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***“Tienes que Poner Atención”*: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Mexican
Immigrant Students' Previous Academic Experiences in an Urban
Central Texas School**

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“Tienes que Poner Atención”: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Mexican Immigrant
Students' Previous Academic Experiences in an Urban Central Texas School

by

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Dedication

This study would not have been possible without the willingness and support of the students and teachers I interviewed and observed over the course of this study. Though I am not permitted to list them by name so as to preserve their anonymity, I greatly appreciate the sacrifice of their time as well as their willingness to open their classrooms and hearts to me in this work. It is not easy to have your work observed and evaluated by an ethnographer, and I greatly appreciate the openness of the entire student body and faculty at Literacy High, without whom this study would not have been possible.

My wife Kristy has supported me and guided me through every inch of this process. Herself the consummate academic, this study benefited greatly from her own ethnographic experience and careful editor's eye.

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Abstract

“Tienes que Poner Atención”: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Mexican Immigrant
Students' Previous Academic Experiences in an Urban Central Texas School

by

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In Central Texas, one high school (hereafter referred to as Literacy High) has attempted to help bridge the literacy gap in immigrant populations so as to more easily facilitate their success in standard classroom settings. In this high school, recent immigrants can focus extensively on English language studies so that, upon completion of the program, they can return to their neighborhood high schools with the linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974, 1977) they need to succeed in a heterogeneous group setting. The following study focuses on second-year students from Mexico within this school. Basing itself upon Yosso's (2006a, 2006b, 2007) theory of “community cultural wealth”, this ethnographic study looks for evidence of cultural attributes held by Mexican tenth grade students that contribute positively to their English literacy development and performance in Literacy High's coursework.

The study has found that, primarily, Mexican students at Literacy High are assisted in their coursework by their previously developed aspirational capital (i.e. their

ability to maintain their hopes and dreams for a better future even when faced with real and perceived barriers) and navigational capital (i.e. their ability to maneuver through social institutions, in this case the educational system). These characteristics enable them to pass their classes both at Literacy High and the high schools they transfer to upon program completion. However, this high achievement in terms of grades does not necessarily translate into complete English literacy, especially oral literacy. Potential reasons for these results will be discussed, based upon observations of sampled students in Literacy High classes, interviews with these students, and interviews with all Literacy High teachers.

This work will also discuss the relative merit of both formal school settings and nonprofit settings in teaching written and oral literacy. Positive exemplary case studies of nonprofit ESL programs will be compared and contrasted with the results from this case study to determine what skills are most effectively taught in either setting, and how particular practices from both nonprofit and formal school settings might be better incorporated in each to improve achievement.

The work will end with recommendations for how English literacy might more effectively be taught in formal school settings like Literacy High.

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Chapter One: Introduction

It was the period right after lunch, and kids were ambling slowly through the Sesame-Street-era primary-colored décor of Literacy High's hallways as they worked their way to their next class. Literacy High is a small school created specifically for recent immigrants in Central Texas, a two-year English immersion program non-English speakers participate in before returning to their neighborhood schools for their junior and senior years. I was reminded of this as groups of friends parted ways for different classes, and I heard splashes of “see you later” in Spanish, Thai and Swahili. Within one tenth grade classroom, students headed to their various tables, informally separating themselves along language lines, with most tables buzzing in low-volume Spanish, while one “catch-all” table held kids from Tanzania, Burma and Iran. I sat at one of the Spanish-speaking tables with Dolores, one of the students I was shadowing, and several of her friends.

The buzzing quieted down as the teacher explained the day's first activity. To prepare for a writing assignment, the teacher explained that students today would be completing a two-column journal entry in which they would organize the points they planned to make in their piece and the order in which they would make them. As the teacher explained, most eyes were fixed firmly on her. A few students here and there were still buzzing on in Spanish about what they did last Saturday, but for the most part, looking around the room, I saw the type of faces a teacher dreams of—eyes fixed on the teacher, brows furrowed in concentration as students mentally attempted to translate the fast-paced English instructions. I didn't see any of the behavior difficulties I still associate with my own experience teaching in low-income schools.

Once the teacher finished explaining, she asked if there are any questions. No hands were raised, and students were asked to begin the assignment. After a minute or so, I noticed that Dolores was quietly fiddling with her paper, having drawn the obligatory T-chart but leaving it completely blank, her writer's block more than apparent. She looked furtively around at other tables and whispered a bit in Spanish with Marta, her neighbor, as they tried to figure out what to write.

I got the feeling that Dolores didn't quite understand the instructions, but not wanting to embarrass her by asking her directly, I asked her what she thought of the assignment. She looked at Marta, both laughed, and Marta gave me a sly look and said, “*La verdad?*” / “The truth?”, as if to underscore the assignment's seemingly apparent lack of relevance. Interested, I followed up with, “*Piensas que este tipo de trabajo te ayuda?*” / “Do you think this type of work helps you?” Marta, with an air of resignation, said, “*Bueno, te piden que haces*”, or “Well, they ask you to do it.”

Dolores, ever polite, tried to qualify her friend's dismissive statements, noting how this assignment helps you practice your reading and writing in English, which is the focus of Literacy High's program. However, her answer was general, vague, and not very sure of itself. She simply knew that she'd been asked to do this assignment, and wanted to please her teacher.

In later interviews, I asked Dolores what it means to her to be a good student, and the answers that came forth were those I saw embodied in her actions that day: you must be polite, pay attention, and do what you're told. Dolores' submissiveness in the face of misunderstanding was driven by her desire to please and thus do well, behaviors she said helped her succeed in her *secundaria* back in Mexico.

In all of the students followed through this study, I saw these same behaviors of listening, being polite and doing what one is told. To the 14 recent Mexican immigrant students I followed during the course of this study, these behaviors were reinforced throughout their previous educational careers in the Mexican formal school system as the behaviors of “good students”. To these students, this store of experience has become a source of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974, 1977), or what Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) would call “community cultural wealth”, in that these behaviors are also producing positive results and are a significant reason for their academic success within Literacy High.

These findings are very salient to the issues facing American education today. In contemporary American education, Mexican immigration presents a staggering challenge. For years, the tide of Mexican immigration has flooded American schools with Mexican-born students with little to no knowledge of the dominant culture or language of either the United States or its schools. Students who may have been talented in their home country fall quickly behind as they struggle to learn the English skills necessary to catch up to their peers, while students who may have struggled or did not attend school in Mexico fall even further behind.

Literacy High's program has attempted to help bridge the literacy gap in immigrant populations so as to more easily facilitate their success in standard classroom settings. In this two-year program, recent immigrants from all over the school district can focus extensively on English language studies so that, upon completion of the program, they can return to their neighborhood high schools with the linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974, 1977) they need to succeed in a heterogeneous group setting.

This program serves immigrants from all nations; however, due to understandable geographic factors there is a preponderance of Spanish-speaking immigrants, particularly from Mexico.

In educational literature, much has been written about the structural barriers Mexican immigrant populations face when entering the American school system. These barriers are quite real and provide serious obstacles to Mexican immigrant achievement. However, little has been researched about the ways in which Mexican culture may actually be a positive force that contributes to achievement.

Statement of Purpose

Interviewing and shadowing 14 recent Mexican immigrant students at Literacy High, I looked for the cultural factors that positively affect their literacy success in this new American context. In other words, I looked for the ways in which these students' Mexican cultural heritage is a source of cultural capital, or what Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) calls "community cultural wealth", contributing actively to the literacy learning of Mexican immigrant students. In so doing, I found that these students have been able to succeed by making use of their linguistic community within Literacy High (as a form of social capital [Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007]), their parental and familial support and drive for academic success (a form of aspirational capital [Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007]), and most particularly, the behavioral patterns inherent in being a "good student" which they learned through their academic experiences in Mexico (a form of navigational capital [Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007]).

In this work, I will first discuss the theoretical background used to support these claims, drawing primarily on the work of Bourdieu (1973, 1974, 1977) and Yosso (2006a,

2006b, 2007). I will then present the methodology behind my fieldwork, and finally the ethnographic findings upon which my assertions are based.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

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, 164). Similarly, the habitus of a person or group is “a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1979, vii, quoted in Harker, 1984, 120). In other words, one’s habitus is the collection of dispositions, beliefs and practices that drive one’s day to day activities, goals and aspirations. The cultural values inherent in one’s habitus may seem arbitrary from an outsider’s perspective, but they are internalized over time by those who embody them to the point that they feel natural (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, quoted in Marsh, 2006, 164). The degree to which this habitus facilitates social mobility is the level of one’s cultural capital.

Within a scholastic framework, schools are second only to families as the primary means of reformulating the habitus and producing cultural capital; they are a primary “means of cultural production” (Nash, 1990, 432). Bourdieu has argued that the dominant group, that which controls the economic, social and political resources, has its culture embodied in schools (1973, 80; 1974, 39). In an American context, that translates into schools that embody white male middle/upper-class 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) as the only proper sort of capital, one which it is assumed all children can access equally—thus, since not all children can access this form of cultural capital equally, societal inequities are reproduced in schools as children with “proper” social capital thrive and others fail (Harker, 1984, 118).

As the habitus is the way in which culture is embodied in the individual (Harker, 1984, 118), the habitus is a primary determinant of one’s cultural capital. Those with a white, male, middle/upper class habitus will thrive, while those with an alternative habitus may stumble. In order for an individual from a non-dominant background to succeed, they must acquire the dominant culture’s cultural capital, thus changing their habitus to reflect that of the dominant group (Harker, 1984, 118).

The habitus is flexible enough to change, as it is a product of practice—if a non-dominant group member adopts the cultural practices of the dominant group, then that practice will gradually modify the habitus (Nash, 1990, 434). This allows for some degree of agency in the culturally reproductive school system. As Sulkunin (1982) writes, “The habitus is constantly being formed in the daily practices of individual subjects. ... People do not simply reproduce their meaning systems, they also produce and use them. One must see classes and their members not just as actors in a prefabricated play but also as creative subjects.” (109-110)

However, individual agents are not the only actors striving to reformulate the habitus. As mentioned above, the school as a reproductive system is actively striving to generate practice among students which will endow them with the habitus of the dominant group (Nash, 1990, 432-433). In this sense, the Mexican immigrant students at

Literacy High School are creative subjects who are acting for themselves as well as being acted upon. These students may not only embody a habitus which reflects their family and country of origin, but are most likely under the influence of both the habitus of their school setting as well as their own efforts to actively create their own habitus, which will then be passed down to and modified by the next generation.

Though this definition of habitus may seem quite empowering, in a Bourdieuan framework structural barriers impeding non-dominant group achievement are quite real. In Bourdieu's words (1974), lower class children don't "bring to their school work ... the cultural capital of upper class children," thus forcing them to withdraw in a way that excludes them from academic achievement (41). 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, 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" (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 US context, immigrant ESL 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" (53). Monica Heller (1997) explains that the standard language of a country, i.e. English in the US, is "the privileged property of the dominant classes" and "is central to the exercise of symbolic domination" (87). This also means English in the United States is part of the dominant habitus 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, 7).

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, 422). As in all things, context is key, and due to this much has been written to help specify and apply Bourdieu’s theories within a 21st century American context. Unfortunately, many thinkers who have undertaken this project of rethinking Bourdieu in an American 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, 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 knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital.

(168)

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. 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, 173).

Yosso’s (2006a, 2006b, 2007) work is 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 (2006a, 172). Not only this, but the cultures of students of color can “nurture” and “empower” them (Yosso, 2006a, 174).

Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) identifies the powerful and valuable portions of students’ cultural heritage left unrecognized by Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital as *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” (2006a, 175). Yosso breaks this “array” down into six categories: 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 (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. This type of community cultural wealth is particularly rich among Mexican and other Hispanic immigrant groups, with their rich history of parables, stories (*cuentos*), and proverbs (*dichos*). It also refers to a form of capital quite common among adolescents, which is the ability to communicate with different audiences, such as family and school or government authorities (Yosso, 2006a, 177).

Thirdly, there is *familial capital*, which refers to the history, memory and cultural intuition maintained by the community and family in which a person lives. This sense of family often extends beyond the nuclear family to include extended family, neighbors and friends (Yosso, 2006a, 177). From this greater community, members gain a sense of solidarity and realize that they are not alone.

Fourthly, there is *social capital*, which Yosso (2006a) defines in much the same way as Bourdieu, referring to “networks of people and community resources” (178).

Fifthly, there is *navigational capital*, which refers to one’s ability to maneuver through social institutions, such as the educational system (Yosso, 2006a, 178). This is one form of community cultural wealth I expected to see in great abundance at Literacy High.

Lastly, there is *resistant capital*, which refers to the knowledge and skill gained through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2006a, 179). This form of community cultural wealth is strongly grounded in the history of resistance which is a part of nearly every community of color, whether such resistance has taken direct and violent or indirect and social forms.

Previous Studies of Mexican Immigrant Students

The particular structural barriers faced by Mexican immigrant students upon their arrival in the United States have been documented at length in the literature. Indeed, the existent literature on Mexican immigrant populations focuses upon such problems. For example, Mexican immigrant students face language barriers (Gandara, 1993; Valdes, 2001), socioeconomic disadvantage (Velez, 1989; Trejo, 1997), inequitable schooling and substandard educational facilities (Shields et al, 1999), and a large propensity for student mobility between schools and areas upon arrival in the US (Ream, 2003). Also, the fact that such large numbers of Mexican immigrants arrive in the United States with low levels of education (Grogger & Trejo, 2002) presents a strong disadvantage. Lastly, teachers in American schools have little knowledge of Mexican culture or background, and an especially strong dearth of appreciation for the skills and abilities they bring from their community cultural wealth (Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, 2002). This lack of familiarity breeds alienation, and a lack of significant teacher relationships (Ream, 2003).

Another factor which breeds difficulty in familiarizing students of Mexican descent into the American school system is their heterogeneity, and the ability of recent Mexican immigrant students to become confused with other students of Mexican descent with vastly different backgrounds and abilities. Matute-Bianchi (1986) has studied this heterogeneity, and in her work differentiates between recent immigrants (who are Spanish speaking, Mexican born, and are often very driven and yet naïve to the ways of American schools) and several variations of later generations of Mexican-descendant students (who increasingly distance themselves from recent immigrants and become disenchanted with possibilities for achievement in the American system) (236-240).

Within this heterogeneous continuum of Mexican-descendant student populations,

recent Mexican immigrant students are the population I will be focusing on in my research. This population differentiates itself from other Mexican-descendant students by dressing differently (in a manner typically considered unstylish by other students), self-identifying as *Mexicano*, treating teachers and staff courteously and respectfully, taking their schoolwork especially seriously, being eager to please (and somewhat more naïve), and considering Mexico their permanent home (though they may or may not commute seasonally back to Mexico). Recent immigrants are also treated differently by teachers—when recent immigrants have difficulties in school, their difficulties are attributed to language difficulties or inadequate schooling in their home country and are not attributed to personal attitudes, whereas those labeled as *Chicanos* and *Cholos* are perceived as being unsuccessful because they are “apathetic” and “discourteous” (Matute-Bianchi, 241). Though Matute-Bianchi found most recent immigrants to fit these characteristics, there is still great differentiation within this group, on the basis of rural versus urban, upper versus lower class, educated versus uneducated (within the formal Mexican system), and *mestizo* versus *indio* (Matute-Bianchi, 1986, 236-237).

Few studies have examined positive aspects of Mexican community cultural wealth among Mexican immigrant students. Matute-Bianchi (1986) discussed the positive attitudes and strong work ethics of immigrant students (as noted above), but did so in a larger dialogue about immigrant students’ difficulties and struggles. Conchas (2006) describes recent immigrants positively, but only in an oppositional context to second-generation Latinos, stating that “recent Mexican immigrants have a stronger desire to learn English, acculturate, and partake in American society, while second-generation Latinos develop an oppositional identity against ‘making’ it in school” (12-

13). In general, few studies have focused on the positive cultural traits which Mexican immigrant students bring to their education, as this study aims to do.

In the academy, most studies of Mexican immigrant achievement in American schools, though high in quality, have been quantitative in nature (e.g. Crosnoe, 2005a, 2005b, 2006;). These studies have identified important demographic trends regarding Mexican immigrant performance in American schools. However, qualitative studies able to depict the nuanced manner in which these trends play out in individual school contexts have been noticeably lacking.

The few existent qualitative studies that address issues influencing Mexican immigrant achievement, such as Conchas (2006), Matute-Bianchi (1986) and Abi-Nader (1990) are strong contributions to the literature, but none focus exclusively and specifically on a Mexican recent immigrant population. Lopez (2001) and Reese et al (1995) qualitatively study the attitudes of Mexican immigrant parents towards schooling, but either do so on a case study basis, relying upon information from only one family (in the case of Lopez [2001]), or work with a younger student population than that proposed in this study (in the case of Reese et al [1995]). Though some of the students in these studies participate in “school within a school” programs, none of them focus entirely upon a small school population focused on English literacy. In this sense, this study aims to fill a gap in the current literature, addressing the particular ways in which Mexican immigrant adolescents use their cultural resources as a positive force in English language acquisition in a small school setting.

Literacy Theory

As Literacy High is literacy-focused in its curriculum, some discussion of the theory behind literacy and literacy learning is needed. Cairney (1995) notes that literacy is a cultural practice (1), a cultural tool used to construct symbolic meaning and communicate with others. As a cultural practice, literacy is learned within a social context (Cairney, 1995, 7-8). In this study, several social contexts are involved: that of students' families and that of Literacy High. Though Literacy High is the context in which literacy is more overtly taught, both contexts influence Literacy High's students' literacy success.

As Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) states, language (or linguistic capital) is part of community cultural wealth. King (1994) also notes that language is cultural capital (21). Literacy, broadly defined as knowledge of language, is thus not inherently an area in which this population is lacking. However, as "a major function of schools is the control of knowledge" and "what counts as knowledge" (Smith, 1987, 59), this population's linguistic capital may vary from that which is prized and labeled "literacy" by Literacy High. As such, Yosso's notion of linguistic capital may feature especially prominently in this study, notably in the differentiation between school and family settings of what is recognized as linguistic capital.

Research Questions

Based on the theories of both Bourdieu and Yosso, this study aims to answer the following research question: What aspects of Mexican immigrant students' "community cultural wealth" improve their success in achieving English literacy? Secondly, I aim to see how this "community cultural wealth" might vary according to students' different socioeconomic, racial and familial backgrounds. By so doing, this study hopes to help

bridge a separation in the literature between cultural and structural theoretical explanations of racial educational inequality (Kao and Thompson, 2003, 419-420).

Culturally-orientated studies, which have tended to be qualitative in nature, posit that the cultural orientations of certain ethnic groups promote or discourage academic achievement (as Yosso does with her notion of community cultural wealth). Structurally-oriented studies, which have tended to be quantitative in nature, have emphasized the lower structural position of certain ethnic groups as most heavily affecting student achievement (as Bourdieu does with his theory of cultural capital). This study aims to continue the growing body of literature that recognizes structural barriers while also noting the role of culture in potentially lessening or overcoming those barriers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this study I used ethnographic methods, specifically qualitative interviews (with students and teachers) and participant observation (of students within their classroom contexts). In order for me to gain a deep sense of how culture is constructed and how it plays a role in academic achievement in such a focused, small setting as Literacy High, qualitative work was necessary. As Hamel (1998) posits, the theoretical work of Bourdieu calls out strongly for qualitative methods—in his words, Bourdieu’s sociology of education requires the active participation of social actors, including the researcher, in order to effectively document and display social struggle (16). Through my numerous classroom observations and interviews with the students at Literacy High, I actively participated with them as social actors, bringing their individual struggles and successes to light.

I restricted my study to tenth grade students at Literacy High, because ninth graders would not have been in Literacy High's program long enough to have much depth of experience in their new American school setting. Though Literacy High has students from around Latin America, I restricted my study to Mexican students so as to limit the extraneous environmental factors that might affect student achievement and highlight the particular strengths and weaknesses gained by student participation in the Mexican school system.

To recruit participants, I visited all tenth grade homeroom classes and explained my study in English and Spanish to all students. Having previously received a list of all Mexican students from the school registrar, I gave each Mexican tenth grader a permission slip in English and Spanish which required a parent's signature as a precursor

to participation. Students were encouraged by their teachers to participate, but no incentives (whether scholastic or monetary) were offered to participants. 14 students brought back their permission slips, and these students comprised my sample.

I used qualitative interviews towards as a means of finding out what the students at Literacy High feel and think about their worlds (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, 1), both the world of Literacy High and the heterogeneous worlds of their families, communities and former schools in Mexico. Qualitative interviewing encouraged the study participants to describe their worlds in their own terms, so that I could more fully understand how and why their culture is created, evolves, and is maintained (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, 2-3).

I conducted numerous semi-structured interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, 5) with each of the 14 students. Due to a change in school, one student was only interviewed once, but all other students were interviewed at least three times. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, with the exception of one student who insisted on being interviewed in English for language practice. Students were pulled out of class for interviews, and thus were typically interviewed in settings close to their classrooms. Most interviews took place in the school library and cafeteria, though some took place in courtyards and (in rare cases) in hallways.

My first interview with each student was a basic introductory interview in which each student would tell me about their family, their city and state of origin in Mexico, their educational background, their views towards education and their future educational aspirations. In later interviews, we discussed their perceptions of what teachers at Literacy High value in students, what makes a “good student”, their former schools and teachers in Mexico (as well as their perceptions of what was valued in those contexts), as

well as other subjects as they arose.

In this semi-structured interview format, I asked some specific questions, with allowance given for unstructured extrapolation upon the themes inherent in those questions. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) state, “Asking everyone the same questions makes little sense in qualitative interviewing where the goal is to find out what happened and why, in rich and individualistic terms” (11). The semi-structured interview format allowed for individual interviews to vary as I became better acquainted with each student, they became better acquainted with my study and they felt more comfortable bringing up topics for discussion.

The ability to discern difference between individual experiences was key given the heterogeneous nature of my target population. These 14 students were from both urban and rural areas throughout Mexico. Though all self-identified as “middle-class”, some came from rural agricultural backgrounds and attended small public schools, whereas others were able to attend expensive private schools. Though all had some investment in their academic performance, both in Mexico and at Literacy High, some students were much more high-performing than others.

Both boys and girls are represented in the study, with high-performing and average students among both groups. Though I was limited in my sampling to those students that returned signed permission slips, I attempted to include as diverse a population in this sample as possible, so as to gain as diverse a collection of perspectives as possible. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) state, “one person’s experiences are not intrinsically more true than another’s” (10), and through qualitative interviews I hoped to capture (as much as possible) the full scope of experience and community cultural wealth

contained in Literacy High's Mexican immigrant population.

I also conducted several interviews each with nine teachers at Literacy High who taught classes with students from my sample, asking them for their impressions of each of the participating students as well as their personal approaches to teaching in general. These interviews were all conducted in English in each teacher's classroom, typically during their preparatory periods. I also interviewed two of Literacy High's administrators, in order to try to gain a fuller picture of the school's goals and vision for student performance.

In the text, individual interview citations can be identified by the dates which follow them. For example, a citation that refers to Jorge (5/14) is referring to an interview conducted with Jorge on May 14th.

I also conducted numerous classroom observations, observing all of the 14 students in my sample in their various subject courses. The classes observed included Writing, Reading, English, World History, Communication, Art History, Geometry and Biology. Each teacher was asked for their consent before each observation, and some classes were observed more frequently than others due to the greater willingness of those teachers to be observed (particularly the English, Reading and Writing teachers). During observations I was primarily a quiet observer, though at times I would engage with students during independent work when they requested help with particular aspects of English vocabulary and grammar. The degree of this participation depended on each teacher, as some (who knew of my own pedagogical background as an elementary school teacher) requested I help out actively in their classes when individual students had questions.

For writing and coding fieldnotes, I followed the practice guidelines set forth in Emerson et al's (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards. Notes were taken during interviews and observations. Notes taken during interviews were primarily focused upon themes as they became apparent (e.g. school socialization in previous schools in Mexico, traits of a “good student”), so that upon transcription I could know what themes to look for and highlight while re-reading interview transcripts. Notes taken during observations included both specific data and notation of themes. After periods of data collection, I would look over my notes from observations alongside highlighted interview transcripts, coding and pulling out common themes as they arose. This process was repeated several times throughout the data collection period, and the themes noted in each coding session were used to create the questions for further interviews. Due to this process, the last several series of interviews were focused primarily upon common themes that had become apparent and shown importance in earlier data sets, such as how students saw themselves transposing and applying the cultural capital they had previously acquired in their Mexican schools of origin to the context of Literacy High.

In order to make sure that I present these students' and teachers' experiences in a way that is true to their own voices, I have practiced a degree of collaborative ethnography as described by Lassiter (2005) in *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. The theoretical purpose of this type of ethnography is to “read alongside natives” rather than “read over [their] shoulders” (Lassiter, 2005, 5), allowing informants to have a say in how their voices are presented in the final product. In short, the spirit of collaborative ethnography is rooted in the practice of sharing findings with one's

informants while in the process of coding and writing, so that one can ensure that informants' comments and actions were correctly interpreted and receive further data relative to themes that informants note while reading the ethnographic text. To achieve this, I presented the first draft of this text to a number of my informants among the staff at Literacy High. In so doing, I asked for their feedback, both positive and negative. The feedback I received was understandably sparse, most likely due to the strenuous workload of educators, and positive.

I originally intended to allow students to preview the text as well, but could find no feasible way of doing so, due to the lack of English proficiency among my sample. Instead, I began discussing the themes I discovered in my data in my later interviews with student informants, asking for their corroboration of the accuracy of the themes I was noting. This collaborative discussion provided the springboard for very rich interviews that gave me much greater insight into the presence of and reasons for the themes I was noting in my data collection. Through these various forms of collaboration, I sought to allow my informants a chance to respond to my interpretation before the written project became published, so that both perspectives (mine as well as theirs) could be presented fully in the finished project (Lassiter, 2005, 8). Though it is always easy to note areas of potential improvement in this area, I felt satisfied with the degree of feedback provided by my informants in this process.

Despite the conscious effort made to become acquainted with my informants and have them open up to me, certain inevitable restrictions were present, most prominently my own national, racial and socioeconomic background. Despite my familiarity with Mexican immigrants and Mexican culture through my own academic and professional

experiences, there are inherent separations between myself and the students upon which this study is focused due to my own identity as a well-educated, upper-class white American male. This inevitably affected my own data collection abilities amongst an adolescent Mexican immigrant population. On the other hand, my own background as a public school educator in neighborhoods similar to that surrounding Literacy High afforded me a degree of commonality of experience with the educators interviewed in this study that opened doors to themes and patterns that might not have been easily noted otherwise.

Selection of Subject Population

Students were picked from Literacy High's 10th grade rolls. All Mexican 10th grade students were given a chance to participate. As stated, teachers of these students were also interviewed. 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. Also, this allowed for some direct comparison between the Mexican and American formal school systems. The study was also limited to the 10th grade because these students have been in the school long enough to allow some degree of longitudinal study of their scholastic performance and literacy growth.

Chapter Four: Findings

The study has found that, primarily, Mexican students at Literacy High are assisted in their coursework by their previously developed aspirational capital (i.e. their ability to maintain their hopes and dreams for a better future even when faced with real and perceived barriers), social capital (i.e. networks of support among other Spanish-speaking students at Literacy High) and navigational capital (i.e. their ability to maneuver through social institutions, in this case the educational system). Though all three of these characteristics are strongly present among Literacy High's Mexican immigrant population, my interviews and observations showed students' navigational capital to be of particular importance.

Primarily, the students I followed all developed strong notions in their Mexican schools of origin of how to “pay attention” and “be a good student”, behavioral modalities which were highly privileged by Mexican teachers and thus strongly incorporated by the students in this study in their efforts to be successful. These learned behaviors became a highly valuable form of navigational capital. After arriving in the United States, these students use these same behavioral modalities in Literacy High to establish themselves as “good students”, and are successful in doing so, as this same set of behavioral expectations is very present and privileged in Literacy High (as evidenced by observations in Literacy High classrooms and interviews with Literacy High teachers).

These characteristics (especially this form of navigational capital) help to enable these students to pass their classes both at Literacy High and the high schools they transfer to upon program completion, often with impressive grades. Due to their demonstrated navigational capital, most of the sampled students have very strong

relationships with International High teachers, and are respected by them for their academic achievements and aspirations. However, these achievements do not necessarily translate into complete English literacy, especially oral literacy.

In the following sections, I will discuss each of these findings in more detail. First, I will discuss the evidence I found of aspirational capital among the sampled students, followed by social capital. In greater detail, I will discuss the evidence I found of navigational capital among Literacy High's Mexican immigrant population, among both high-achieving and average students. Lastly, I will discuss the success these Mexican immigrant students have achieved through their use of their navigational/aspirational/social capital, as well as the ways in which Mexican immigrant students have not been as successful, primarily in their development of oral literacy.

Aspirational capital

Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) 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 (2006a, 176). I saw this very strongly in all of the 14 students I interviewed, 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 of the students I interviewed 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 I interviewed, this belief in the power of education to improve their life comes from repeated messages from their parents. As Dolores (1/29) states (as will be the format throughout the rest of this work, my interview questions are in italics, with Dolores' responses in plain text),

Mi mama me dijo que aquí podría tener una oportunidad para estudiar, tener un buen estudio, y para aprender el inglés. ... *La maior razón porque estás aquí es para estudiar?* Sim. *Estudio es muy importante para tus padres?* Sim, es muy importante para mi mama. Mi papa ya murió. *Porque estudio es tan importante para tu madre?* Porque ella sabía que yo podría tener una vida mejor con estudio, tener una carrera, y no sufría más para tener más cosas. Con una carrera, podría salir adelante, porque ella no estudió más que high school.

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 are a primary reason for her study efforts. This theme was present in all of my student 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 “*es parte de nuestra educación, que [mis padres] nos dan en casa. Nos dicen que quieren [educación] para nos, ya que ellos no pudieron [estudiar]*”/“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”

(Beatriz, 1/29).

One teacher, Mr. Robinson, saw his own experience reflected in the students. He was the first in his family to get an education, and he sees the same familial push and support he received in his Mexican immigrant students. As he states,

I'm from Louisiana, Creole area, well my mother spoke Creole, grandparents, everyone, they didn't want us to speak Creole but wanted us to speak English, so we could get a job. And I've heard that from the students too. For two thirds the main reason is their folks wanted them to learn, and there's at least some push. (Robinson, 2/24)

Whether in terms of grades or English acquisition, this familial “push” was undeniably present in the lives of the students I interviewed.

Some students took this familial importance placed on education and applied it to their own experience. Jorge, the only student who insisted on being interviewed in English (as a means of practicing his ability), 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 is not easy and that education could make the situation better. However, like several other students I interviewed, Jorge also has a part-time job, and is 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 its not hard to me but its hard because I work outside in the sun, and when the days are too hot, it's hot. (Jorge, 3/18)

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

Whatever their levels of thinking about future earning power, all sampled students feel a strong sense of familial obligation regarding education. One teacher notes that

Our Latin kids also have a strong sense of responsibility to family, so a lot of times with some of my reluctant kids in the past who spoke Spanish, it's easy to hold conversations with them about what they want to do in the future, how they want to help their family, repay someone that helped them get here, and also not throwing away the opportunity they have because they come from countries where a large amount of people want to leave and come here, so they can relate to that sense that "I'm lucky to be here," and sometimes that can help translate to take advantage of that, take risks with the language. (Walker, 3/3)

One student, Raymundo, was especially adamant and sincere in his desire to use his education to help his family. He lives here with his older brothers who are working, while his parents are still back in Mexico. He states (Raymundo, 3/8):

Después de terminar escuela, quiero trabajar. Mis hermanos quieren que tomo una carrera. Trabajar em un restaurante, ser bombero, ser mecánico, así. ... [Mis familiares] me dan muchos consejos. Estoy aqui em la escuela, haciendo o que ellos dicen, estoy estudiando para poder hacer algo por ellos, para ambos ayudaren. ... [Estoy estudiando] para apoiar mi família. Ellos quieren que yo sepa hablar inglés. Queiro apoiar los hermanos que no pueden. Mi educación es importante para mi, y mi família también. Porque todo que quiero es ayudar a ellos.

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 the students I interviewed.

To a certain degree, this level of aspirational capital may be due to the fact that the students I interviewed, as well as most Mexican immigrant students at Literacy High, were of a social level that had been able to achieve meritocratic success, thus facilitating their belief in the power of education. Beatriz (3/3), when asked where she really finalized her notion of what a “good student” is, replied

“Aquí. Aquí, yo vine a ver. Los que están allí [en mi rancho en México], no llegaron a terminar la secundaria. Nunca vi, antes de venir aquí, mexicanos tentando entrar en universidad.” / “Here. Here, I came to see [that]. Those that 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.”

Though my sample is understandably much too small to try to use as a representation of recent Mexican immigrants as a larger group in American society, I did note that above and beyond the students I interviewed, 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”. This lead me to wonder if part of the aspirational capital displayed by my interviewed students can 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 that are immigrating to the United States, thus making those that do

immigrate primarily a self-selecting swath of the Mexican middle class. Though such a claim is not tenable within the bounds of this study, it would be a fascinating topic for further study.

Social Capital

Another powerful resource for Mexican immigrant students at International High is the social capital they inherently hold as Latin American immigrants. Yosso (2006a) defines social capital in much the same way as Bourdieu, referring to “networks of people and community resources” (178). Many interviewed students noted the advantage they have over non-Spanish speaking immigrants at Literacy High, due to the large cultural and academic support network among their fellow Latinos. In any given Literacy High classroom, only a handful of students are from non-Spanish speaking areas (like Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia or the Middle East), and they all tend to sit together at one small table while other tables are dominated by Spanish-speaking Latinos (Dolores, 1/29; Beatriz, 1/29; Eva, 2/10). As a result, a low buzz of spoken Spanish is relatively constant throughout the many classes I observed, as students converse and help one another with assignments.

These common linguistic and cultural roots amongst Latin American immigrants at Literacy High provide students with an almost instantaneous social network upon their arrival in the school, as even without a working knowledge of English, they are able to function socially and academically with the help of their peers. Several students noted the increased comfort they initially felt among students that share their religion (Christian, primarily Catholic) and culture (Isabel, 1/27; Dolores, 1/29), and that with that they were able to accustom themselves to Literacy High more easily. This embedded

network is much less prominent for immigrants from other less-represented countries, like Thailand, Tanzania, or Iran.

There is a very strong linguistic element to the benefits of Mexican immigrants' social capital in Literacy High as well. As the vast majority of Literacy High's students are from Spanish-speaking countries, Mexican students that are struggling with English have access to an immediate help network in the form of their peers. I often saw students working together on assignments in various classes, explaining one element or another of the assignment to a fellow student in Spanish. As Eva (2/10) notes,

Si tú quieres hablar en inglés, puedes, pero todos de tus compañeros hablan español, entonces lo más normal es que hablas español. Nos dejan hablar en voz baja, pues muchos no entienden o que están pasando, y podemos pasar a los otros. Sería mejor que todos hablamos inglés, pero no sabemos, y ya sabemos español.

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 depend on this support to do well in their classes. Esteban (3/1) 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 and others admitted that many others students do the same. From my own observations, I would say that nearly all Mexican immigrant students depend on this linguistic support network to some degree, and without it many students would have a lot more difficulty in trying to “get by”. With regards to academics, these Mexican immigrant students' social capital would

almost seem to be another form of their navigational capital, as their linguistic network assists them greatly in navigating the academic terrain of Literacy High.

Navigational Capital

This leads to what I found to be the primary source of Mexican immigrant students' academic success at Literacy High: their navigational capital. Yosso (2006a) defines navigational capital as one's ability to maneuver through social institutions, in this case the educational system (178). Among the students interviewed and classrooms observed during the course of this study, students broke down into two primary groups in terms of how they use their navigational capital. Firstly, there are those who simply strive to "get by", seeing high school as an important means of earning more once they graduate but having little aspiration to go on to higher education and thus little interest in getting high grades. Secondly, there are those who look forward to community college or university and strive to do their best to be a "good student".

Just Trying to "Get By"

One morning I was in a humanities classroom, observing students as they worked on an independent writing assignment. Teresa, a Mexican student I was shadowing, was sitting with two other girls from Mexico. While she was working, one of the other girls leaned over to ask Teresa a question, and I saw Teresa write something on the girl's paper. When I asked her afterwards what she had written, she said that she had written a word or two that the girl didn't know. I asked her if this was very common, and she said that it wasn't everyday, but that everyone does it once in a while (Teresa, 3/10). Raymundo (3/8) also noted the commonality of helping others and copying, saying that students did it "*porque quieren tener la respuesta correcta, para que saquen 100*" / "so that they can

get the right answer, so they can get 100”.

Though not many others cited copying or cheating specifically, many students made it clear that they saw high school as a means to an end, and simply wanted to “get by”. Teresa noted that “*hay pocos que quieren aprender—la mayoría quieren sólo pasar de año*” / “Few really want to learn, most just want to pass” (3/10). When I asked Hector if he thought it more important to learn the material or pass, he said pass (3/1).

Several students said that they didn't see a need beyond doing the minimum required to pass, which with the help of the linguistic network mentioned earlier, is not especially difficult. Mercedes (3/3), sharing feelings I noted among several students, stated openly,

No me esfuerzo tanto—entrego mis trabajos, si trabajar tanto puedo hacer más, pero no hago. 70, ya está bien. Puedo trabajar más para sacar más que 70, pero no hago. ... No quiero estudiar más que high school. ... Queiro passar, nada más. ... *Hay otros así?* La mayoría. No vamos poder estudiar en universidad. ... Muchas personas a veces no pasan, y soy una de estas personas, que para nos no importa tanto.

I don't work too hard—I turn in my work, I know if I worked more I could do more, but I don't. 70, that's good enough. I could work more to get higher than a 70, but I don't. ... I don't want to study past high school. ... I want to pass, nothing more. ... *Are there others like this?* The majority. We won't be able to go to university. ... Many people don't pass at times, and I'm one of these people. For us, it doesn't matter too much.

Though Mercedes' lack of enthusiasm about college wasn't universal among the students I interviewed, the sense that one could “get by” without working too hard was definitely present. For all of the students interviewed, their shared social capital and their previous

academic experience was enough to get the grades and results they wanted, whatever those individually might be.

Teachers as well as students were able to note the ability of students to just “get by” without learning much content and without gaining much oral English ability, if that were their goal. When I shared some of the aforementioned student sentiments with one teacher, he said

I can totally see that, I can see how they could feel that way because certainly even in my classroom which there's a lot of class discussion and small group work, there's a lot of necessary oral communication, but you'll see the Spanish speakers all clump together and do their work in Spanish, and then the product will be in English. ... I see it in other classes, that they don't need to, that they'll just sit quietly and let other people do the speaking for them. (Nelson, 2/2)

Though this ability of students to “get by” may sound familiar to many teachers, and may seem to cast aspersions on the students doing so, it is important to note that even “getting by” took a great amount of resources at Literacy High. The only reason Mexican immigrant students were able to “get by” is due to their parental support (i.e. aspirational capital), linguistic network (i.e. social capital), and previous experience with schooling in Mexico (i.e. navigational capital).

Although they are not the focus of this study, I could not help but note the much harder time many South Asian and Sub-Saharan African students experienced in Literacy High's curriculum, having the same minimal English skills as Mexican or other Latin American immigrants, and often the same aspirational capital or familial support network, but lacking the same linguistic support network and often the previous academic experience or navigational capital held by the students I interviewed.

Some may see these Mexican immigrants students “just getting by” in this context

as lacking in desire or lazy, but in truth only their rather incredible skill set and level of resilience kept them performing at this level, as can be seen when one compares them to other struggling ethnic groups of students in the same context. As evidence of this, even when discussing students like Mercedes who were struggling academically or “just getting by” within my sample group, all the teachers I interviewed would note the work ethic and level of determination such students demonstrated to achieve even the seemingly average grades they received (Hall, 2/24; Robinson, 2/24; Walker, 3/3; Wright, 2/22; Allen, 2/23).

Striving to Be a “Good Student”

Even among those students who admitted to not always trying their hardest or doing their best, all students in my sample had a similar vision of what it meant to be a “good student”, and all to some degree strove to be such. To all interviewed, being a “good student” meant doing your work, following the rules, being quiet and *bien educado* (i.e. polite), and above all, paying attention. To a surprising degree, these themes were present in the comments of all of my student (and most of my teacher) interviewees on the qualities of a good student.

In other words, the dominant discourse of being a “good student” at Literacy High is typified by attentiveness and good manners. Interestingly, having good grades or understanding well weren't dominant themes associated with being a “good student”, and the majority of the success experienced by the students I interviewed was due to their ability to embody politeness and attentiveness in the classroom.

This focus on politeness and good manners is reflected in some comments made by Dolores (1/29) when I asked her about what differentiates the “best students”. The

first thing she mentioned was that “*A veces tenemos diferente educación*” / “Sometimes we have different ways that we were brought up” . When I asked her to clarify, she said that “*algunos respetan*”, or that some are respectful, while others aren't. The privileged status of politeness was also recognizably present in my interviews with teachers. When I asked one teacher to tell me about the positive qualities of the students I was interviewing, the adjectives he used followed a consistent line of thought: “She's respectful”, “when you begin to give instruction they're listening”, “I can tell when I'm giving instructions that she's listening, paying attention, and she tries to do what I ask her to do” (Robinson, 2/24). Though some students were also described as “dedicated” and “hardworking”, politeness and attentiveness were the most commonly identified positive traits.

Even more so than politeness, all students were quick to note the supreme importance of “ponendo atención”, or paying attention. When I asked for an explanation of what that meant, students gave very consistent responses:

O que significa poner atención?

Beatriz (3/3): Quando él habla, no distraerme.

Dolores (3/1): [Mirar] el maestro quando él está hablando, explicando un trabajo.

Esteban (3/1): Estar concentrado, no estar haciendo otra cosa mientras. [Tus ojos están para] el maestro. Mirando siempre el maestro, ponendo atención.

Mercedes (3/3): Quando él está hablando, respetarlo. No hablar, nada.

... Mirar quando está hablando, no

hablar con otros compañeros, mirar para ella, como está hablando y explicando.

What does “paying attention” mean?

Beatriz (3/3): When he's talking, not getting distracted.

Dolores (3/1): Look at the teacher when he's talking, explaining an assignment.

Esteban (3/1): Concentrate, don't do anything eles. [Your eyes are on] the teacher. Looking always at the teacher, paying attention.

Mercedes (3/3): When he's talking,

respect him. Don't talk or do anything.
... Look when he's talking, don't talk to

your buddies, look at her, when she's
talking and explaining.

When visiting classrooms, I saw this attentiveness in action. One teacher reinforced this behavior by constantly repeating “I need your eyes” as a means of getting students' attention. Those students who wanted to do well or give a good impression would consistently sit quietly and look at the teacher throughout the entire lesson.

Perhaps most importantly, all students I interviewed saw the act of paying attention as not only good manners, but the key to performing well in class. Almost all students I interviewed felt a very strong sense of personal accountability to pay attention as a means of showing their understanding. As Dolores (3/1) notes, “*No importa si está bien hecho para ellos, pues ellos pueden ver si tanto tú sabes, si pusiste atención*” / “It doesn't matter if your work is very well done to them, as they can see if you know the material, if you've paid attention”. Paying attention here is clearly identified as the means to understanding, and, it would seem, the desired end result. High quality work is less important than proving that you paid attention and understood.

Interestingly, several students noted that being a “good student” in this sense is not necessarily a matter of intelligence as much as practice. When I asked Teresa if being intelligent and being a good student were the same thing, she replied (3/10),

No, porque ser inteligente es saber hacer muchas cosas—ser bueno es como estar callado, hacer tu trabajo. ... Así, si eres buena em la clase, y pones atención, no necesitas ser inteligente. Una persona inteligente sabe muchas cosas. No es

necesario ser inteligente para ser bueno em la classe. Puede ser bueno se pones atención y haces tu trabajo bien o pides una explicación.

No, because being intelligent is knowing how to do a lot of things—being good is

being quiet, doing your work. ... You see, if you're good in class, and pay attention, you don't need to be intelligent. An intelligent person knows a lot of things. It's not necessary to be intelligent to be good in a class. You can be good if you pay attention and do your work well or ask for an explanation. In this discourse, doing well in school is not a matter of intelligence as much as a matter of willingness to embody the characteristics of a "good student".

"Aprendi en México" / "I Learned in Mexico"

When I asked where students learned these principles about the importance of attentiveness, politeness and hard work to be a "good student", most students had trouble discerning an origin point. For many, it felt like common knowledge, or something they had always known. When I began to ask students about their education in Mexico, however, the origin point become much more clear.

Teresa told me that on the first day of class in Mexico, her teachers would be very explicit about what was expected in terms of behavior. When I asked others what was expected in Mexican classrooms, some familiar themes arose: pay attention, respect those around you, follow the rules (Raymundo, 3/29; Dolores, 3/29). These patterns had been reinforced since the beginning of their formal academic careers.

Though these behavioral modalities became the focus of this study, they were not the sole form of navigational capital (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) acquired by the 14 Mexican students in this study in their schools of origin. Above and beyond learning the behavioral modalities of being a "good student", students also brought with them specific learning techniques and study skills which they've been able to reapply at Literacy High. Mr. Nelson (3/22) notes that

The students from Literacy High, they come with knowledge from their

home schools and home country that help them succeed in our classes. Things like finding the main idea, that's the same no matter what language it's in, and Literacy High students often look right at the first sentence, like they're supposed to, and are already whipping out their translators to find out what it means while the normal [American] students are still getting out their highlighters.

Ms. Hall (2/24) similar notes that

The first week I know who comes from a good school, or who came from a little town or no school at all. ... They come in with skills, they have to answer the problem, or understand the problem, in Math there are a lot of abstract things but even the simple tasks a student who is well educated will know what to do.

These basic skills, necessary to function in a formal school setting, form an important part of the navigational capital my sampled students were able to use to achieve academic success.

Perhaps most pertinent to their learned behaviors relative to what it means to be a “good student”, the sampled students also learned to be academically self-sufficient in Mexico, due to the rather distant tone many teachers took towards student learning.

When I asked Mercedes and Hector why they were relatively quiet in their Literacy High classes, they responded citing experiences in Mexican schools in which their requests for help went unanswered (Mercedes, 3/3; Hector, 3/1). Both of these students, after several experiences in Mexico of being rebuffed when asking for help, stopping asking, and unconsciously continued the same behavior upon transitioning into Literacy High.

Beatriz (3/24) made explicit note of this when describing the efforts of her current teachers at Literacy High to help struggling students: *“Usan un poco más estrategias aquí si no entiendes, y en México, ellos explican, y si no entiendes, dicen, 'Bueno, expliqué, si no entiendes no hago caso de eso, no me interese”* / “They use different strategies here if

you don't understand. In Mexico, they explain, and if you don't understand, they say, 'Well, I explained it, if you didn't understand that's not my problem, I don't care'".

Impact on Achievement

The impact of Mexican students' navigational, social, and aspirational capital was quite clear when I met with Literacy High teachers and discussed individual students. Nearly all of the students I shadowed were passing all of their classes, and many of them were passing with all 90s and 100s. Teachers also noted these students' good writing skills, relative to other students. As I informally looked over writing samples shown to me by one teacher, I also anecdotally noted the competence in writing held by most of the students I shadowed. The sampled students' community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) was obviously translating into strong academic success.

However, one skill which almost all students recognized as lacking in themselves was oral fluency in English (e.g. Eva, 2/10; Mercedes, 3/3; Beatriz, 1/29). Teachers (e.g. Nelson, 3/22) recognized this as well, describing several students as being very good at translating their thoughts into English on paper, finding quick cognates and synonyms, while struggling to communicate orally in English. I noted this myself, as only one of 14 interviewees was comfortable being interviewed in English.

When asked, students cited several reasons for this lack of oral fluency. First and foremost, students felt a social pressure from other Spanish speakers to not speak English in class. Many, especially girls, said they were ashamed to try to speak in English, since others would laugh and make fun of them (Teresa, 3/10; Beatriz, 1/29; Dolores, 1/29; Mercedes, 2/3; Isabel, 1/27; Josefina, 1/27; Hall, 2/24; Adams, 3/10).

Other students were self-conscious about making mistakes (Beatriz, 1/29;

Dolores, 1/29). Jorge, the one student who wanted to be interviewed in English, was always very open in trying out new phrases in class, and always spoke English with the teacher. However, in my observations I often noted others making fun of him for doing so. When I asked Jorge why he felt comfortable speaking so much in English even when others made fun of him, he said that he was content to just ignore it (Jorge, 3/8).

Robinson (3/10) and other teachers speculated that his lack of self-consciousness is likely due to his popularity and self-confidence, qualities many of my other interviewees lack.

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 amongst themselves. In the words of several students, “*En clase, exigen que hablan inglés, pero no hablan*” / “In class, they ask you to speak English, but no one does” (Beatriz, 1/29; see also Dolores, 1/29). Several teachers noted the commonality of students speaking Spanish in class, but said it's hard to avoid given the large numbers of Spanish speakers (Robinson, 2/24). Also, another teacher noted that it's hard to persuade a child of the importance of speaking English when they are able to do everything they need to do within their own community without it (Walker, 3/3). Speaking in terms of navigational capital, both students and teachers were able to see that speaking English was not something students needed to do to “get by”—so, with the exception of several students (particularly Jorge and Isabel) who truly desired to practice their English literacy, most were content not to do so.

One staff member stated that she felt oral fluency was lacking because teachers had no structural motive to push it (Allen, 3/23). Since teachers do not grade students on speaking, and are not required to do so, oral fluency loses out to items that are

structurally graded and assessed, like writing samples and state tests. One administrator summed up the school's philosophy succinctly in stating that the school is focused on children passing written English tests, with the expectation that oral fluency will eventually come alongside the development of academic language (Carter, 3/3).

In summary, these students' navigational, aspirational and social capital have helped them greatly to adapt to Literacy High and meet its academic expectations. That pattern is reflected in their high grades and competent writing abilities. However, oral fluency is lacking, primarily because it is not required or given prominence at a structural level by the school. Since the school does not put an emphasis on it, these students with their strong abilities to discern and deliver what is required (due to their navigational capital) do not develop this ability, since it is not required.

“I Wasn't Paying Attention”: Students Blaming Themselves

Overall, as has been shown, these students' behavioral training in “paying attention” helps them to gain a good reputation with teachers and thus improve their school standing and their grades. However, this behavior, which primarily is a strong source of navigational capital, also often impedes these 14 students from reaching true understanding of the material.

The opening anecdote in this paper is a strong example of this phenomenon. In it, Dolores was confused when asked to produce her two-column journal entry, and didn't know what to do. Knowing Dolores' lack of English fluency, this is likely due to her not having understood the instructions, particularly since I noted her paying close attention to the teacher throughout the entire lesson. When I asked her later why she didn't ask for help, she responded (3/1), *“A veces la Miss nos explica bien, pero no sé si es porque no*

ponía atención” / “At times the Miss explains things to us well, but I don't know if [I didn't understand] because I didn't pay attention.”

This sentiment was repeated to me by many, many students—when explaining that good students “pay attention”, many would quickly note that they often feel guilty of not doing so (Beatriz, 1/29; Teresa, 3/31; Hector, 3/1; Raymundo, 3/8; Esteban, 3/1; Mercedes, 3/3; Jorge, 3/24; Eva, 2/10). When I asked Beatriz (1/29) if she considered herself a good student, she responded that

Me considero entre los más o menos.
Me gusta participar y todo. Hay muchas competencias aquí, a veces no salgo muy bien, a veces no me concentro. ... A veces cuando están hablando, no pongo mucho atención.

I consider myself in the middle. I like to participate and all. There are a lot of subjects here, and at times I don't do well, at times I don't concentrate. ... At times when they're talking, I don't pay much attention.

As would be expected of any student, in my observations I would at times see the students I shadowed not paying attention. However, these continual assertions of personal responsibility began to bother me when students would say such things after I had observed them paying the closest attention possible to the teacher's explanation. Even in these circumstances, if a student didn't do well, they would often take personal responsibility, assuming they hadn't paid enough attention. Hector (3/1) sums up this assumption of causality nicely, when I asked him what it meant to pay attention, and he responded, “*Si hago un trabajo bien, sí [puse atención]. Si no, no.*” / “If I do well, then yes [I paid attention]. If not, I didn't.” In Hector's eyes, you can know if you paid attention if you did well or not. If you didn't, you must not have paid enough attention.

Raymundo's (3/8) response was similar: “*Si no sabes, no ponías atención*” / “If you don't know, you didn't pay attention.”

To many students, the notion of paying attention seemed to have become a catch-all explanation for lack of academic success. When I asked Esteban if he considered himself a good student, he was quick to say no. When I asked him what was lacking, his answer was just as quick: “*Poner más atención*” / “Pay more attention” (3/1).

Some students did seem to see that language might be playing a role in their lack of understanding. However, even recognizing the role of language, they would often still take personal responsibility for not understanding. In one interview, Jorge (3/24) noted that “I think it's the languages sometimes, but sometimes I don't pay attention. If I don't understand what she's saying, I don't do anything.”

Here Jorge encapsulates the dilemma: even paying attention, he sometimes won't understand what a teacher is asking, due to language difficulties. However, because he does not want to harm his reputation as a “good student” by implying he was not paying attention, he doesn't ask for help. In my observations, I saw this pattern repeat itself numerous times, and it seems to be the primary caveat to the success of these 14 sampled students in their use of their navigational capital. Ironically, there are occasions when despite their best intentions and efforts to pay attention, these students have encountered material they haven't understood, but have been hesitant to ask for help for fear of seeming to have not paid attention.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Theoretical Discussion

The increasingly large role of *educación* and being *bien educado* on Mexican immigrant students' academic performance has been noted by previous scholars, most notably Reese et al (1995). To Mexican families, *educación* is not only a term for academic learning, but moral learning as well, and Mexican parents have been found to take their responsibility to instill such moral values in their children very seriously (Reese et al, 1995; Lopez et al, 2001).

Reese et al (1995), in their study involving Latino families with children in first and second grade, find the principle of *educación* to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the academic progress of such families' children (73). As noted throughout my findings, this principle has had a strong positive influence on the academic performance of the students in my sample, as well. However, at the high school level, in a new American school setting like Literacy High, I found that the immigrant students in my sample were to an extent disadvantaged by their personal emphasis on acting *bien educado* in a classroom setting.

This disadvantage mirrors somewhat the disadvantage Lareau (2003) identifies in American students from lower social classes. In studying middle-class families, Lareau (2003) sees parents engaging in what she terms “concerted cultivation” with their children, or the conscious effort to promoting questioning among one's children and address them as relative equals in conversation. This “concerted cultivation” promotes critical thinking amongst middle-class children, which benefits them in their academic work. Also, this adult treatment gives middle-class children a sense of entitlement that

facilitates a higher level of comfort in a school environment. On the other hand, poor American families are most often focused upon the provision of basic support such as comfort, food and shelter to their children, and thus become out of synch in their child-rearing logic relative to the institutional standards found in schools.

Ironically, the middle-class Mexican immigrant students in my sample, in adopting the principles of good manners and *educación* instilled valued in the Mexican formal education system, have placed themselves in a similar state of disadvantage relative to the cultural capital of “concerted cultivation” which is valued in American schools. Taking responsibility for one's own lack of understanding and prioritizing one's status as a “good student” that “pays attention” are all behaviors which were privileged in the Mexican formal school system, and thus translated into academic success for the students in my sample while in Mexico. As most of the students in my sample self-identify as middle class, they are accustomed to being the students who “fit” the cultural capital expected in their schools. To an extent, their cultural capital is translating into success in the context of Literacy High, a small-school environment that has prioritized the creation of community and familial support for students among its faculty. However laudable Literacy High's efforts to create this supportive community have been, these students will likely experience difficulty in acculturating to their neighborhood schools upon transitioning out of Literacy High's program, where they will be more vigorously expected to display the white, middle-class cultural capital of “concerted cultivation” prized by the American school system as a whole. If the students in my sample continue to feel afraid to ask questions when they do not understand, prioritizing “paying attention” over true understanding, they will only fall further and further behind in a

school whose teachers expect students to question and think critically.

However, though the students in my sample do not necessarily display the white middle-class cultural capital prized by American schools on the whole, the data has shown that they do exhibit strong forms of what Yosso (2006a, 2006b, 2007) would term aspirational and navigational capital. The aspirational capital evident in these students reflects the instilled ethic of hard work and educational aspirations identified previously by Lopez et al (2001) and Lopez (2001), and has been a potent source of academic success for the students in this sample.

Policy Discussion

These findings have interesting potential policy implications. The sampled students have a strong skill set of positive learned behaviors that has allowed them to perform well academically at Literacy High, as well as a strong linguistic and social support network among their fellow Spanish-speaking peers. They also have a strong sense of intrinsic and familial motivation to do well within an academic context. How can educators take the greatest advantage of Mexican immigrant students' aspirational, social and navigational capital? How can the learned behaviors of how to “pay attention” and be a “good student” be best capitalized upon so as to produce not only high grades but English literacy acquisition? Would structural changes to the formal school setting of Literacy High, or a change in instructional setting altogether, better facilitate acquisition of literacy and American academic cultural capital (Lareau, 2003; Lightfoot, 1978)?

The following section will look at each of these questions in greater detail. The level of discussion undertaken here is still quite introductory; further study is needed on each of these aspects of Mexican immigrant student literacy acquisition in both formal and informal/nonprofit settings.

Taking Advantage of Existent Aspirational Capital

In general, Literacy High does quite well in taking advantage of its Mexican students' latent aspirational capital, or desire and push to continue working and studying despite obstacles. As mentioned earlier, most of this drive comes from familial pressure, and as noted in the Findings section, teachers often remind students of their parents' expectations as a motivational tool.

Another reason the sampled Mexican students were able to maintain their

aspirational capital is because of the familiarity and relevance of the curriculum at Literacy High, which is quite similar to that in formal schools in Mexico. Upon their entrance as freshmen at Literacy High, Mexican immigrant students encounter a curricular format, daily schedule, and learning environment that largely resembles their previous school settings in Mexico, and as such they are able to feel somewhat confident that their skill set will continue serve them well. This is reinforced when their grades in the new setting are relatively high, which was true for all 14 sampled students. This positive reinforcement keeps their personal drive to succeed, or personal aspirational capital, from lagging.

The same is unfortunately often not true in many other ESL settings serving Mexican immigrant students, both adolescent and adult. Schalge and Soga (2008), in their study of ESL classes at the Roosevelt Community Center in southern Minnesota, saw a great degree of absenteeism and a lack of retention among migrant students (151-152). Other studies (Kerka, 1995; Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994) have asserted that absenteeism is the biggest difficulty facing adult ESL programs today. In the case of Schalge and Soga (2008), ethnographic data suggested that learners' dissatisfaction with the program primarily came from anxiety about the seeming arbitrariness of the program's learning goals, and a lack of ownership in their learning process. Many of these learners came to the program with a strong sense of self-directedness and strong opinions about what they desired to get out of their courses—or in other words, a strong reserve of aspirational capital. When these personal needs were not met, students felt frustrated and bored and eventually stopped coming (Schalge and Soga, 2008, 153).

Literacy High avoids this pitfall by placing new Mexican immigrant students in a

learning environment which resembles their previous experience and which rewards their particular forms of navigational capital. By so doing, Literacy High is able to capitalize on Mexican immigrant students' aspirational capital, rather than squander it.

Taking Advantage of Existent Social Capital

Students at Literacy High have taken advantage of their linguistic social network among Spanish speakers to help them understand classroom instructions and complete assignments. This social network provides Mexican immigrant students and other Spanish speakers with a built-in tutoring system that includes all other Spanish speakers in the room. In a region with a preponderance of Spanish speakers like Central Texas, this social capital is a powerful source of scaffolding for introductory English language learners from Spanish-speaking countries.

However, as noted in the Findings section, this inherent social network also has kept the 14 students in this sample from pushing themselves more in their development of oral literacy in English. In the case of Literacy High, whose mission is in part to provide an ideal environment for promoting English literacy, this linguistic social network has proven both a blessing and a curse.

Some nonprofit programs have capitalized on such shared cultural and linguistic networks by grouping ESL learners according to their cultural background. Success in such programs has been possible even when the instructors involved are relatively untrained community volunteers. In Modiano's study (1968) of Spanish literacy acquisition among Mexican indigenous people, learners taught by indigenous members of their own community with little training learned to read in both their indigenous language and Spanish better than those taught by "outsider" Spanish-speaking instructors (cited in

Bradley, 1998, 52).

When ESL or literacy teachers are members of the same cultural community as their students, they share a cultural and linguistic background that allows them to draw on culturally familiar discourse forms. As Bradley (1998) states, “people from learners’ communities are in a unique position to elicit and facilitate learning around the learners’ life experiences because they have shared experiences and can understand them” (53-54). Thonis (1990) also notes that teachers of ESL students should be understanding of students’ realities and know the history and heritage of the community in which they work. Such understanding is maximized when the instructors themselves come from that community.

Hornberger and Hardman (1994) studied the teaching practices in a Puerto Rican GED class. In this class, Puerto Rican cultural elements and institutions were used as the basis for all instruction. This was made possible by the shared cultural background of both students and teachers. This approach not only made the instruction more pertinent to the learners, but it legitimized their Puerto Rican identity in an institutional educational context. Such a legitimization of Mexican immigrant identity would likewise be a powerful source of positive reinforcement for the students I interviewed at Literacy High, were they to be taught by Mexican immigrant or Mexican-American instructors. As stated by Bradley (1998), this shared cultural background between teachers and students is critical for literacy acquisition, whether in a first or second language context (54).

This type of shared cultural setting would likely prove more difficult in a public school setting like Literacy High. Public schools typically have non-discrimination clauses in their hiring practices that prevent them from purposefully seeking out teachers

from particular backgrounds. Also, creating a school for students from a particular country or language network is typically a long and onerous process within the public school system, and only possible in areas where an ethnic or cultural group is large enough to make such an idea feasible. Though Central Texas is such an area for Spanish-speaking immigrant students, such a setting would still most likely only be feasible in a charter school, nonprofit program or other private setting in which greater independence and flexibility in both student and teacher recruitment is possible.

Taking Advantage of Existent Navigational Capital

The sampled Mexican immigrant students are already quite successful in using their previously acquired navigational capital to succeed academically at Literacy High, as evidenced by their passing grades and reputations as “good students” among the faculty. However, as has been noted, this ability to act as a polite “good student” has some negative ramifications, as students are often unwilling to ask questions for fear of seeming to have not “paid attention”. Some structural change must be undergone to prevent this occurrence, as otherwise many “good students” will progress in their classes without having retained the information being taught, and without developing their English literacy skills fully. Once students transition to their neighborhood schools where questioning and critical thinking are expected (Lareau, 2003), the learned behaviors of being a “good student” will not be enough to sustain continued academic achievement.

One form of literacy instruction which has been found to promote participation and capitalize even more fully upon learners' already existent skill set is Paulo Freire's (1985, 1993) system of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is an empowerment-based

literacy teaching model that pushes both students and teachers to question any and all oppressive or unequal conditions in which they find themselves, whether they are based on race, sex, class, or any other form of discrimination (Chung, 2006, 8-9). Critical pedagogy pushes teachers to “strive to develop a pedagogy equipped to provide both intellectual and moral resistance to oppression, one that extends the concept of pedagogy beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and skills and the concept of morality beyond interpersonal relations” (McLaren, 1994, 30).

Literacy instruction in Freire’s model is built on a student-generated system, in which students chose what words or groups of words they would learn, thus giving the written word a stronger sense of relevance and reality in their daily lives (Spener, 1993). Thus, as opposed to a strict curriculum based on a “banking education” system in which students are seen as “empty vessels” to be filled with the literacy content chosen by their instructors or curriculum developers (Freire, 1985, 1993, quoted in Chung, 2006, 9), students were able to direct their own learning so as to gain the literacy skills most pertinent to and needed in their own cultural and professional context. Using democracy as not only an ideological framework but as an educational method (O’Cadiz et al., 1998, 246), literacy curricula becomes intensely more meaningful in the lives of students.

Paulo Freire’s explicit purpose in creating this system was to not just make learning meaningful, but to foster pride and self-respect among students, providing them with a means of struggle and power (O’Cadiz et al., 1998, 21). Literacy learning can be a powerful force in this sense because, as Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) point out, “language and reality are dynamically interconnected” (29). When literacy curricula have no visible tie to the reality of the students, it loses its pertinence and, to a large

degree, its meaning. When there is a clear tie, literacy curricula can be a powerful means of enacting social change.

Numerous literacy programs have used this system and gotten successful results (e.g. Ferguson, 1998; Auerbach, 1996). The difficulty in implementing such a system in a setting like Literacy High is primarily curricular—American public schools, especially since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act, have very regimented and strict curricular guidelines, within which a Freirian framework would likely prove impossible.

Formal School Settings vs. Nonprofit Settings

The primary settings seen so far in this discussion are formal school settings (such as Literacy High) and nonprofit ESL settings. Literacy High has been able to positively make use of students' aspirational, social and navigational capital. However, it has also not been able to overcome several difficulties (primarily the promotion of student oral participation in English) which the nonprofit programs cited have been able to overcome. The primary ways in which these nonprofit programs have overcome this difficulty is through the use of instructors from the same cultural background as students and the use of a participatory Freirian curricular framework. To achieve these characteristics, the successful nonprofit programs cited have required a relative degree of organizational or programmatic independence.

One question, then, is how this relative independence can be guaranteed, in both formal and nonprofit settings. As evidenced by Ferguson (1998) and Auerbach (1996), the nonprofit sector can effectively incorporate the Freirian curricular base and community instructor workforce necessary to effectively facilitate ESL instruction. However, as Bradley (1998), Schalge and Soga (2008), Kerka (1995), Tracy-Mumford &

Baker (1994) and Buttaro (2004) demonstrate, the nonprofit sector can also encounter structural or internal difficulties impeding the incorporation of such principles. Though theorists have attested that civil society organizations are able to provide services in a way that is independent of private market forces and government restrictions (Enjolras, 2009, 766), the real ability of nonprofits to be independent and innovative is not so simple. Nonprofits are still subject to the whims of funding sources, whether those are state-based or private. The ability to practice innovative Freirian pedagogy will depend on the willingness of funding resources to support such work.

On the other hand, autonomy in program development does not always lead to implementation of effective teaching methods. When literacy-focused nonprofits are able to exercise relative independence, not all will choose to use those practices that are most effective. So long as donors support their work, such nonprofits could continue using mediocre practices without any drive to improve.

In the formal education sector, there have been instances in which such autonomy can be found, such as during Paulo Freire's tenure as the secretary of education for the municipality of São Paulo, Brazil in the early 1990s (O'Cadiz et al., 1998). During his tenure, Freire incorporated his own pedagogical techniques into the formal municipal education system. Under his supervision, schools became focused on local community empowerment.

Formal schools incorporated Freire's critical pedagogical framework in their teaching of school-age children, and an additional government program was begun to teach adult literacy courses (O'Cadiz et al., 1998, 21-22). The purpose of this revised system was to help students (both children and adults) become "protagonists of their own

history” (O’Cadiz et al., 1998, 22). This system achieved true systemic change, as student retention rates rose throughout the municipality and the best teachers were effectively recruited into the hardest schools (O’Cadiz et al., 234-235). Freire’s tenure proved that the innovation typically associated with NGOs and civil society can effectively be incorporated into public policy in governmental education systems.

The question is, can such independence be achieved within the American formal school systems, given the strict curricular guidelines now in place? The only setting in which such a curricular format seems possible is within a charter school setting. For Literacy High to receive the curricular independence needed to truly focus upon oral as well as written literacy without the constraints of a typical high school curriculum, it would have to seek a charter as a 4-year charter school. However, as noted in my discussion with one administrative official, full oral and written literacy are not the primary goal of Literacy High. Literacy High is more focused upon granting new immigrant students the skills necessary to survive and function in a typical American high school upon completion of their freshman and sophomore years within Literacy High's program. Given this focus, Literacy High is achieving a degree of success. However, as described in the work of scholars like Lareau (2003), there are elements of American academic cultural capital which are not yet being gained by Literacy High's Mexican immigrant students, particularly the questioning, reflective attitude towards learning which is expected in middle-class American schools. If a group of educators were to want to create a setting in which newly arrived immigrant students are able to develop full oral and written literacy, as well as the critical thinking skills expected by middle-class American schools, such a school would need to have structural guidelines in

place which require the development of and use of such skills. Such structural guidelines may not be possible under the current curricular restrictions experienced by American public schools, and if so, a charter school or nonprofit setting would be preferable.

Conclusion

In summary, the sampled students' possess a great deal of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007), primarily imbued by their parents and family, which drives them to seek success. This aspirational capital is a powerful resource that could be more fully tapped by Literacy High staff. Internally motivated students such as those in this sample rise to their educators' expectations; if speaking in English and critical questioning in class were required, the sampled students would likely rise to the occasion and develop these needed skills.

The sampled students have also developed strong learned behaviors of how to “pay attention” and be a “good student.” These skills have granted them a great deal of navigational capital (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) within Literacy High, allowing them to progress well through the academic program with decent grades and positive teacher recommendations. However, this same navigational capital ironically occasionally keeps a student from asking the questions and starting the conversations that would lead him to complete understanding or a greater degree of oral literacy.

Despite this negative effect, the results of this study are far from bleak. This lack of oral ability and occasional unwillingness to ask questions are a part of the picture at Literacy High, but far from the complete picture. Indeed, to focus exclusively on these negative aspects would only continue the academic discussion of deficit thinking about immigrant students which this study positioned itself in the introduction as attempting to refute.

The success these 14 Mexican immigrant students have found at Literacy High, despite the gigantic structural difficulties they face upon entering a completely new and

foreign academic environment, is a tribute to their resilience and the power of their community cultural wealth (as evidenced by their specific forms of aspirational, social and navigational capital) (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). Additionally, as stated by the aforementioned Literacy High administrator, oral literacy is not currently a requirement or necessary focus of Literacy High's program, and thus these students' lack of oral literacy may not be seen as overly problematic, given their other manifestations of success.

However, if oral literacy were to become a goal of Literacy High, these data have shown that without structural changes to the school's curriculum or instructional requirements, oral literacy will not happen except among the few students that are intrinsically motivated to develop it, like Jorge. For oral literacy to be developed, it must become a required portion of the school's academic programs, one which teachers are required to teach and are held accountable for teaching. Without such structural incentives, oral literacy will continue to fall by the wayside. As debated in the discussion section, such structural changes may not be feasible in a public school setting, and a charter or nonprofit setting would thus be preferable.

Similarly, some structural change is needed to correct student hesitancy in asking questions for fear of seeming to have not “paid attention”. This study has shown that the self-consciousness students feel regarding their status as a “good student” is potent and powerful, and unless educators take the time to confirm that they are understanding, many well-meaning and motivated students will fly under the radar without having truly retained the material being taught. In typical American schools where a middle-class familial ethic of “concerted cultivation” of critical thinking and questioning is prized

(Lareau, 2003), these students will find themselves falling further and further behind as unknowing educators equate their polite silence and lack of questioning with understanding.

Overall, this study contains very hopeful information for those who work with Mexican immigrant populations. These 14 students were found to have a great deal of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) that assists them in finding true academic success in the context of Literacy High. It also contains a few warnings as to how that community cultural wealth could manifest itself negatively, unless structural regulations are put in place to prevent such. My hope is that as a result of this work, more educators may notice Mexican immigrant students striving their hardest to pay attention, and ask the questions and take the instructional steps necessary to make sure that such students are truly understanding behind their well-meaning masks of attentiveness.

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