up here, they do not want to speak Spanish. They only want to speak English. Quickly, they decide to speak only one language. The parents do not help them learn that Spanish is beautiful. That it is worth their while to learn it. Many mothers have told me of this problem. That their children do not want to interpret for them, they do not want to help. They will say, "Come with me (so that I know) what the doctor is saying." And the child will say, "I understand, but I cannot say it in Spanish." And they feel very frustrated: "Oh, how is this possible?"]

I found that denouncing Spanish was a consistent feature in several homes and was especially prevalent among the younger Mexican American males. José, one of the Mexican American focal students, had a younger brother, Manuel, who had grown up speaking both English and Spanish at home. José's grandmother, Señora Nuñez, described her frustration with Manuel, who had recently decided to only speak in English. Señora Nuñez mentioned that José and his younger sister, Alicia, were comfortable being bilingual, but Manuel was not:

Alicia si habla español y inglés, y [también] José. Pero el que no quiere hablar español es el otro, Manuel, y que él no sabe. Que no le gusta el español dice. Nos reímos de él. Digo, no tienes que, porque cuando vas para México no vas hablar. Que él no sabe, y no quiere hablar muy bien el español. Y la chiquita [Alicia] no, la chiquilla ella si habla español, y habla inglés. Y así cualquier cosa que le pregunto. Yo le digo, "¿Qué es nena?" Y ya me dice lo que es.

[Alicia will speak Spanish and English, and (also) José. But the one that does not want to speak Spanish is the other one, Manuel, he says he does not know it. He does not like Spanish, he says. We laugh at him. I mean, he does not have to, because when you go to Mexico you are not going to be able to talk. He does not want to know, and he does not want to speak very well in Spanish. And the little girl (Alicia) no, the little girl does speak Spanish, and speaks English. And I can ask her anything. I can say, "Child, what is this?" And she will tell me what it is.]

Manuel was at home when Señora Nuñez described her concern about him. Señora Nuñez called out to Manuel to come explain to me why he had decided to only speak in English. Manuel remained quiet and only offered short responses to my questions about why he had decided to only speak in English. "I don't know, I don't feel like it [speaking Spanish]," was the most

Manuel could offer. Manuel had also anglicized his name to "Manny" and preferred this name in public. Manuel completely ignored my questions in Spanish and only offered short responses to my questions in English. Manuel said he simply woke up one morning and decided to only speak in English. Because I sensed Manuel's discomfort, I did not continue to press him for answers.

Willow Grove Public Library

Seven of the 10 focal students claimed to periodically visit the library to do homework and read books. The only *Mexicana* female, Amanda, did not go to the library as much as the other students, but she did participate in public areas in the community (e.g., McDonald's), where she could learn and practice her oral English. I considered the Willow Grove Public Library to be a quiet vanguard for literacy.

Mrs. Marcel was the head librarian, and she had lived in Willow Grove for only about 4 years. From my observations, Mrs. Marcel performed her job with a genuine interest in the literacy of the people who entered the library, and many Mexican-background students spoke fondly of their interactions with her. Some students described the previous librarian as cold and impersonal; they also said that she smoked inside the library. When Mrs. Marcel took over the job of librarian, she worked hard to make the library an inviting and comfortable place for students to visit. She repainted the entire library, hung attractive pictures and local folk art, and was keenly interested in students' reading habits. Mrs. Marcel was conscious of the demographic characteristics of the community and took them into account when she purchased books. When Mrs. Marcel first began working at the library, she noticed that there were only four Spanish-language books in the entire collection, and these were not even children's books. She said: "According to the village clerk, there are 480 bilingual residents. If we are a town of a thousand people, and almost half of them are speaking Spanish, and we have four books, something is not quite right."

Mrs. Marcel began to acquire more Spanish-language reading materials, mostly children's literature, to accommodate the demographic profile of the community. Mrs. Marcel observed that there were unique differences between how Mexican-background students and White students used the library. The White students generally were in a hurry to get what they needed and quickly left, whereas Mexican-background students tended to hang out at the library to read and work at a more relaxed pace. According to Mrs. Marcel, many Mexican-background students used the library after school to work on homework and class projects; they often stayed at the library until it closed for the evening at 6 p.m.:

> They will stay here in the library and do their work. They will come as a group, and they help each other. It seems like they are tighter. It's the family structures. Cousins, aunts, uncles, whatever, . . . like, the kids

from the high school are helping the younger kids when they come to the library. I don't know if they are cousins, sisters, brothers. They are all somehow related, and they come.

Although Mrs. Marcel saw many Mexican-background students, it was rare for her to see their parents. Mrs. Marcel reported that she occasionally saw a couple of bilingual Mexican American mothers, who were prolific readers of magazines. However, she believed that these women were only there to support their children's use of the library. They were not there for themselves: "I feel that they spend a lot of time helping their kids find something that they want." During home interviews, I asked the parents if they had gone to visit the public library, and all of them indicated they had not. Pablo Gómez's mother assumed that all the library materials were in English, and that she would not be able to understand them. The library also had limited hours. It closed early in the evening, at 6 p.m., about the same time that many parents arrived home from the fields, factories, or meatpacking plants to eat dinner and unwind from a long day of work.

Mexican-background parents generally allowed their children to go to the library after school. Mexican American and *Mexicano* students took this time to socialize outside of the school setting away from strict adult supervision. Even Pablo Gómez, who described himself as not being a reader, mentioned that he periodically went to the library with his friends and younger brother and looked at children's books. After-school activities for the Mexican-background males also included going to the park to play basketball or soccer, or to a small recreation center in a private school that would open for a few hours during the week. Mexican-background males would go to the library when the weather was too cold or inclement and prevented them from being outside. Mrs. Marcel observed that Mexican-background females were especially attracted to the tactile manipulation of some of the magazines and would go to the *Glamour* and *Seventeen* magazines and "rub all the perfume on themselves." Mexican-background females were also keenly interested in particular reading material, such as the adolescent novel *Selena*, about the Tex-Mex music star who was murdered (Richmond, 1995). Mrs. Marcel learned some valuable insights by observing the reading habits of some of the Mexican-background students and determined what high-interest reading materials to acquire. In addition, even though Mrs. Marcel had no formal training as a librarian, she learned about potentially interesting Spanish-language reading materials by attending library book fairs sponsored by commercial distributors.

Mrs. Marcel was aware of many of the Mexican-background students' needs in conjunction with schoolwork. She specifically identified María Elena as frequently checking out an electric typewriter from the library to take home for use on her English assignments. Previously, Mrs. Reynolds had commented that some of María Elena's assignments had been typed, as opposed to being done on the computer. Mrs. Marcel also helped José pick out a book that had also been a movie for one of Mrs. Reynolds's English assignments. José and

Mrs. Marcel finally selected *The Pelican Brief* (Grisham, 1993). Mrs. Marcel noted that Myrna was a regular visitor to the library along with her sister Gloria. They recently had been looking through periodicals to do research on a paper on teenage suicide.

Recommendations for Teaching Practice

Knowledge of Appropriate Instructional Methods

Educators at Willow Grove High School acted under certain assumptions in dealing with Mexican-background students and consistently missed strategic opportunities to improve the status of literacy instruction available to all students in the school. School personnel at Willow Grove High School were feeling the "demographic imperative" of having to educate increasing numbers of Mexican-background students (Banks, 1994, p. 32). Yet, school personnel, who were mostly White monolingual English speakers, did not reflect the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the student population, and they seemed to have surrendered to the fact that Mexican-background students dropped out of Willow Grove High School at a disproportionately higher rate than their White peers.

Despite the title, Ms. Rowell's "Practical" English class did not focus on the practical aspects of English literacy, such as functional literacy tasks that many of the students shared at home. Mrs. Reynolds's English class was more engaging for students, but it was not available to the majority of Mexican-background students, who were routed to the lower track Practical English. The pursuit of English literacy was particularly fruitless for the *Mexicano* students who were segregated into a side room with their bilingual aide. Ms. Rowell was not aware of the potential of native language (L1) instruction to scaffold successful L2 learning. Ms. Rowell and her bilingual aides were limited by their use of English-language materials. Even though Willow Grove High School followed the letter of the law by providing bilingual tutors as a form of ESL instruction, it did not follow the spirit of the law.

Equitable Access to Resources

Educators at Willow Grove High School assumed that Spanish-language materials provided to Mexican-background students would somehow prevent them from learning English. Spanish-speaking students were not even allowed the option of using simple reference materials in their L1 that would have given them an independent strategy for dealing with language. The lack of appropriate resources in the school setting limited students' attempts to learn English. Other researchers have encountered the dearth of Spanish-language literacy materials available to Latino students in public schools (Godina, 1996; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; García, Pearson, & Jimenéz, 1990). Despite school personnel's good intentions for providing instruction in English, in many cases, Spanish-dominant students did not have sufficient

scaffolding of mainstream English instruction to allow meaningful participation in classroom activities. Not providing students with Spanish–English dictionaries or reading materials in Spanish was a lost opportunity that could have aided their understanding of the English instruction. The school library had a few Spanish materials, but the school in general did not maintain a strong literacy emphasis.

The limited resources available for Mexican-background students extended to other areas of the rural high school, such as technology. I recall the many times I sat in the segregated side room between the main Practical English classroom and the computer laboratory next door. I often heard the whir and click of students using the computers in there. None of these students were talking, while in the side room the *Mexicanos* were being disruptive and forced to do oral readings of *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 1945) in English. Computers might have enhanced the reading and writing dimensions of literacy and stimulated these students' interest in school because computer technology would have deemphasized oral English as the only valid medium for instruction. There are many ESL computer resources available for high school students (Cummins & Sayers, 1995), but the school in Willow Grove did not take advantage of any of them.

For some Willow Grove students, the school integrated computer instruction with the more sophisticated components of English. This included the effective writing instruction by Mrs. Reynolds, who expected her students to word process their assignments. However, the opportunity to familiarize *Mexicano* students with technology was lost because similar high expectations for writing did not occur in their classroom. *Mexicano* students were not viewed as effective writers and as a consequence were not able to engage computers for literacy instruction. Willow Grove High School had limited resources for providing computers to students and did not sufficiently orient the *Mexicano* students to computer technology to the point where they could even begin to implement the technology for their classes. In a survey of high schools in 12 California counties, Arias (1990) similarly concluded that Latino students, compared with White high school students, had inequitable and limited access to computer technology.

Qualified Personnel

Educators at Willow Grove High School assumed that appropriate ESL instruction could be provided by Spanish-language translators from the local community. The bilingual aides who were hired to work with the *Mexicano* students were inexperienced and limited in their knowledge of ESL and appropriate educational practices. The bilingual aides had some successful translation strategies for working with the *Mexicano* students. However, many of the aides' efforts were inconsistent across the entire school setting and reflected the lack of ESL expertise at the school. When an aide realized that a particular strategy was effective for the *Mexicano* students, there were few

teachers who knew or even cared about it. With the exception of the simulated Sheltered English Approach in science classes, comprehensible instruction for the *Mexicanos* was limited to concurrent translation, an ineffective method of instruction because it was inefficient and impractical for the effective learning of English (Legarreta, 1977). The *Mexicano* students' preference for the Spanish version of translated classroom activities was consistent with research related to the concurrent translation approach for ESL instruction, which suggests that L2 learners tend to focus on instruction that is imparted in their L1 (Crawford, 1999). Wong-Fillmore, Ammon, McLaughlin, and Ammon (1983) found that students tend to ignore the teacher when their L1 is not being used during concurrent translation. Schulz (1975) and Legarreta, as cited in Merino (1991), found that when concurrent translation is used, teachers and students tend to emphasize English-language interaction and deemphasize Spanish-language interaction. Schulz also discovered that the "most complex academic instruction was conducted in English" (Merino, p. 123).

School personnel failed to recognize useful strategies for instructing *Mexicano* students. Díaz-Rico and Weed (1995) point out that the Sheltered English Approach is easier for content-area instruction, such as in science, because of the use of graphic aids and manipulative laboratory exercises, but is more limited for application in other subjects, such as English literature. School personnel were not aware that the English class might not be the best place to implement ESL instruction. However, teachers assumed that *Mexicanos* would learn ESL in English class and remained largely unaware of effective teaching strategies.

Integrate All Students Within the Learning Community

White students informally socialized with Mexican-background students to learn Spanish. This marginalized activity should have been recognized by school personnel, as well as encouraged during study hall sessions where peer tutoring normally occurred. However, school personnel prohibited the use of informal Spanish, and such restrictions indirectly weakened Spanish literacy as an academic subject in the school. Because Mexican-background students held such a low status at the school, they were never officially identified as being sufficiently competent to tutor other students. The informal school policy that does not permit Mexican-background students to feel comfortable speaking Spanish at school is a practice that has deep historical roots (García, 1977). Whites in the rural community of Willow Grove had not acknowledged the instrumental research that emphasizes the role of L1 instruction as a vehicle for school success (Cummins, 1981; Fillmore, 1991). The extra study hall sessions were mostly a waste of time because they were not academically challenging to Mexican-background students.

The Spanish class reinforced the students' L1 but ignored the linguistic sophistication of the native Spanish speakers. Similar to findings by Hidalgo (1993) and McLaughlin (1985), Spanish as a foreign language instruction disproportionately benefited the White students who anticipated entrance to

a university setting. White students enrolled in Spanish strategically and informally relied on the Spanish fluency of the Mexican-background students to advance their understanding of Spanish. Cooperative activities in relation to literacy have been found to be beneficial for students of Mexican background (Dixon, 1976), but the Mexican-background students who were informally used as Spanish tutors by Whites did not receive similar informal instruction in English. In the study hall setting where tutoring sessions frequently occurred, cooperative language learning would have been most effective, but students were self-segregated into different social groups.

Integrate Cultural Diversity Into Curriculum

Most Mexican-background students were socially stereotyped into being slotted into low-track classes and segregated settings. Some of them did well but were not recognized or acknowledged. Many Mexican-background students were placed in low-track courses that ignored their real-life needs for effective literacy instruction. The school did not recognize cultural differences, only language differences that were looked upon negatively by most school personnel. Students demonstrated far different literacy practices and accomplishments in their homes and community than those acknowledged at school. Educators need to take advantage of the potential for using social contexts for literacy education, especially when they correlate with authentic desires and tasks in English-speaking settings. Similar to previous findings (Lucas et al., 1990; Moll & González, 1994; Godina & McCoy, 2000; Godina, 2003), tapping into authentic contexts for instruction would have immensely benefited the teachers at Willow Grove High School.

The education of Mexican-background students was not a priority among school personnel, who mostly relied on conventional wisdom to guide the L2 instruction. Rather than give the students a variety of programs designed to accommodate their L2 needs, they were relegated to lower tracks that subordinated their educational presence in the school setting. School personnel ignored how state-mandated educational assessment at Willow Grove High School revealed contradictory evidence about their negative assumptions surrounding students of Mexican background. Interestingly, María Elena, Sylvia, and Cindy received writing scores above state and school averages; José and María Elena received mathematics scores above the school average. Yet, in spite of their having received ESL instruction in the district for 2.5 to 5 years, ESL assessment measures for the *Mexicano* students revealed that the *Mexicanos* had made no measurable gains in English. Both *Mexicano* and Mexican American groups were only viewed in terms of their English knowledge.

If we were to consider the implications for gender variation within these standardized test measures, school success in terms of test performance tended to favor both the *Mexicano* and Mexican American female students above the *Mexicano* males, who may have been limited by their perception of school

success as not having a realistic connection to the male working-class domain modeled by other *Mexicano* males in the Willow Grove community. María Elena, specifically, whose standardized test scores surpassed those of the entire cohort of focal students, might have benefited from L1 instruction in Spanish by having initially gone to school in Mexico. By doing so, she established a foundation in her L1 that some researchers believe to be important for subsequent L2 development (Cummins, 1991a, 2000; González, 1989; Umbel & Oller, 1995). Having charted her academic history, I also examined how María Elena had begun to receive ESL and English-immersion instruction before puberty. María Elena could exemplify how her academic proficiency revealed cognitive benefits associated with the concept of a "threshold hypothesis" that basically describes how children benefit from bilingual fluency (Cummins, 1991b). Igoa (1995) has stipulated the importance of charting a student's educational history in order to determine the appropriate sequence of academically challenging curriculum in conjunction with their L1 and L2 competency. Unfortunately, although María Elena encountered a certain degree of academic success, she largely went about school unnoticed by her teachers and peers, who neglected to recognize her exceptional biliteracy.

Thus, the formation of an innovative, culturally relevant curriculum would need to be cognizant of not just variables mediated through ethnic origin but also include a recognition of students' belief systems related to social class. A richer interpretation of culture would also need to integrate the uniqueness of male and female differences in light of wider social expectations, as well as how L1 and L2 instruction has been sequenced within a student's educational history.

Conclusion

All too often, Mexican-background students in Willow Grove were silenced in a process that devalued their culture and their unique perspectives on life, labor, and language. Many Mexican-background students were placed in low-track courses that ignored their real-life needs for effective literacy instruction. White school personnel shared well-intentioned, but often misguided, beliefs that prevented Mexican-background students from effectively learning English and participating in educational spheres pursuant to upward social mobility. Mexican-background students were informally measured by their ability to speak and communicate in English. However, those students, such as María Elena, who had already become English proficient still encountered negative perceptions by teachers who doubted their commitment to education. The lack of validation for the Mexican-background students who maintained a positive attitude toward school and learned English resonates with Macleod's (1995) findings that reveal how minority youth with similarly positive attitudes were consistently thwarted by diminished social expectations for their progress. School personnel could not

seem to distinguish between the linguistic and academic competencies of the Mexican-background youth and tended to aggregate them within educational sectors that did not share a positive trajectory. The cooptation of minority populations to serve mainstream educational interests, such as that evidenced by the nonreciprocal Spanish-language learning by Whites, remains a problematic aspect of instruction. Mexican-background students need to be integrated within meaningful activities at the school setting, and not participate in activities that remain at the periphery of what is validated in the educational community.

The level of L2 literacy that the students achieve may be important in considering their education in a rural setting. Does the L2 literacy remain at a functional level? Or, is there a possibility that L2 literacy can allow other avenues of higher education to open up and in effect open other career opportunities besides those that await them in the fields, factories, and meatpacking plants?

The aspect of gender differences becomes of critical concern when Foley's (1990) research foreshadows the negative educational outcomes for Mexican American females, who encountered the least amount of upward social mobility as a result of their subordinated status. However, this study revealed contradictory examples of how female students outperformed their male peers.

Consistent with Ogbu's (1978, 1982) caste theory, an examination of cultural differences associated with school failure and success needs to more fully account for the colonial influences of Spain, France, and the United States, as well as the system of internalized colonization *Mexicanos* and Mexican Americans impose upon themselves. For these students to internalize, or accept, a dominant–subordinate structure as "normal" creates an internalized system of failure that results in low self-esteem and lack of motivation to transcend the traditional pattern of colonial domination for future generations of students and their families. Teachers and students both benefit from clearly understanding the history and existence of a traditionally subordinated group's identity within an oppressive social framework, and how this understanding might be useful for the foundation of an emancipatory literacy practice and transcendent social trajectory.

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