

Title: Student Use of Aspirational and Linguistic Social Capital in an Urban Immigrant-Centered English Immersion High School

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Abstract: Expanding upon Yosso's theory of *community cultural wealth*, this interview-based qualitative study finds that Mexican youth in an urban two-year English immersion high school here referred to as Literacy High are assisted academically by what Yosso would call their *aspirational capital* and what the present article theorizes as their *linguistic social capital*, or their ability to utilize a Spanish-speaking student network to understand assignments and instructions. Among these students, opinions regarding the need to develop oral English proficiency vary widely, with some students choosing Spanish as a form of resistance while others feel anxiety regarding their lack of fluency in spoken English.

Key words: Social capital; Linguistic capital; Immigrant education; English immersion settings

In the southwestern border states of the U.S., Mexican immigration presents a staggering demographic challenge, one that has led to many policy decisions that have sacrificed educational quality and social justice for immigrant students in the name of efficiency and expediency. For years, schools in border states have been filled with Mexican-born students with little to no knowledge of the dominant culture or language of either the United States or its schools. Not only do such schools lack understanding of Mexican-born students' culturally-specific sources of academic strength, they dismiss Mexican cultural definitions of education and

Mexican students' Spanish language abilities as errant or, at best, inapplicable (Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, a number of students who showed promise in their home country begin to struggle academically due to a lack of oral proficiency in the language of instruction, while students who were already struggling academically in Mexico only lag further behind their peers.

In urban central Texas, a public high school program I will refer to as Literacy High¹ was created two years prior to this study specifically to address policy makers' concern with struggling immigrant students' performance, providing an English immersion setting for recent immigrants wherein they could develop their language skills before entering a standard classroom setting in their neighborhood schools. This two-year program functioned as one “school within a school” on a larger “small school” campus that housed three different academic programs with particular curricular tracks focused on various content areas. While two of these small schools (focusing on science and geography, respectively) served the geographic neighborhood surrounding the building, Literacy High was designed as a newcomer school (Short, 2002) intended to serve recently arrived immigrants throughout the school district that had failed to pass a district-mandated English language competency test for newly enrolled students.

As a result, Literacy High's student body was composed entirely of immigrant students from outside the U.S. who had to pass the program in order to continue their studies in a traditional public high school setting. During the six months in which I conducted daily ethnographic interviews and observations at Literacy High, the school had 237 students in its two

¹ To preserve anonymity, all names used here to refer to students and teachers at Literacy High (as well as the name of the school itself) are pseudonyms.

grade levels, with a faculty of 18 (nine teachers for the first year, whose coursework corresponded with ninth grade state standards, and another nine teachers for the second year, whose coursework corresponded to tenth grade standards). The vast majority of these students had arrived in the U.S. in the last two years, though a handful had arrived as early as three years before enrollment at Literacy High. Student ages ranged from 14 to 20, as nearly all students had completed some level of secondary schooling before arriving in the U.S. Numbers of male and female students were roughly equal, though there were slightly more female students during data collection than male. This student body included a large number of immigrants from throughout Latin America (particularly from Mexico) alongside a smaller number of political refugees from countries as diverse as Iran, Tanzania and Burma.

Literacy High, like other newcomer school models (Short, 2002), was slightly different from a traditional public school in its curricular focus: it focused on providing linguistic and social support to newly arrived immigrant students, a population that was often underserved by traditional programs and classes targeting English Language Learners (ELL). At the same time, Literacy High was supervised, funded and operated by the local school district just like any other public school, unlike non-district charter schools and other privately managed public school models.

Literacy High students were separated from English-speaking students in the campus' other two small schools. While Literacy High's coursework included the traditional content areas associated with the first two years of high school, teachers focused extensively on English language studies so that, upon completion of Literacy High's two-year curriculum, students could return to their neighborhood high schools with the linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu,

1973, 1974, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) needed to succeed in a heterogeneous group setting. The following work draws on 45 interviews with 14 second-year students from Mexico within this school. Building upon a theoretical construct hereafter referred to as *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007), this study was designed to respond to the following research questions: what forms of *community cultural wealth* do recent immigrants from Mexico rely upon for support within Literacy High, and what are the perceived effects of that use of *community cultural wealth* on their school experience? In response, I assert that these Mexican tenth grade students embodied a number of positive attributes (most notably, what previous theorists call *aspirational capital* and what I here define as *linguistic social capital*) that students saw as contributing positively to their performance in Literacy High's coursework. I also explore here the relative lack of development of oral English proficiency among this population, and students' various opinions regarding it.

To make this argument, I first briefly explain the theoretical framework supporting it. I then provide a short summary of the methodology used to collect the data cited herein, before presenting my findings regarding these students' forms of *community cultural wealth* (most notably, *aspirational capital* and what I call here *linguistic social capital*) and their perceptions regarding their English language abilities. I conclude by highlighting the varied and complex opinions of these 14 students regarding use of spoken English in the classroom, with some students choosing to resist such while others seek to develop their proficiency. I also conclude arguing that transitional programs like Literacy High can and should explicitly recognize students' *community cultural wealth* so that aspiring and high-performing immigrant students

such as those profiled in this study may fulfill their potential throughout their future academic careers.

Theoretical Framework

Generally speaking, the concepts of cultural capital and habitus have their roots in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1974, 1977). In a Bourdieuan framework, “cultural capital refers to the store of experience and knowledge individuals acquire throughout life, influenced by family background and sociocultural experiences” (Marsh, 2006, p. 164).

Within a scholastic framework, schools are second only to families as the primary means of producing cultural capital; they are a primary “means of cultural production” (Nash, 1990, p. 432). Bourdieu (1973, p. 80; 1974, p. 39) has argued that the dominant group, that which controls the economic, social and political resources, has its culture embodied in schools. In a U.S. context, that translates into schools that embody white male middle/upper-class Christian values. In a Bourdieuan framework, this means that this demographic is structurally favored by schools, as our educational institutions are structured to favor those who possess the cultural capital they embody. Schools look at this particular form of cultural capital (white, male, middle/upper class, Christian) as the only proper sort of capital, while other forms of cultural capital held by students that are not white, male, middle/upper-class and/or Christian go unrecognized or undervalued, and such students struggle academically. In short, societal inequities are reproduced in schools as children with “proper” social capital thrive and others fail (Harker, 1984, p. 118).

In a Bourdieuan framework structural barriers impeding non-dominant group achievement are quite real. In Bourdieu’s (1974) words, lower class children don’t “bring to their

school work ... the cultural capital of upper class children” (p. 41), thus forcing them to withdraw in a way that excludes them from academic achievement. The school setting only fully empowers those students whose cultural capital corresponds to that of the school, or in other words those who are seen as “ready” for schooling (Nash, 1990, p. 436). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) go so far as to classify this exclusion of non-dominant groups from accessing school’s cultural capital as “symbolic violence” (p. 5), in that it imposes arbitrary cultural norms (preferred only because of their dominance) onto groups to whom they are foreign, simply because of the arbitrary power that is in the hands of the dominant.

In a U.S. context, immigrant ELL students are one common example of a non-dominant group that is thus low in acceptable cultural capital. Bourdieu (1991) points out that “all linguistic practices are measured against the legitimate practices, i.e. the practices of those who are dominant” (p. 53). Monica Heller (1997) explains that the standard language of a country, i.e. English in the U.S., is “the privileged property of the dominant classes” and “is central to the exercise of symbolic domination” (p. 87). This also means English in the United States is part of the dominant cultural capital embodied by schools, a fact which “[reproduces] inequalities by emphasizing the use and acquisition of Standard English, at the expense of the home language, as the only way out of one’s marginalized condition” (Chung, 2006, p. 7). Zentella (2002) recognizes this as part of the dominant language ideology in U.S. schools “that equates working-class Spanish speaking Latina/os with poverty and academic failure and defines their Spanish-English bilingual children as linguistically deficient and cognitively confused” (p. 322).

Though his theories have become the basis for a vast body of work in the sociology of education, Bourdieu himself recognized the limitations of his theories and the need for future

modification. Basing his own works on his native France, Bourdieu argued strongly against extrapolating institutional patterns of social behavior across cultures, noting that these patterns were reflections of the dispositions of the observers and reflected their discrete cultural contexts (Robbins, 2004, p. 422). Context has always been critical to interpretation, and due to this much has been written to help specify and apply Bourdieu's theories within a 21st century U.S. context. Unfortunately, many thinkers who have undertaken this project of rethinking Bourdieu in a U.S. context have used his notion of cultural capital as a way of implying that some communities are inherently "culturally wealthy" while others are inherently "culturally poor" (Yosso, 2006a, p. 174).

When applied to People of Color, this nouveau-Bourdieuian theoretical approach seems particularly pedantic. As Yosso (2006a) states,

Bourdieu's theoretical insight about how a hierarchical society reproduces itself has often been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the outcomes of whites. The assumption follows that People of Color "lack" the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. As a result, schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help "disadvantaged" students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary ... abilities and cultural capital. (168)²

This definition of Students of Color as being inherently lacking in "preferred" cultural capital ignores the strengths that Students of Color gain from their racial and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, such a definition has resulted in a lengthy history of educational literature that theorizes Communities of Color as having an inherent cultural deficit, resulting in school

² Yosso (2006a) in her work capitalizes the terms People of Color, Communities of Color and Students of Color. As can be noted throughout this article, I purposefully capitalize these terms as well as one small means to counter deficit discourses that minimize the contributions and strengths of these groups and communities.

environments that “subtract” or dismiss the heritage of Students of Color (Valenzuela, 1999).

This deficit thinking puts the onus and blame for poor achievement among Students of Color on their families due to their inability to send their children off to school with the “normative cultural knowledge and skills” they will need to succeed (Yosso, 2006a, p. 173).

Community cultural wealth (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) is a theoretical construct based in critical race theory, whose purpose is in part to repudiate this theoretical history and “[recognize] that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding” the reasons for the marginality of People of Color (Yosso, 2006a, p. 172). Not only this, but the cultures of Students of Color can “nurture” and “empower” them (Yosso, 2006a, p. 174).

These powerful and valuable portions of students’ cultural heritage left unrecognized by Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital are *community cultural wealth*, “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2006a, p. 175). Yosso (2006a) breaks this “array” down into a number of categories, three of which are particularly pertinent to this work: firstly, *aspirational capital*, which refers to the ability Communities of Color have to maintain their hopes and dreams for a better future even when faced with real and perceived barriers (p. 176). Secondly, there is *linguistic capital*, which includes all of the intellectual and social skills which have been attained through communication experiences in any and all languages or styles (Yosso, 2006a, p. 177). Thirdly, there is *social capital*, which Yosso (2006a) defines in much the same way as Bourdieu, referring to “networks of people and community resources” (p. 178). In this paper, I will discuss evidence among the 14 students I followed of *aspirational capital* and

what I will term *linguistic social capital*, which brings together elements of Yosso's (2006a) *linguistic* and *social capital* constructs.

More specifically, I use the term *linguistic social capital* to refer to linguistic social networks upon which immigrant students in this study can rely when they need academic and social support. This is more specific than Yosso's (2006a) definition of social capital that refers to "networks of people" (p. 178) upon which students can rely for support, as the networks in question used by these 14 students at Literacy High are united primarily by their shared use of the Spanish language. That is, the most prominent form of *social capital* these 14 students used to support their studies was one based on the ability to speak Spanish, shared by the significant portion of the Literacy High student population that had emigrated to the U.S. from Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America. This network is not strictly a form of *social capital*, as membership in it is based on linguistic knowledge; nor is it strictly *linguistic capital*, as the network of Spanish speakers at Literacy High also served as a source of cultural and community solidarity for Spanish speakers that went beyond language (including solidarity on the basis of religion, culture and so forth, as well as an ability to provide academic support, as will be explained hereafter). As a result, on the basis of the findings that will be shared in this article I argue for the creation of *linguistic social capital* as a more specific theoretical construct that fits within the broader *community cultural wealth* framework (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) outlined previously.

Methodology and Participant Selection

This article draws on data gathered through six months of ethnographic inquiry at Literacy High. This larger study involved both extensive participant observations of students and

teachers in classroom contexts as well as multiple in-depth interviews with 14 immigrant students from Mexico and their teachers. However, the present article focuses particularly on 45 interviews conducted with these 14 students over this six month period. This focus is purposeful: given the aforementioned history of Bourdieuan scholarship that has framed the experiences of Students of Color through a deficit lens, and the association of that scholarship with “an epistemology based on the social history and culture of the dominant race” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 169) that marginalizes Students of Color and delegitimizes their experiences (Fine, 1994), it is important for academic work that questions deficit theoretical perspectives to choose methods and data sources that assist in avoiding such racially fraught epistemologies. It is for this purpose that the present article is shaped as a modified ethnography or case study (Cohen & Court, 2003), focusing on these 45 qualitative student interviews rather than the participant observations and teacher interviews that were similarly collected. This focus on student interviews is a conscious effort to focus on student voice, while still maintaining the researcher-driven interpretive lens towards those voices that is a hallmark of ethnographic inquiry.

Participant Selection

All Mexican tenth grade students (identified by country of origin on an official attendance list of Literacy High students) were given a chance to participate. More specifically, I attended all home room classes with tenth grade students from Mexico, described the study in Spanish, and handed out parental permission slips (written in both English and Spanish) to all Mexican tenth grade students. The 14 participants described here were those that expressed interest in participation and returned signed parental permission slips.

The study was limited to Mexican immigrants so as to limit extraneous factors or variables that might come into play should the population be more broadly defined and highlight the particular strengths and weaknesses of this group (such as the skills they may have gained through participation in the Mexican school system). The study was also limited to the tenth grade because ninth grade students at Literacy High were predominantly very new arrivals to the U.S., and had not been in the school long enough to have much depth of experience in their new school setting.

Secondary-level Latino/a immigrant newcomer students are a population in desperate need of more attention within U.S. schools. School dropout rates for such students are even larger than those for U.S.-born Latino/as (Van Hook & Fix, 2000), and many have very limited or interrupted former school experience in their home countries (Short, 2002). As McDonnell and Hill (1993) point out, such students are often grouped together with U.S.-born English language learners, even though they have many needs and problems relative to their unique immigration status that typically go unmet (p. xi-xiii).

This particular population was comprised of 14 tenth grade Latino/a immigrant newcomer students from Mexico. Table 1 provides some introductory information regarding each of the participants whose interviews will be cited throughout this article. All 14 participants in this study were relatively recent immigrants, as all of them had been in the U.S. for less than two years, and all of them were in their second year of coursework at Literacy High.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Though I was limited in participant selection to those students that returned signed permission slips, I attempted to include as diverse a population as possible to capture the full

scope of experience and *community cultural wealth* contained in Literacy High's Mexican immigrant population. Interestingly, all 14 students had some experience in Mexican schools—Raymundo, the student with least previous school experience, had finished the first year of *secundaria* (roughly the equivalent of grade 7 in the U.S., as Mexican *secundarias* typically correspond to grades 7 to 9), while some students had finished a year or two of *preparatoria* (which typically includes grades 10 to 12). Students in the population were from both urban and rural areas throughout Mexico, and both boys and girls were included. Interestingly, though this was not intentional during participant selection, all self-identified as “middle-class,” despite the fact that some came from rural agricultural backgrounds and attended small public schools, whereas others were able to attend expensive private schools in metropolitan areas.

This unity in class identification among participants was an opportunity for this study to provide particular insight into the experiences and perceptions of self-identified middle-class recent Mexican newcomer students. Most secondary-level English learner students are low-income and born in the U.S. (often one or two generations removed from immigrants) or newcomer immigrant students with low levels of education (Grogger & Trejo, 2002; Velez, 1989), while all of this study's participants had spent a significant amount of time studying in the Mexican school system. As a result, the present study provides deeper understanding of a relatively unstudied population in U.S. English learner settings and represents a relatively new and open area of inquiry.

Methods

As previously mentioned, this article focuses on 45 student interviews gathered from a larger, six-month-long ethnographic study at Literacy High. Within that study, I conducted

numerous interviews with each of these 14 students. Due to a change in school, one student only participated in two interviews but all other students did so at least three times. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, with the exception of one student who insisted on speaking in English. I have translated interview citations used in this article into English for the benefit of non-Spanish speaking audiences.

Student interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed and translated into English, typically within several weeks of being conducted. Every month, I coded the most recently recorded interviews according to dominant themes that were arising within the data. Twice during the 6-month period of data collection, I re-coded all transcriptions, to allow for the emergence of new trends and new codes.

Positionality

While I structured this study so as to spend the maximum amount of time possible with the students I was following, in an effort to facilitate the growth of trust and a friendly level of emotional intimacy, my own positionality as an upper-class White male graduate student that was born and raised in the U.S. created some unavoidable difficulties in relating to the immigrant teenage youth in this study. Though I had spent a great deal of time with Mexican immigrants and gained some familiarity with Mexican culture through previous academic projects and professional experiences, inherent differences in positionality kept me from fully understanding their experiences as students at Literacy High and their daily lived realities as recent immigrant students from Mexico. Language also likely was a source of some of this cultural distance, as despite the fact that I had undertaken years of Spanish language study and university-level coursework to achieve oral fluency in Spanish, I am not a native Spanish speaker.

This inevitably affected my own data collection abilities amongst the 14 students in this study. First, my positionality meant I had no access to the “cultural intuition” (Delgado Bernal, 1998) that Chicana scholars (such as Huber, 2009) have used to ground their research among Latino/a populations.

This was the primary motivation for my choice to focus on my interviews with students in this manuscript: to prioritize the voices and experiences of the Students of Color in this study, and de-prioritize my own as an elite outsider. While I recognize the “inherent intersubjectivity” of such work (Cruz, 2006), and the reality that my personal biases and experiences will color the interpretation, coding and analysis of student interviews, my utilization of this method was an attempt to purposefully prioritize participant voices and avoid a more directive and researcher-centered tone (Lassiter, 2005).

Findings

Aspirational Capital

Yosso (2006a) defines aspirational capital as the ability Communities of Color have to maintain their hopes and dreams for a better future even when faced with real and perceived barriers (p. 176). I saw this very strongly in interviews with all 14 students, all of whom referred to their immigration to the United States as a search for a better life. Whether based in their own personal aspirations or those of their parents, all 14 students believed strongly in their education at Literacy High as a means to improve their earning abilities and quality of life.

For most of the students, this belief in the power of education to improve their life came from repeated messages from their parents. As Dolores stated (as will be the format throughout the rest of this work, my questions are in italics, with Dolores' responses in plain text),

My mother told me that here I could have a better opportunity to study, have a quality education, and learn English. ... *The main reason you're here is to study?* Yes. *Studying is very important to your parents?* Yes, it's very important to my mother. My father already died. *Why is studying so important to your mother?* Because she knows that I could have a better future with education, I could have a career, and I wouldn't have to work too hard to get things. With a career, I could go forward—she [my mother] didn't study past high school.

Dolores' mother's support and encouragement were a primary reason for her study efforts.

This theme was present in all students' interviews, as all were at least partly motivated to study due to their parents' dreams and desires for them. Most were regularly counseled and reminded about the importance of school by their parents, and that advice was often reflected back to me as I talked with them about their families.

Another example is Beatriz, who had studied up through the first year of *preparatoria* in Mexico (a pre-university professional school beyond basic secondary school). She said that the importance of education “is part of how my parents raise us, the manners they teach us at home. They tell us that they want us to get education, since they weren't able to study.” Whether in terms of grades or English acquisition, this familial “push” was undeniably present in the lives of these 14 students.

Some students took this familial importance placed on education and applied it to their own experience. Jorge, the only student who insisted on speaking in English, saw education as a very clear means to a more lucrative career and a better life. Like others, he referred to his parents' work and lifestyle, noting that their life was not easy and that education could make the situation better. However, like several other students in this study, Jorge also had a part-time job, and was able to personalize the perceived benefits of education beyond his parents' experience:

If you have education you can have a better job or make more money, to have

more opportunities in life, and if you don't shoot for more, I mean right now I got a job, but I work in a car wash, and sometimes it's not hard to me but it's hard because I work outside in the sun, and when the days are too hot, it's hot.

Like his father (who works in construction), Jorge's current work was unskilled manual labor, and he clearly did not want to work in such conditions for the rest of his life. For Jorge, the connection between education and improving one's earning power was simple to understand.

Whatever their levels of thinking about future earning power, all of the students in this study felt a strong sense of obligation to family, and associated their education with that. One student, Raymundo, was especially adamant and sincere in his desire to use his education to help his family. He was living in the U.S. with his older brothers who were working, while his parents were still back in Mexico. He stated:

After finishing school, I want to work. My brothers want me to have a career. You know, work in a restaurant, be a fireman, be a mechanic, something like that. ... [My family] gives me a lot of advice. I'm here in school, doing what they say; I'm studying so that I can do something for them, so that we can help each other. ... [I'm studying] to support my family. They want me to know how to speak English. I want to support my brothers that can't. My education is important for me, and my family, too. Because all I want is to help them.

Though the degree of commitment to family varied student to student, this same expectation that one's education was a means to helping support one's parents and family was universally present among these 14 students.

To a certain degree, this level of aspirational capital may be due to the fact that the students in this study, as well as most Mexican immigrant students at Literacy High, were of a social level that had been able to achieve meritocratic success back in Mexico, thus facilitating their belief in the power of education. Beatriz, when asked where she really finalized her notion of what a "good student" is, replied "Here. Here, I came to see [that]. Those who are there [back

in my town in Mexico], didn't finish secondary school. I never saw, before coming here, Mexicans trying to go to college.”

Along these lines, I found it interesting that above and beyond the students in this study, all Mexican immigrant students I spoke with and met while at Literacy High had attended at least some portion of secondary school and considered themselves “middle class.” As the literature shows (see C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006), immigrant students with the means to have attended some level of schooling in Mexico often outperform their peers in low-income U.S. schools (including U.S.-born Mexican heritage students). This led me to wonder if part of the aspirational capital displayed by these 14 students could be attributed to the fact that the poorest of the poor in Mexico, those who have not seen any benefits come from their educational experience and are not necessarily seeking to further it, are primarily not those who are immigrating to the U.S., thus making those who do immigrate primarily a self-selecting swath of the Mexican middle class. While such a claim is beyond the scope of the present study, I argue that this would be an interesting area for potential future inquiry.

Linguistic Social Capital

As outlined above, I define *linguistic social capital* as access to a network of same-language speakers upon which one can rely for academic support and a sense of cultural belonging. As previous research has shown (Milroy, 1987), social networks based on shared elements of identity are particularly strong in Latina/o immigrant communities. In a general sense, such *linguistic social capital* was very much in evidence among these 14 students due to the linguistic, cultural and national solidarity they felt with other students from Mexico and other

parts of Latin America. In particular, several students (particularly Isabel and Dolores) noted the increased comfort they initially felt among students who share their religion (Christian, primarily Catholic) and culture, and that with that they were able to accustom themselves to Literacy High more easily. This embedded network was much less prominent for immigrants from other less-represented countries, like Thailand, Tanzania, or Iran.

However, the most prominent aspect of this *linguistic social capital* was the social network upon which it was based. That is, the students in this study found support for their studies in their shared ability to speak Spanish. Many students noted the advantage they have over non-Spanish speaking immigrants at Literacy High, due to the large academic support network among their fellow Latinos. Dolores, Beatriz and Eva noted that in any given Literacy High classroom, only a handful of students were from non-Spanish speaking areas (like Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia or the Middle East), and they all tended to sit together at one small table while other tables were dominated by Spanish-speaking Latinos. Truly, Spanish-speaking students at Literacy High seemed to have created a community by “[embracing] the Spanish language ... as a common denominator” (Zentella, 2007, p. 25).

Many students expressed how these common linguistic roots among Latin American immigrants at Literacy High provided them with an almost instantaneous social and academic support network upon their arrival in the school, as even without a working knowledge of English, they were able to function socially and academically with the help of their peers. As Eva stated,

If you want to talk in English, you can, but all of your friends speak Spanish, so it's more normal to speak Spanish. They let us talk if we keep our voices down, since many don't understand what we're doing, and we can help pass on the

material to others. It would be better if we all spoke English, but we don't know it, and we already know Spanish.

Many students depended on this support to do well in their classes. Esteban specifically noted that he would often not understand or be able to finish his assignments if his friends weren't able to help him and explain in Spanish. He, as well as Hector and Celio, admitted that many other students do the same. With regards to academic achievement, these Mexican immigrant students' *linguistic social capital* was one of the primary reasons they were able to navigate the academic terrain of Literacy High.

Perceived English Abilities

The perceived impact of Mexican students' *aspirational* and *linguistic social capital* on their academic achievement was quite clear in their interviews. Nearly all of the students in this study were passing all of their classes, and many of them (such as Claudia, Eva, Hector and Celio) were passing with all 90s and 100s. These 14 students' *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) was obviously translating into some academic success, at least within the context of Literacy High.

However, this does not mean that students felt they were being pushed to perform at their full potential. Interestingly, despite oral language ability not being a focus of this study, all of the 14 students in this study mentioned at different times their ability to just “get by” without learning much content and without gaining much oral English ability, which was the ostensible goal of Literacy High's program. Ofelia, Hector, and Celio felt they were able to “get by” using specific learning techniques and study skills which they'd learned in previous school settings and been able to reapply at Literacy High. More

specifically, Eva, Isabel and Beatriz expressed feeling very comfortable writing in English, as they had already developed strong skills in academic writing while in Mexico.

These 14 students had all developed a certain skill with academic language. In the words of Wright and Kuehn (1998), they had already built some knowledge of the grammar, syntax and form associated with the “academic literacies” required in school settings. However, despite these previously developed academic skills, nearly all 14 students (particularly Eva, Mercedes and Beatriz) brought up oral English proficiency as a skill they felt they lacked. As Eva noted,

I don't feel very well-prepared to return to a normal school. I need to practice what I've learned, to put it in practice. Like knowing how to speak. I know how to write well in English, but I don't feel comfortable speaking.

When asked, students cited several reasons for this lack of oral proficiency. First and foremost, students felt a social pressure from other Spanish speakers to not speak English in class. Many, especially girls like Teresa, Ofelia, Beatriz, Dolores, Mercedes, Isabel and Josefina, said they were ashamed to try to speak in English, since others would laugh and make fun of them. Jorge, the one student who asked specifically to be interviewed in English, stated that he was always very open to try out new phrases in class, and always spoke English with the teacher, even though others made fun of him for doing so.

Celio expressed some feelings that could help explain this dynamic:

I don't always show it, but I like when I do well in class. I like when I get a paper back and the teacher says my writing is good. I like when I understand what they're teaching us, in science, in algebra. I know it could be hard to tell, because I never talk in English. I don't know, I just feel like, when people try to talk in English the way the teachers talk, all formal—it feels a bit too *gringo*, you know?

Here Celio makes a very important point: his decision to not try to speak in formal English

is a conscious choice, one made out of resistance to the perception that doing so would represent cultural conformity. Similar dynamics have been found in many places elsewhere in the literature, such as the writings of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) on Black students fears' of academic achievement being perceived as "acting white," as well as the work of Fránquiz and Salazar (2004), which documents similar dynamics among Chicano students in Colorado who accuse their English-speaking peers of "acting *gringo*" (p. 42). Such refusal by some students to speak English is a purposeful use of agency to resist perceived oppression (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Other students, like Beatriz, Dolores, Ofelia and Isabel, were self-conscious about making mistakes. As Claudia said, "I hardly ever speak English, because I trip all over my words." This corroborates the findings of many studies in second language acquisition (Chambers, 1993; Dörnyei, 1998; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) which make particular note of how anxiety regarding "perception of competence" (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) in one's second language leads many second language speakers to be hesitant to speak in that language.

Adding to the social stigma against speaking in English, most students felt no need to speak as teachers would almost always allow them to speak in Spanish among themselves. In the words of Beatriz and Dolores, "In class, they ask you to speak English, but no one does." Students were able to see that speaking English was not something they needed to do to "get by"—so, with the exception of several students (particularly Jorge and Isabel) who truly desired to practice their oral English proficiency, most were content not to do so, especially when they were finding a great deal of academic success without

doing so.

In later interviews, I asked students how English and Spanish were used in the classroom, so as to better understand this dynamic from their perspective and their fears regarding their ability to effectively speak English after finishing Literacy High's program.

Teresa described it thusly:

Well, pretty much all the teachers let us talk in Spanish when we're working. Lots of them let us ask questions in Spanish, if they understand it. Most of them don't seem to mind us speaking in Spanish, so long as what we write is in English, and it's good.

While some students (like Eva) expressed anxiety about this lack of oral English practice, previous scholarship has shown that such tolerance of a second language in the classroom does not necessarily negatively impact student learning of particular content area knowledge or academic English. A number of scholars, particularly Chamot and O'Malley (1994) with their Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (or CALLA) and Echevarria, Vogt and Short (2012) with their Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (or SIOP), have developed extensive curricular systems designed specifically as means whereby ELL students can learn academic English and secondary content knowledge simultaneously. On a more micro level, Fránquiz and Salinas (2013) found that newcomer students (like those in this study) were able to effectively learn academic vocabulary and content area concepts in English in a classroom setting that allowed fluid bilingual use of both English and Spanish, or what García (2007) has called *translanguaging*. In short, teacher tolerance of spoken Spanish in the classroom at Literacy High is not necessarily a cause for concern, in terms of academic achievement. What is

important and notable in the present study, however, is some students' unease over their lack of oral English proficiency, alongside other students' resistance to practicing their spoken English.

Student unease regarding this *de facto* policy allowing use of Spanish in the classroom reflects the “crucial yet contradictory role” (Zentella, 2007, p. 25) of Spanish in Latina/o communities. It is seen by students as an overall good, as this Spanish-language network can help them perform at a higher level in their English-language coursework while also reinforcing the “comfort, trust, solidarity, and affection generated by the sounds and styles of family and community” (Zentella, 2007, p. 27). Yet at the same time, this fostering of Spanish language use and pride at Literacy High was happening within a space that proscribed (at least in its rhetoric, even if not in its practice) English as the superior language of choice, the norm to which students were expected to adapt in order to gain respect (compare to Urciuoli, 1996). While some students resisted this implied superiority of spoken English by refusing to use it, others (like Eva) seemed to accept the school's implicit ideology of English superiority and worried about how their lack of oral English proficiency might affect their future academic achievement.

Conclusion

Through seeking to understand these 14 students use of *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) and its effects on their school experience within Literacy High, I have found that the 14 students in this study developed extensive *community cultural wealth*, specifically what I have identified herein as *aspirational capital* (Yosso, 2006a) and a new construct I have entitled *linguistic*

social capital. These forms of *community cultural wealth* granted them a significant amount of academic success within Literacy High.

This article primarily adds to the present literature through its theorization of the term *linguistic social capital*, which builds upon the *community cultural wealth* framework (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) by recognizing the way in which linguistic networks can contribute to the academic success of Students of Color in ways that the separate terms *social capital* (defined by Yosso [2006a] as “networks of people” [p. 178]) and *linguistic capital* (which does not recognize the ways in which social networks sharing language ties provide cultural as well as linguistic solidarity) do not. This new theoretical construct has a myriad of potential applications to research within Communities of Color with shared linguistic roots.

These 14 students’ perceptions of the relative importance of oral English proficiency, particularly given their location within an English-language-focused newcomer school, provide some compelling questions that could orient further inquiry: is the primary role of newcomer schools to provide English language training? Does oral English proficiency matter when students are able to develop the academic literacies demanded in formal school settings? What influence does the ideological preference given to English in such settings have on students’ perceptions of their own abilities, and the relative worth of their heritage languages? This article has provided a fascinating first glance into some of these dynamics, with some students choosing to resist spoken English while others pursue oral English proficiency in a manner that might imply ideological acceptance of the superiority of English. Meaningful and rigorous examination of these

questions, however, will only be possible through further inquiry.

One point, however, is made clear in all 14 students' interviews: the forms of *community cultural wealth* that are noted in this study are not being sufficiently recognized at a structural level within Literacy High. On one hand, this is understandable—the primary reasoning behind the initial theorization of *community cultural wealth* as a construct was to recognize forms of strength among Students of Color that traditionally went unrecognized. However, now that research such as this article is beginning to make note of students' *community cultural wealth*, programs like Literacy High can and should do more to recognize and build upon these strengths inherent to Latina/o and other immigrant populations, particularly with regards to students' *linguistic social capital*. As Zentella (2007) states, “It is in the dismantling of critiques of our English, our Spanish, and our Spanglish, and in an understanding of who benefits from the diminishment of our linguistic repertoires, that a powerful Latina/o unity can be rooted” (p. 36). Programs like Literacy High could go a long way towards raising Latina/o student achievement by recognizing and building upon the sources of strength inherent to Latina/o communities and their cultural heritage.

This suggestion provides a provocative paradox: can English immersion programs effectively continue their focus on English fluency while also still recognizing the *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) of their diverse immigrant student populations? While this may be difficult even for supportive teachers in English immersion settings due to such programs' structural focus on English fluency and the lack of incentives to recognize and valorize

students' *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007), some successful cases of English fluency being reinforced alongside valorization of home languages and cultures are beginning to be documented in the literature (see particularly Bartlett & García, 2011). This article builds upon this small yet growing literature by demonstrating the ways in which students' *community cultural wealth* (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2006a, 2006b; Yosso & García, 2007) can help them achieve academic success, even in an academic setting like Literacy High that does not recognize such latent strengths.

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