Coming of Age and Becoming American: Adolescents Learning English and the Rules of Citizenship

by

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Abstract

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This study follows the social and academic development of first and second generation immigrant students in a public middle school in an urban area of California over the course of their seventh grade year. Using an ethnographic approach, I observed three cohorts of students during the course of their English classes with one particular teacher in an attempt to trace the formation of their social, cultural, and academic identities. The cohorts of students were divided into leveled English classes: regular 7th grade English, High Point English (for English language learners), and Strategic English (for non-English language learners who had scored below the 30th percentile on the CST). From these cohorts, I chose twelve focal students to interview outside of classroom observations. In addition, I conducted formal and informal interviews with the principal teacher and other school staff.

Through these methods, I sought to gain understanding of how the school structures around language learning affecting students’ academic and social experiences of learning English as well as their perceptions of language use (both of their own and others). I also wanted to uncover how students’ formed their understandings of cultural identities that were based in notions of language, race, and ethnicity, and how all of these notions intersected with larger beliefs of academic achievement and success. While my observations were based in these students’ school experiences, the interviews extended my understanding of how their out of school social networks also factored into forming their belief systems, understanding, and multifaceted identities. The findings from this study add value to our ongoing understanding of language minority students by demonstrating that first and second generation immigrant students differ less than has been hypothesized by others in terms of their cultural identities and their profiles of performance in English reading, writing, and language.
CHAPTER 1

During class, Ms. Jackson hands me a copy of a book entitled We Beat the Streets. The story is a nonfiction account of three African American men who grew up in the inner city and went on to become successful doctors. She explains that it has been distributed throughout the entire school, with hopes of serving as an inspirational message to the students. Ms. Jackson is one of many teachers at Webster Middle School who have genuinely high expectations of their students. As a veteran teacher, she tells me that she has had former students, now in college, come back to visit.

I spent a year doing my dissertation research at Webster Middle School (a pseudonym) in an urban area of California I will refer to as Ocean City. I spent two years in total doing research there (for previous studies) and during that time, I found this rhetoric of success against all obstacles a common theme. Teachers and staff members continually spoke of encouraging their students to achieve academically and working to close the achievement gap. They openly recognize that the population of Webster (African American, Latino, a high percentage of English language learners and households with low income) is made up of students who are not traditionally successful in formal educational institutions. However, the students’ backgrounds are often spoken of as a strength.

This is the other common thread of rhetoric at Webster: a celebration of diversity. Like many schools in the Ocean City Area, Webster boasts a number of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. This diversity is considered a hallmark and source of pride to the school. Student created banners hanging from the ceiling celebrate the various ethnic backgrounds of students. The mission statement of the school speaks of the commitment to serving students who are so culturally and linguistically diverse. While Webster is indeed very diverse (with over a dozen different home languages represented among its students, located in a district of a city in the east bay that houses a number of ethnic groups), it is not unique in the wider surrounding area nor it is it unique in California. The county next to Ocean City is 7th in the top ten counties nationwide on a measure of the proportion of a foreign born population between 2000 and 2007; five out of those top ten counties are in California (Terrazas and Batalova, 2008). California is also the top state in the total number of first generation immigrant children and also the total number (and highest percentage) of second generation immigrant children (Terrazas and Batalova, 2008).

At other moments, however, the teachers and staff acknowledge the low levels of academic achievement among Webster students. In addition for some teachers, though they outwardly noted the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the student body as a positive, they also disparaged what they view as the cultural and linguistic barriers to the students’ learning. It became apparent to me that this clash between opposing belief systems was typical rather than exceptional. Despite this contradiction, one truth remains abundantly clear: with the youth population of not only schools like Webster but schools across the nation continually increasing in linguistic and ethnic diversity, the demands and challenges of meeting the needs of this population in schools also increasing.

The experience of various immigrant youth has become an increasing focus of interest in research, documented in both ethnographies and also more quantitative studies. One central issue which emerges across all of the ethnographic studies is that of
immigrants and identities marked along generation lines: namely, the apparent differences between students immigrating after adolescence (1st generation immigrants), early in their childhood during adolescence (1.5 generation immigrants), and U.S. born students with immigrant parents (2nd generation immigrants) (Kim & Yu, 1996). Differentiated by point of immigration, these students have a notably different stance on taking on an American identity. Another significant theme running through these ethnographies is how students simultaneously experience the limiting literacy and social practices in public schooling, yet also participate in re-creating these structures of difference and exclusion.

I set out to detail this moment in time for these adolescent youth. For those who were new immigrants, I wanted to tell the story of what it is like for them as they begin an education in the U.S., try to establish themselves socially, and find a place for themselves as Americans. For those youth born in the U.S. to immigrant parents (they are the “second chapter” of this story), I wanted to understand what happens in the next generation of these families. As adolescents, they are experiencing a very specific time in life, marked by numerous transitions, and a critical point in identity formation. For the immigrant youth, these transitions are multiplied.

I wanted to base my research on these transitions, to understand how the first and second generation immigrant youth at Webster developed these different dimensions of their identities. By taking a closer look at the structure and curriculum of English and language arts instruction, I wanted to also explore how the students fared in their English placements and what their experience was like as they learned English, frequently as a second language. I suspected that in the context in which they were receiving this language instruction, students were also learning personal theories about achievement, about what led to academic success and failure for both themselves and their peers. In addition to their academic identity, students were also developing ideas about who they were socially and culturally—how they not only fit into the cultural landscape of the school and community, but how they fit in as Americans.

During my time at Webster, I attempted to answer these questions and to understand the core of these students’ experiences, and what it means as the grow up in America with cross-section of influences and experiences. The portraits of these specific students is, in part, the portrait of the next generation of America, a changing and evolving population. The second chapter will review relevant and current literature that framed this research study, and the third chapter will explain the methodology and provide details about the context, the site and the participants, including the selection process. The fourth chapter will focus on the findings about students’ linguistic and academic identities—their language learning, their perceptions of their language instruction, how they think of themselves as language users, and how all these factor into their understandings of achievement and their own academic and linguistic identities. The fifth chapter will focus on findings concerning their social and cultural identities—the students’ social lives in and out of school, how these social networks factor affect their understandings of ethnicity, culture, and race, and how they participate in the meanings around these identities. The sixth and last chapter provides a brief summary of findings and moves on to conclusions about what the data mean and how they inform the broad set of issues that motivated this investigation in the first place.
CHAPTER 2

I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

President Barack Obama

Immigration is a transformative force, producing profound and unanticipated social changes in both sending and receiving societies… immigration engenders ethnicity—collectivities who perceive themselves and are perceived by others to differ in language, religion, “race”, national origin or ancestral homeland, cultural heritage, and memories of a shared historical past.

Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. xv-xvi

America is still held up as a land of possibility. To many immigrants, young and old, the idea of the American Dream is alive and well. All the recent immigrant students at Webster explained why their families decided to immigrate and offered some aspect of the American Dream—leaving for a better education in the U.S., better job opportunities, and a better future. For these students and their families, learning English and establishing themselves in the U.S. as Americans are also parts of their projected futures.

While we continually celebrate America as a nation of immigrants, in the same breath we dispute who really belongs here. While the earliest immigrants are now celebrated as settlers in America, even those second generation Americans who are born to immigrant parents are perceived to be less than citizens (Spickard, 2007). Despite this divided view of Americans, immigration to the United States continues. The largest wave of immigration to the U.S. took place about a hundred years ago; the most recent wave of immigration was spurred in 1965 by a change in immigration laws (Spickard, 2007). Since then, citizens from all over the world have participated in a steady immigration to the U.S. The 2000 Census counted 28 million first generation immigrants in the United States. Among the first generation immigrant population are a percentage of youth, who are attending mostly public schools. The students at Webster are part of a much larger population of immigrant youth in the United States.

In this chapter, I will review the relevant literature to frame this discussion of the experience of immigrant youth, in the larger context of the shifting ideas of an American identity and the current reality of immigration. First, I will discuss various models of the assimilation of immigrants in the U.S. Then I will move onto notions of identity, in particular the socialized, cultural notions around what it means to be “American”. This discussion of the idea of American identity will include the issues of how race and language in particular factor into this idea. I will then move onto the issue of immigrants and schooling, in particular how curriculum and structure guide their experience of learning English, and how their ideas of achievement, language learning, and school success are socialized and developed in school. I will also address how models of assimilation and acculturation apply to the population of first and second generation youth.
Immigration: The Current Debate

The public seems to have general unease about the perceived increase in immigration, legal and otherwise. According to a 2004 poll conducted by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the general public expresses concerns about the presence of immigrants and the rate of immigration to the United States. Forty-one percent of the general public believes that legal immigration should be decreased, with 56% believing that most recent immigrants are, in fact, here illegally. In that 56%, a majority of them believe that there are too many immigrants in the U.S. (62%), that immigrants take jobs away from Americans who want these jobs (54%), and that the federal government is not tough enough with immigration legislation (73%).

The poll further revealed that the majority of Americans (immigrants and non-immigrants alike) agree that the United States is “a country made up of many cultures and values that change as new people come here”, as opposed to “a country with a basic American culture and values that immigrants take on when they come here.” However, the majority of non-immigrant Americans believes that the U.S. should, in fact, be “a country with a basic American culture and values that immigrants take on when they come here.” Interestingly, there is little difference of opinion between the children of immigrants and native-born Americans.

While the poll reported that “the public’s views on immigration are significantly less negative than they were in the months after the September 11 terrorist attacks”, residual feeling seems to linger in the American consciousness. Some months following the attacks, the 9/11 Commission Report was released; it found that both the Clinton and Bush administrations had lacked a “failure of imagination” regarding the new threat of terrorism. The report stated that it was the role of the U.S. to “communicate and defend American ideals in the Islamic world. Our efforts here should be as strong as they were in combating closed societies during the Cold War” (Reynolds, 2004). And while the initial alarm following the attacks may have subsided, the resurgence of fervent American nationalism and reappearance of a cold war mentality in American foreign policy remains evident. The New York Times reports a “cold war echo” in the recent relations between Iran and the United States. The U.S. relations with North Korea display the same kind of sentiment (Sanger & Sciolino, 2006).

In this climate of cold war American jingoism, immigrants are also identified as a threat--not only in the job market and to the national economy, but also to national security. Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, explains: “If a Mexican day laborer can sneak across the border, so can an al Qaeda terrorist. While the vast majority of illegals are not terrorists, the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are able to settle in the United States illegally each year indicates that terrorists who wish to do so face few obstacles. We can’t protect ourselves from terrorism without dealing with illegal immigration” (Center for Immigration Studies [CIS], para. 4). The commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) James Ziglar colludes with such beliefs, reporting that three of the terrorists involved in the September 11th attacks were confirmed to be illegal aliens (CIS, 2001).

With these vigilant actions taken to preserve statehood and control immigration, both legal and illegal, the underlying question inevitably turns to exactly who is American and what it means to claim citizenship. If we are protecting ourselves against
an enemy of our imagination, exactly how far does this reach extend? How do we define ourselves as Americans in a land of increasing linguistic and ethnic diversity?

Models of assimilation

As immigration to the United States steadily continues, immigrants also continue to be a widely varied group. There is variation not only linguistically and ethnically, but also with other characteristics such as economic circumstance and opportunity once they arrive in the U.S. Those characterized as immigrants have different reasons for immigrating, and this may affect their initial reception and subsequent stay in the U.S. Ogbu (1987) generated theories based on this consideration of how and why immigrants came to the U.S. He surmised that minority populations fall into three main categories: autonomous minorities, voluntary or immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities. According to Ogbu, autonomous minorities were “minorities primarily in a numerical sense” like the Jews and Mormons, who are not “socially, economically, and politically subordinated” (1987, p.152). Among the immigrant minorities are the voluntary minorities “who have moved more less voluntarily to the United States because they believe that this would lead to more economic well-being, better overall opportunities, or greater political freedom” (p.152). Ogbu theorized that the greatest challenges and societal inequalities were faced by the migrant worker population and by involuntary minorities, who were “people originally brought into the United States society involuntarily through slavery, conquest, or colonization” (p.153). He further explained that immigrant students (who fall into the category of voluntary minorities) were able to engage in what Gibson identified as “accommodation without assimilation”; they were able to adapt in order to succeed in school without truly altering their own cultural beliefs and practices. Though Ogbu’s theories move beyond simple models of assimilation vs. pluralism, he still does not offer an adequate typology to explain the experience of a number of immigrant students (both first and second generation) who do not easily fall into one category of classification or experience.

Rumbaut and Portes (2006) offer another typology of contemporary immigrants based on the two major differences that separate them: “1.) personal resources, material and human capital and 2.) classification by the government” (p.21). Their categories of immigrants distinguish between labor migrants, professional immigrants, entrepreneurial immigrants, refugees and asylees. They argue that a variety of components affect how immigrants might assimilate in a model of “segmented assimilation.” As they explain, assimilation is affected by:

1.) the history of the immigrant first generation, including the human capital brought by immigrant parents and the context of their reception; 2.) the differential pace of acculturation among parents and children, including the development of language gaps between them, and its bearing on normative integration and family cohesiveness; 3.) the cultural and economic barriers confronted by second-generation youth in their quest for successful adaptation; and 4.) the family and community resources for confronting these barriers. (Rumbaut and Portes, 2001, p. 6)

As Rumbaut and Portes argue, assimilation is hardly a linear process, and a number of factors complicate and affect the process of assimilation that continues to take place with the second generation.

Spickard (2007) raises the issue that assimilation is often mistakenly considered to be a one-way process, and this model contends that immigrants come to the U.S. and
in various stages, become Americanized to an established culture; (this idea was also reflected in the general public’s beliefs, as illustrated by the NPR poll results). He further critiques the transnational diasporic model of assimilation, which assumes the mobility of certain populations. The transnational model hardly fits all current immigrants, who may have weak or nonexistent ties to a geographic homeland, or may not have the economics means to truly inhabit multiple parts of the globe. He asserts that none of these models give proper weight to the process of racialization— an inherent part of the experience of those who immigrate to the U.S. and attempt to establish a life here. According to Spickard, only a panethnic or racial formation model of assimilation acknowledges the extent to which race and race-making factors into the formation of an American identity.

Ethnographies based on the experiences of first and second generation immigrants in public schools shed light on the complex and non-linear nature of assimilation. Previous assimilation models do not adequately explain the experiences of these adolescents. As the face of immigration evolves, the process of assimilation also evolves. These ethnographies will be revisited in more detail later in this chapter.

America as a Nation: Citizenship and Belonging

With these questions of what it means to be a member of our nation and who qualifies for this membership, we also may find ourselves asking what defines our nationhood itself. Anderson gives us a modern definition of the nation as “an imagined political community”, one that is “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 1983). Though a nation is outlined by geographic borders, what really defines a country is an imagined sense of community, with the understanding that it is bounded. Every country has finite boundaries beyond which exist other nations; nationhood is thus built on the assumption that certain individuals will be included (and others excluded) by citizenship. Anderson further points out that language is historically recognized as one common unifying force among nationals.

The issue of America characterized by geography and language becomes complicated by considerations of just how far the territory of America extends. After all, in Puerto Rico, officially part of U.S. since 1898, residents are “educated as U.S. citizens in Spanish, [and] work in Spanish” (Zentella, 1999, p.156). Historically, Puerto Ricans have “worked for U.S. corporations, voted in U.S. elections, and served in the military—all with the U.S. government’s blessing—when it served U.S. interests” (Zentella, 1999, p.158). However, Puerto Rico has shifted for fifty years back and forth between English only, Spanish only policies—a clear indication that the U.S. government seems unable to align its practical interests with its ideological ones (Zentella, 1999).

The question thus remains: in America, with little to speak of in the way of historical claim to territory, and an equally brief claim to grand historical narrative, is language then the most viable claim to nationhood? Though this claim of nationhood is also ideologically questionable, much of the recent debate regarding citizenship is bound in conversations regarding language—specifically the use of English. As Poole (1999) explicates:

A major source of the strength of national identity has been in its inescapability... The fusion of language, culture, and polity defined by the nation has so entered our conception of ourselves that it becomes difficult to address the question of who we are except in terms which presuppose that we already have a national identity. (p.272)
So then questioning who we are without questioning who we are as Americans seems nearly impossible. Living in America means living against an ideal of the American citizen, the implication being that some of us may not measure up.

Identity: Defining Roles and Being American

Within these issues of nationhood and national identity lies the fundamental question of what makes up identity itself. According to Gee (1996) identity is multifaceted and fluid, subject to change in different spatial contexts. Who we are in a moment depends on where we find ourselves and in what company. As he explains, “we are each of us not a single who, but different whos in different contexts. In addition, one and the same act can count as different things in different contexts” (Gee, 1996, p.124). We act out who we are in the “saying and doing”, in participating in the discourse for that particular “who”. Considering an American identity, Gee points out that “Americans tend to be very focused on the individual, and thus often miss the fact that the individual is the meeting point of many, sometimes conflicting, socially and historically defined Discourses” (Gee, 1996, p.132). Gee makes an important point: even within an American individual identity, we balance many roles, and some of them may actually be in conflict with one another.

Exploring some of these tensions of the boundaries and definitions of identity, Appiah (1994) asks, “what is the relation between this collective language and the individualist thrust of the modern notion of the self?” (p.150). He describes the process of identity-making as one that is both internally and externally negotiated, crafted by choices we make, but limited choices. As he states, “We make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society” (p.155). As part of our collective identity as Americans, we tell our story against a given “script”. As American individuals within the real and imagined boundaries of nationhood, we fashion a narrative of stories about ourselves against the reference of our own memory, of our family, our community, or against a cultural canon of “master myths” or “American folk theories” (Bruner, 2001; Gee, 1996; Ogbu, 1987).

As much as we insist on individualism as Americans, we must recognize our fundamental need to be legitimately recognized as a part of a collective as well. And in this tension between what we choose ourselves and what perceptions we operate within, we struggle to make ourselves and make ourselves known. On the subject of cultural narrative, Foucault (1981) writes “there is scarcely a society without its major narratives, which are recounted, repeated, and varied; formulae, texts, and ritualized sets of discourses which are recited in well-defined circumstances…”(p.56). America is certainly no exception, and many of these American narratives or master myths about how we define ourselves as members of collectives are historically centered around or emphasize race. Essentially as Americans, Omi and Winant (1994) write that “we utilize race to provide clues about who a person is” (p.59). Moreover, Omi and Winant underscore how race has been a huge force throughout our brief history as a nation: “from the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of ‘identity’” (p.1).

Immigrants and the Race Question

Race, a longstanding American obsession of sorts, is complicated by the issue of immigration. In the recent presidential election, Barack Obama became a potent symbol
for just how multilayered the intersection of race, identity, and American citizenship may be. Rather than revealing America as post-racial, as some would argue, the conversation about Barack Obama and his racial and cultural background simply revealed how intricate these issues are. Celebrated as America’s first black president, Obama and his background were widely discussed leading up to the election: a white, American born mother; a black, Kenyan father; and a childhood spanning from Indonesia to Hawaii. And so Obama occupies all these categories at once: interracial, African American, second generation American, and simply, uniquely American. If America is post-racial, it is only because “race” by its prior definitions has become too limited a category to properly explain one’s cultural, linguistic, and social identity.

Takaki (1993) provides insight into how this “force” of race was historically established in the U.S. As Takaki points out, early immigrants to the United States came from several different countries and cultures and shared many similar hardships and struggles for recognition and rights; however, these shared experiences of immigrants diverged along the lines of race. Those who were recognized as racialized minorities had a markedly different experience attempting to achieve equal rights for land, voting rights, and property. The legacy of exclusion and inequity for racialized minorities within the U.S. extends far back, the echoes of which continue to resonate in modern day policies and legislation.

Omi and Winant (1994) define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (p.55). While acknowledging the intersection of racial inequalities with those of ethnic and class group politics (ethnicity most often being identified as a link to common culture or descent), they point out that race is persistent as a symbolic indication of an individual’s lived experience and identity. Waters (1990) further asserts that there is a distinction between ethnicity for whites and nonwhites: for whites it is a choice of self-identification, a label which denotes a particular lineage or familial history; however, for recognizable racial minorities, ethnicity is subsumed under race. Waters findings show that for racialized minorities such as blacks, racial identifications are perceived and assigned by others. In regards to class, Omi and Winant caution against the understanding of the relationship between class and racial categories as either equivalent or causal. With these cautionary provisions in mind, racial inequality should be considered as a recurrent and distinctive factor that determines an individual’s experience.

The historical struggle for recognition and rights of race-based communities has evolved to a current era of “colorblindness”, which asserts that the recognition of race denies the principles of equal opportunity and meritocracy (Omi & Winant, 1994). The colorblind ideology, which gained momentum in the Reagan era, is still active in the discourse of American politics and society. It is argued that we can no longer legitimately or consciously claim race as a determining factor for experience and potential success or failure in education and in the choice and pursuit of future careers. Ward Connerly, the author of Proposition 54, (also known as the Racial Privacy initiative), explained the necessity of such legislation and the underlying principles of this colorblind ideology:

We are splintered along lines of income, class ideology, and political affiliations. As a society, we are close to coming unraveled. But, our racial and ethnic divisions are becoming increasingly contentious as we fight over policies relating to affirmative-action preferences, bilingualism and illegal immigration. These are the issues that hold the potential to rip
the fabric of our California community in ways that we can’t begin to imagine. (Connerly, 2003)

Ward here equates the recognition of difference with the actual inequities resulting from such difference. Within the frame of this kind of “common sense”, language standardization and English only legislation is also perfectly rational.

If we are operating with the premise that race is no longer a consequential or legitimate category and no longer matters, re-framing the discussion as one simply about the usage of English re-legitimizes the underlying claims of equal opportunity for achievement for all individuals regardless of background. The legacy of racial oppression is evident in the current language policies which, in reality, perpetuate long present segregation and discrimination through what only appear to be newly official federal and state policies. English becomes a symbolic qualification for citizenship, with the unspoken accompanying requirements of race, class, language and so on. In effect, languages may “symbolize a nation, but they disproportionately represent the interests of specific groups within these nations” (Kroskrity, 2004, p.501). Thus, citizenship requires not only acquiring the symbolic language of the nation but also, “ultimately…a responsibility to require a new identity, one which is not experienced as a matter of choice” (Poole, 1999, p.277).

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) remind us that “the study of identity has always been highly political”, due in part to the fact that the “shared perception of identity requires as its foil a sense of alterity, of an Other who can be positioned against those socially constituted as the same” (p.371). Those who are classified as “Other” operate as “marked identities”, which gain a “special, default status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are usually highly recognizable. In many contexts in the United States, such unmarked categories may include whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, middle-class status, and Christianity…[These] marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language: linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p.372). If the definition of an American identity itself requires the designation of an “Other”, then what is the experience of those who live as Americans but may not be recognized as citizens? To these intersecting issues of language, identity, and citizenship we now turn.

The Language of American Citizenry and the Ideology of Inequality

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) offer a helpful framework for considering the relationship of language and identity, how language at once constructs and reflects ideologies, constrains and expands expressions and foundations of self. In exploring how language use indexes certain identities, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) refer to the “formation of social stereotypes based on language” and emphasize, “such stereotypes are not neutral but highly politicized.” In effect, “beliefs about language are also often beliefs about speakers” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p.379). However, these stereotypes exist against an unspoken ideal. Hill (1998), in her discussion of “public white space”, observes that while white, middle class Americans may freely engage in the use of what she characterizes as “mock Spanish” without compromising their position of language authority, the same freedom does not extend to those who speak less than “Official English.” The “public white space” of America extends to spaces such as public school,
where stereotypes and assumptions of language and speakers are built against the overtly and covertly white, middle-class expectations of the institution.

The Role of Schooling

Foucault writes that “any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry” (Foucault, 1981, p.64). The issue then becomes how students themselves, and immigrant students in particular, participate within these systems of discourse and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Ogbu (1987) theorizes that involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, have an oppositional defiant attitude toward schooling, while other immigrant groups are able to engage in assimilation without accommodation—essentially retaining their own culturally based identities while successfully participating in school. However, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) offer an alternate frame by which to consider both student resistance to and student participation in schooling. Rather than an either/or dichotomy, student performance in school can simultaneously resist some imposed identities of school while taking on others.

In the context of schooling, language becomes one highly visible measure by which to separate and track students, most ostensibly into ESL and mainstream classes. However, language tracking often results in what Valenzuela (1999) identifies as “cultural tracking”. Furthermore, school becomes a site where students themselves both take on and perpetuate larger attitudes toward equity and inclusion. As is illustrated in the following ethnographies, they may actually hold each other responsible for the unyielding structure of opportunity and achievement, and for the lack of both resources and mobility within such a structure. Wherever they may find themselves within this structure, the reality is apparent—as students resist and choose identities within the context of school, their choices are limited. Students place each other and also themselves within the confines of particular delineations of identity by categories like language use, race, and birthplace. They make decisions about how they themselves as well as other students fill the roles of students, as speakers of English, as members of racial categories, and ultimately, as Americans. While the lines of exclusion and inclusion may be debated at a national level, it also takes place at the level of institutions, schools, and individual interactions.

Immigrants and Education: The Discourses of Schooling

California serves as a salient example of increasing standardization in educational curriculum, pedagogy, and policy in direct response to increasing diversity in the student population, both linguistically and ethnically. In 2005, California public schools had more than 1.5 million English language learner (ELL) students enrolled, making up approximately one third of its student population and totaling more than any other state in the U.S. California’s general youth population also reflects a large numbers of immigrant youth, with 24% of California’s 13-24 year olds identifying as first generation immigrants, with another 25% identifying as second generation (born to immigrant parents). Forty-five percent of the youth population report speaking a language other than English in their homes (California Tomorrow, 2005).

In the face of steadily increasing linguistic and racial diversity, California has seen a matched increase in both punitive measures against illegal immigrants and provisions to heavily standardize education (Guitterez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Alvarez, 2000). A recent L.A. Times poll reveals that Californians view immigration as a serious
issue, with more than 40% rating it as one of the most important problems facing the
country, and the voting record of the state reflects this outlook (LA Times, 2006). Prior
to H.R. 4437, Proposition 187 (also known as the “Save Our State” initiative) was an
erlier attempt to deny social services to undocumented immigrants. The passage of
Proposition 209 (the “Civil Rights” initiative) in effect ended affirmative action policies.
Proposition 227, passed in 1998 by a 61% majority, basically ended bilingual education
in California’s public schools (American Institute for Research & WestEd, 2006).
Measures like these essentially exist as legalized measures of discrimination against
linguistic and cultural diversity (Guiterrez et al., 2000).

A Closer Look at Student Experience

California offers a revealing picture of current language policy trends in response
to a rapidly changing student population. In an attempt to take a closer look at these
policies and understand how they might affect the students who directly experience them
on a day-to-day basis, we turn to a survey of selected ethnographies which detail the
student practices and performances of language in school. Ethnographies offer a
snapshot of the immediate reality of schooling as lived and perceived by these students.
According to Street (2000), it is possible to photograph literacy events, but not literacy
practices. Literacy practices are embedded in cultural contexts and cannot be fully
considered outside of such; inasmuch, these ethnographies offer insight into student
experience, but are inherently limited by the same constraints. Thus, these ethnographies
should be construed as close, local portraits which give us some sense of a larger truth of
student experience, but not the entire picture.

In addition, what these ethnographies highlight are not only issues unique to each
immigrant generation in language and identity, but also concerns and constraints specific
to gender and the cultural and community expectations attached to those roles. While
factors like gender and class background undeniably play a major role in student outlook
and identity formation, for the purposes of this analysis they will not be used as major
lenses by which to consider their school experiences. It should also be noted that while
their experiences are distinctively different on many counts, African American students
have also historically been denied equity of school resources. The work of Delpit
explores the ramifications of these inequities on students and their sense of self as tied to
language; Rickford address the linguistic practices of the classroom in particular (Delpit,
2002; Rickford, 2004). While this survey of ethnographies will not attempt to address the
complexities and evident similarities of language and equity issues facing African
American students, it is significant that many of the previous approaches to sorting
students by ability which were previously applied to low income, minority students now
apply to immigrant students. The overt justification—the assessed English language
ability of these students—has changed, but the inequity remains.

Official English: Citizenship as a Question of Language

With the revival of standardized curriculum and the elimination of bilingual
education in California (as well as other states across the U.S.), language tracking is the
natural result. Moreover, English only policies and ESL placements result in
Valenzuela’s notion of “cultural tracking”. Students are placed in classes based on
perceived English language abilities, and often end up in non-supportive academic
environments, with no real opportunity for advancement or equality of educational
resources.
Upon closer consideration, official English seems more of a symbolic discourse than a literal one. Even in Iowa, which has a majority of white residents and second only to Pennsylvania in its number of native-born residents; eleven counties have declared English as their official language, and there has been intense lobbying for statewide legislation. Proponents cite such rationale as directing legislation at today’s immigrants who “refuse to assimilate” (Herman, 2003). As Huebner (1999) points out in his discussion of U.S. language policy, the edict of official English is far reaching and should not be underestimated in its imposed limitations. After all, as Huebner asserts, in the talk about language, dialect has come to mean “something less than a language”, and the term “bilingual” is used interchangeably with “non-English proficient.” The case of official education policies in regards to dialect speakers, or Standard English learners, provides a case in point.

Hawai‘i Creole English, also referred to as Pidgin, is the native dialect of most residents of Hawai‘i. In 1987, Hawai‘i’s Board of Education “attempted to legislate the use of Standard English by students and staff in a classroom setting”, but received severe criticism in response (Wong, 1999). The legislation was never enacted, and instead the Board of Education instructed staff to simply “encourage the use” of SE. However, the argument that “Pidgin is a simplified and bastardized form of SE and that its speakers are therefore cognitively inferior to speakers of SE” is maintained, along with the efforts to disparage its use (Wong, 1999, p.209). The Ebonics debate in Ocean City Unified School District revealed similar sentiments regarding dialect speakers. The Ocean City School board attempted to designate Title VII funds for training teachers to address the academic needs of large African American student population. They openly declared Ebonics, or African American English (AAE) as a separate language derived from West African and Niger Congo languages. Though the public figures involved disagreed over whether or not AAE should be considered a separate dialect or a separate language, most of the argument actually centered on matters of how African Americans themselves are perceived and treated by the education system and American society at large. One side of the Ebonics debate considered “AAE to be a language variety that children consciously choose to speak rather than reflecting culture, historical contact, social class, etc.” (Morgan, 1999, p.174).

The critiques around both Pidgin and Ebonics arose within the communities of native speakers as well as in broader political arenas. What was made apparent by these incidents is that disputes over differences in literacy education and language use are in truth disputes over the differences in students, based on perceptions of what these students can do and essentially who they are. In both cases, attempts at creating equity in language instruction were identified by the public as either extensions of privilege directed to racial or language minority populations or attempts to undo the effects of parents and communities who did not care about their children’s education. These cases of minority students, and now the sweeping movement for official English only policies in schools and public institutions, illustrate the perpetuation of inequality through language standardization.

Valdés (2001) illustrates in her ethnography of middle school students learning English how school curriculum and structures continue to fail to meet the needs of English language learners. One such student was Elisa, a 12-year-old girl who came from small village in Honduras. Elisa was by every appearance the model student.
Despite Elisa’s efforts and apparent growth in English, she did not move beyond her original Non English Proficient (NEP) placement. At the end of her middle school career, “Mrs. Gordon recommended that Elisa be placed, once again, in the ESL track in the high school. She did not support Elisa’s placement in mainstream classes—not because of the level of her proficiency in English, but because Elisa had not completed the last book in ESL textbook series used at Garden” (Valdés, 2001, p.107). Elisa continued to be perceived as a less than fluent English speaker rather than a developing bilingual speaker. Like the teachers in Pavlenko’s study who taught English as a foreign language, ELL students only see themselves as “failed native speakers of the target language” rather than “multicompetent” language users (Pavlenko, 2003).

Students’ perceptions of themselves as language users also extend to how they see themselves as students, shaped in part by the way they are perceived by teachers and other students at school. One such student was Bernardo, who was labeled at first as “bright but lazy” by his teachers, and then later possibly learning disabled. Though Bernardo had a solid academic foundation in Spanish, it did not help him, as he could not transfer these skills to English, and did not receive the necessary guidance or strategy instruction from his teachers to do so. Though respected and depended upon by members of his family, Bernardo also continued to be “seen as incompetent and limited” at school where “no one expected very much from him” (Valdés, 2001, p.143).

As the students in the white working class community in Heath’s ethnography Ways with Words experienced, even an initial footing in the academic setting does not prepare students for the task for bridging their own background knowledge to more multifaceted school-oriented literacy tasks. The nature of what is required for students linguistically does not develop along a linear trajectory; tasks become less explicit and yet more demanding (Heath, 1983). As in the case of Bernardo, students’ failure to keep up is too often perceived as either a matter of student choice, or as a matter of limited academic and cognitive ability.

Valdés illustrates that if students succeed academically and go on to pursue avenues of higher education, they do so despite the academic support not because of it. Even motivated students (as in the case of Elisa) or students with a stronger academic background from their native schooling experiences did not have any feasible routes by which to learn English, progress, and succeed. Cummins (1985) argues that though even native English speakers come to school equipped with foundational skills in English, they still spend twelve years of schooling developing the expected level of literacy and command of academic English necessary for advancement in higher education. As Valdés puts forth, “School programs aimed at immigrant students…[are] seldom based on an ethnical understanding of how education is related to broader social and cultural relations, even though they may make use of a rhetoric of equality and opportunity and claim to prepare students for academic success” (Valdés, 2001, p.155).

Immigrant students are learning certain kinds of behaviors and perceptions of themselves, and they may reject schooling in order to reject these behaviors or perceptions. As evidenced in Valdés’ study, students’ language learning is enmeshed with how they learn to see their capabilities and potential in school and beyond the classroom as well. Officially, assimilating to being American means learning English; unofficially, assimilating to being American also means un-learning the other languages and discourses you speak, or at the very least, keeping them hidden. Valenzuela (1999)
demonstrates (discussed in the next section) how immigrant students feel that their language and also their culture is being disparaged, and thus feel silenced by the culture of school. The students in her study in turn, also learn and reflect attitudes of division and exclusion. Beyond the concerns of what language skills students are learning and not learning in school, they are also learning lessons about who succeeds, who doesn’t, and who seems to be at blame for these disparities.

Socializing Attitudes at School:

Educación, Schooling, and the Reality of Inequity

School is a significant site of socialization; how students are perceived at school and are positioned against and alongside other students may affect not only their current circumstance, but also how they project and live their futures. Bowles and Gintis (1976) theorized that school served as a site to socialize students into their future roles as workers in a capitalist economy. Willis (1977) built upon this same argument, but looked at how working class youth themselves participated in this socialization, making choices that reflected and reinforced their working class status. Lucas (1999) followed this same thread of reasoning further and studied how historically marginalized students--including immigrant students, lower class students, and minority students—have been socialized to expect their own lower school achievement, and so given the opportunity for “choice” in ability level tracked classes, they still choose lower tracks for themselves. It is important to consider these intersecting elements of school structure and student agency for the immigrant student population, the majority of whom come from lower income households, attend under-resourced schools, and then graduate from high school at dismal rates. Most students classified as English language learners actually attend only a small percentage of schools; for example, more than one third of California’s ELL students attend 15% of California public schools (where they made up than 50% of the total student population). And most of these schools, in turn, are lower income schools where teachers are far less likely to be credentialed (Rumberger, Gandara, & Merino, 2006).

Valenzuela’s study Subtractive Schooling focuses on cross-generational Mexican youth at Seguin High School over a three-year period. Located in what is identified as the “Ocean City”, an inner-city area in Houston, Seguin has been made up of predominately Mexican students since the 1983-4 school year and at the time of Valenzuela’s study was identified as one of the poorest performing schools within the Houston School District. Valenzuela observed that freshman “make up more than half of the school’s total population. Academic failure is so common than in any given year, a full quarter of the students have to repeat the ninth grade for at least a second time” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.78). Though by outward appearances, these youth appear to fail in school and in their education, Valenzuela demonstrates that they do not reject education itself, what they reject is the institution of schooling. In fact, Valenzuela explains that the students’ understanding of education is rooted in the concept of educación:

The family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning. Though inclusive of formal academic training, educación additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others…Educación…represents a means and end, such that the end-state of being bien educado/a is accomplished through a process characterized by respectful relations. Conversely, a person who is
mal educada/o is deemed disrespectful and inadequately oriented toward others. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23)

Following this idea of educación, students also recognized a difference between aesthetic vs. authentic caring, as demonstrated by school teachers and staff. Wherein the staff and teachers verbally attested their commitment to the students’ and their educational goals, the students felt that the staff and teachers failed to demonstrate “authentic caring”. Rather than demonstrating a deeper level of concern with students’ well being and involvement with school, the staff was perceived to be overly focused on the students’ adherence to school rules and policies, such as dress code and attendance. Valenzuela reports that the students clearly recognized this communication failure and “clearly state[d] that the school does not sufficiently provide relations premised on authentic caring. They further demand an inclusive curriculum responsive to their cultural identity as Mexicans.”

Valenzuela thus makes the point that the climate of subtractive schooling reinforces the divisions among the generations of immigrant youth. Because students are “objectified by double standard”, they “experienced as a forced-choice proposition between being Mexican or American…When the definition of what it means to be educated in U.S. society systematically excludes the Mexican culture, the Spanish language, and things Mexican, the prescription that students ‘care about’ school can be a hard pill to swallow” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.258). Valenzuela gives the example of two students Michael and Annalisa who find themselves “held individually responsible for what is, in fact, a pressing collective issue—the ‘loss’ of their language and the experience of marginality that follows from their poor command of Spanish” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.169).

This situation of subtractive schooling is not one unique to Seguin or to a Mexican identified student population; Valenzuela argues that subtractive schooling extends to other U.S. minority youth, who are offered neither the option of “biculturalism” nor that of “bidialectalism”, but instead must conform to imposed standards of language and identity. As demonstrated in Pita and Utakis’ study of the role of education in the Dominican community in New York City, education and the development of bilingualism is not only necessary for students’ self esteem, it is also directly linked to their academic and future economic survival (Pita & Utakis, 2003).

For the case of these students, schooling itself forces subtraction of identity and positions students against each other: inequity is learned as a matter of course, as built into the institution itself. Second generation immigrant students perceive first generation immigrants as responsible for buying into and upholding the myths of schooling. First generation immigrants, in turn, perceive second generation immigrants as negatively assimilated into American ways of life: disrespecting teachers, authority, and education--failing academically, but by choice. What also is apparent is that neither students nor teachers explicitly recognize or acknowledge that these systems are in place—systems by which students are categorized, labeled, and sorted (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1997).

These systems are merely reflections of a much larger set of complex and troubling attitudes; though nationhood by its very definition assumes that some will be excluded, those who fall outside the real and imagined restrictions of being American may in reality live within America’s borders. Race historically restricted even those who were considered citizens from the rights, experiences and opportunities of fully being an
Forging an American Identity: 
Limited Choices, Limited Realities

The students in both Valdés’ and Valenzuela’s studies found themselves with limited options of how to correlate achievement and behavior; it seemed that students too often found either their abilities or their home culture invalidated by the culture of school. The school environments reinforced students’ negative stances toward school. As Valenzuela’s study delineated, students rejected schooling rather than education itself. Students were presented with few options of how to define themselves and negotiate their choices of their student experience and their futures. Anderson’s ethnography Made in America highlights this stark truth of student experience: there is no middle ground. Students do not have a range of choices or options through which they may fit into or try on different identities; rather, being American is presented as an option in opposition to choosing an ethnically or racially defined identity. As Anderson (1997) writes, students must either identify as American or another racially defined category, or else “get stoned from all sides” (p.54).

Sarroub’s study, All American Yemeni Girls, followed a group of six female students who attended a high school in Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit, and found themselves caught in the same dilemma. The girls culturally and ethnically identified as Yemeni, and are referred to within their community as the hijabat, based on their practice of wearing the hijab, or scarf. Over the course of two years, Sarroub observed the girls’ lives at home and at school in the Southend, a lower-income enclave of Dearborn. Sarroub’s study of Yemeni American high school female students illustrated that many students can experience a kind of cultural dissonance, living a distinctly liminal existence between two cultures. For the girls in her study, many felt that they failed at being entirely American and Yemeni, finding it quite impossible to live up to either ideal. Assimilation models fail to account for their experience. Rumbaut and Portes (2006) differentiate between the youth who experience selective acculturation, in which they have parental support and live in cohesive communities and often (but not always) develop bilingualism with their home language and English; and dissonant acculturation, in which they learn English and experience cultural and linguistic loss. Obgu’s assimilation models also create limiting categories. Sarroub actually engages in a critique of Obgu’s framework of immigrant students, charging that he fails to adequately account for the role of gender and to acknowledge that some student identities become politically charged or stigmatized due to the current political orientations of the U.S. This point becomes especially salient when Sarroub considers how the post-September 11th hostility toward Arab Americans has affected the girls.
With this push against Ogbu’s firmly established immigrant categories, Sarroub locates areas of conflict and tension in the girls’ lives and negotiated identities, citing both “generational dissonance” in their relationship to first generation Yemeni, and deeply conflicting views in their religious and cultural beliefs and those of schooling. In explaining “generational dissonance,” Sarroub gives the example of Layla who was expected to become a fully realized Yemeni in her parents’ eyes, yet at the same time she also was called upon to learn the ways, language, and expectations of the United States in order to help them navigate through what remained to them a largely unknown territory. These students regularly balanced the gendered demands of being Yemeni with the expectations of school. Sarroub clarifies that “gender is a rather fluid category that cannot be easily demarcated or objectified, because it is indexed by talk, interaction, ethnicity, and in the case of the Yemeni American girls, religion” (Sarroub, 2005, p.7).

The girls made a distinction between religion and culture, which “means that, to them, although their religion and Holy Book [could not] be questioned, their culture and their cultural acts [could]” (Sarroub, 2005, p.66). While studying texts in Arabic school, “the hijabat learned and improved their Arabic, but they also heard and learned lessons that were not easily reconciled with those they learned at their public high school or through the American media. The oral and written texts with which the hijabat engaged allowed them to connect their religious practice to their identities as teenagers, but these also positioned them as powerless girls whose femininity and education could be a liability... In Scribner’s sense of literacy as social practice, the discursive reading of the Qur’an empowered the girls with social and intellectual grace, but it paradoxically reified their marginality as members of American public schooling and society” (Sarroub, 2005, p.76).

For these students, contradiction was inherent to school, which offered conflicting messages and ideologies that seemed nearly impossible to reconcile with the expectations of their own culture. For these students, balancing participation and beliefs was an ongoing task. The hijabat did not necessarily resist schooling, and actually found certain that in some instances, school provides a kind of “oasis” from their home expectations. Though most of them accepted that they would not continue their education after high school, the girls still industriously applied themselves to their studies. A few of them expressed a desire to continue on and perhaps attend college. However, their home expectations were first and foremost. School presented a certain freedom and kind of possibility, but these options did not necessarily exist outside of school.

What is most striking in this portrait of the hijabat is that in occupying these in between spaces and attempting to negotiate living in America with living up to being Yemeni, these girls believed they had failed on both counts. They upheld the belief that the Yemeni community created structures to support expected behavior and instill values, yet took a decidedly American sense of individual responsibility and self determination in their perceived failure. The hijabat internalized the largely irreconcilable contradictions of their home and school experience as a breakdown on both fronts. Like the high school boys in MacLeod’s study of working class male high school youth, these young women could only imagine their futures and themselves within the possibilities presented to them. Without any other prospective models, they felt they had failed. As MacLeod (1995) writes, “Because aspirations mediate what an individual desires and what society
can offer, the hopes of these boys are linked inextricably with their assessment of the opportunities available to them” (p.7).

What is apparent across all these ethnographies is that for these intergenerational immigrant students, point of conflicts of school and home literacy led to a stilted sense of self. Rather than seeing themselves as bilingual, bicultural or participating in multiple identities, the majority of these students saw themselves as having to choose one culture over another or unable to align fully with any one language or identity. For the most part, they did not identify the purpose of schooling with that of a real education, or connect their in-school experiences in any salient way to their futures beyond school. What was also apparent across ethnographies is that despite some sincere efforts, the teachers and staff of the schools were not equipped to understand or deal with the demands of the students’ out of school lives and the serious conflicts between their schooling and home cultures.

While many theories of immigrant orientation to the U.S. either assume assimilation or pluralism, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept such a dichotomy in light of the complex and varied situations of different immigrant students. For one, claiming that individuals can adopt a “transnational” identity is not necessarily valid for those who do not regularly travel to their “home” country, have no plans to return to live there, or simply have no visceral memory of their “homeland.” An equally optimistic claim for a fluid sense of identity grounded in a diasporic notion of the self, or pluralistic realization of identity ignores the very real constraints imposed by the real and imagined boundaries of America.

Research questions

My previous work with immigrant students at Webster Middle School in Ocean City, California revealed the complex intersection between culture, language, school environment and identity. I first began my work at Webster with the intention of investigating the implementation of the state mandated language arts program High Point. I wanted to critique the program in its effectiveness for student learning and also understand what it really looked like in a full adoption. This study investigated the effects of the HP program (1) on a school level, specifically on the teachers and their role in teaching HP (2) on the overall learning outcomes for students, considering both the needs of English language learners and English only students placed in HP and (3) on the students’ everyday lived school experience and understanding of being placed in the “High Point track.” Through ongoing classroom observation, interviews, and review of curriculum and student work, I determined that the most substantial effect of High Point on student experience was the school-wide restructuring and tracking created by its implementation. After taking note of the intended and unintended consequences of its implementation, I also noticed other significant effects on the students themselves.

The students in High Point, in addition to encountering conflicting feelings about being placed in the program, and also encountered conflicting uses of language inside and outside of the classroom. They were definitely aware of separate and differing uses of language, both spoken and written, in and outside of school, and spoke of the varying ways they used language outside of school: at home with family, in the personal composition of poetry or rap lyrics, and outside of the classroom with friends. They also spoke of the reading they did outside of a school context. In this discussion, the dichotomy of school language and knowledge and “real” language and knowledge
emerged. One student explained why he liked stories by a particular author, Walter Dean Meyers. He said, “Like, he be real, he talk about how life, not like ‘keep on topic, talk about important stuff and everything.’ [The stories] talk about regular life.”

Students revealed other ideas about their own language use. Two thirds of the interviewed students who were classified as English language learners did not see themselves as such. Rather than defining themselves as bilingual, or having some proficiency in a language other than English, they all identified themselves as English speakers. Upon further questioning, it was revealed that they did possess some amount of proficiency in languages other than English (Cambodian, Spanish, etc.) and had occasion to participate in exchanges with family and friends in these languages. However, they chose not to recognize this capacity as any kind of language ability—a belief that would only be sustained and emphasized by their tracking placements at Webster. Their placement helped enforce an idea of what “counts” as language use and what does not.

The students did not recognize in themselves any sense of developing bilingualism or biculturalism, but definitely had a growing awareness of their participation in the school-wide tracking system. Talking about their placements in the High Point classes, they disclosed their ideas about student achievement and success. There was a distinct difference in students’ ideas of how “good” students behaved and how “bad” students behaved, or in other words, what being smart or not smart looked like in the classroom. Following the same line of reasoning, students spoke of unsuccessful students or “bad” students as those who “played around” or didn’t follow the rules by engaging in such behavior as: not paying attention to the teacher, throwing paper, talking to friends in class, or getting angry easily and fighting either with other students or with the teacher.

Success in school, or making smart choices in school, directly translated into compliance with school and classroom expectations and guidelines. Further, being a good student was also equated with personality characteristics, such as being “nice”; unsuccessful students were characterized as lazy, disruptive, angry, talking too much, or sometimes too little. One student acknowledged that trouble at home and lack of support might lead to a student’s lack of success in school: “if you’re doing bad at home, and your parents treating you bad and stuff like that, you’re going to want to start treating people bad at school and you’re going to do bad in the classroom.” However, this student did not attribute any of his own school success to his family support—he still insisted that ultimately, a student’s success or failure in school was a matter of self-determination.

For these students, ways of knowing translated into ways of being, and the separation between choosing to enact behaviors and becoming the kind of person those behaviors represented was not entirely clear. This again reflects the notion of tracking separating certain “kinds” of students from others, with a direct correspondence between behavior, choice, and academic ability. If tracking happens by behavior, then the ensuing logic implies that the students are ultimately responsible for choosing and behaving their way into their placement.

Placement in HP reinforced the idea that school wasn’t about learning, it was about necessary strategy for success. Here, students are socialized into believing in success and achievement as attributable to the efforts of the individual, and that failure, too, must be attributable to the individual as well. Not only were students at Webster buying into the achievement ideology and ultimate power of self-determination, they
were also being socialized into believing that certain behaviors were rewarded—
compliance and obedience to rules and authority.

These experiences led me to deepening and broadening my investigations with
questions of how immigrant students place themselves racially and understand what it
becomes to be American, a racialization process of schooling that is largely connected to
language instruction and tracking. In particular, I wanted to try to answer these research
questions:

1.) For students in this class, how did the structure of curriculum
assignments based on English language proficiency shape students’ views of
themselves as language users and their ideas of how language and culture relate to
one another?

2.) How did students make sense of and understand their language learning
and English instruction?

3.) How did students view their own language use and capabilities and
personally identify in terms of culture and language?

4.) How did students socially categorize themselves and each other, and how
do these categories relate to race, language, and achievement?

5.) What sort of racialized identity did students construct for themselves and
other students? What was the basis of these constructions?

My goal in undertaking this work was to build on the work of these ethnographers
such as Valenzuela, Olsen, and Sarroub, who have written compelling accounts of how
consequential the effects of school structure can be on students’ ideas of race,
achievement, and opportunity. These ideas and school experiences, in turn, ripple
outward to develop and affect these students’ understandings and expectations of
themselves and orientations toward formal education. While there is certainly variance
across the breadth and nature of students’ experiences and perceptions, it is undeniable
that the stakes are real and the stakes are high. As Keaton (2007) makes the point in her
ethnography detailing the experiences of Muslim female students in France, a public
educational system is capable of working well, but “the people for whom it works most
poorly are the ones with the least power to counter its devastating and long-term effects”
(p.17). Further, she argues that “precious little is known about the complex background
of such young people and what is expected of them socially and culturally” but that is in
fact “critical for the general public to learn more about their actual experiences, from
their perspectives” (p.17). I, too, assert that the stories of these students have much to
reveal, not only about their own lives, but about the state we are all living in as
Americans and in what direction we are all headed collectively as a nation. With these
thoughts in mind, then, I began my quest to answer these questions.
CHAPTER 3

Culture, this acted document, thus is public…though ideational, it does not exist in someone’s head…”

Geertz, 1973, p.10

The word “culture” is widely used at Webster—the staff often identifies the school as “multicultural”; there are various cultural celebrations and events to recognize the heritage of different sectors of the student population, and so on. But to dissect the many elements of culture, then the culture of the school itself, attempt to understand how students perceive their own immediate environments (i.e. the classroom, the lunchroom, home) and then how these environments shape their identities is at best an inexact science. Though culture may be public and to some extent observable, there are some dimensions which can never be properly represented, whatever the method of inquiry and record. Nevertheless, I use this study as a vehicle to try and uncover, as much as possible, the public aspect of the students’ lived culture: how they understand and make meaning of their own environments, and how this in turn shapes the young people they are and the people they are becoming.

My involvement at this school actually developed over a number of years. I first encountered Webster working with students on service learning projects as an employee of a public service corps during the period of 1995-7. The aim of the service learning projects was to work with nine designated “high needs” schools in the Ocean City Unified School District and enrich classroom learning. I later returned to do research there in 2004 as part of a project for a language acquisition class investigating the adopted High Point curriculum, and stayed on to conduct further research. This extended research of the previous project was developed into my master’s thesis (and then eventually evolved into my dissertation research and study). Witnessing the changes at this particular school over time, I’ve come to realize that telling the story of this school also tells the story of the neighborhood community and of the greater city of Ocean City. Ocean City in its extremes-- celebrated for its diversity and notorious for its crime rates—points to larger national trends of growing diversity, especially in urban centers. At the same time, like every city, Ocean City is unique in its own cultural blend and particular history. And so an ethnography of a small number of students within an Ocean City school attempts to record and detail in writing this specific “acted document”-- this culture-- that indeed exists, develops, and thrives, largely unseen or unconsidered by the greater public.

The immigrant students at Webster certainly are not an isolated or a unique population—they reflect a larger immigrant population in the community, mixed in terms of ethnic background, birthplace, and language use. However, they are bound by residence and most often, socioeconomic class. I am attempting to tell the story of particular students at this site through observing their interpersonal relationships and interactions at the site with one another and also with their teachers. As much as possible, I hope to tell their story in their own words. With the awareness that who these students are at school is but one glimpse of their multilayered experiences, I believe that depicting their lives at school is still a critical experience, one that will impact and shape their future endeavors and aspirations.
This study considers the classroom as the focal point from which to observe and understand these students, but with the understanding that “classrooms, like all sanctioned sites of formal education, receive their identities, spaces, times, and instructional goals primarily from power sources beyond local participants” (Heath, S. & B. Street, 2008, p. 17). With this understanding of the many forces at work, I use an ethnographic approach to tell the stories of these students.

As Merriam (1998) states, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p.6). Through this study, I attempt to uncover this meaning for these students, using their school and their classroom experiences as a starting point.

**Research Stance**

Ethnography is one way to tell the story of an individual or a community, but even as it sheds light on some aspects of one’s experiences, it is also inherently limited. As Geertz explains it, “doing ethnography is like trying to read...a manuscript—foreign, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tenacious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (1973, p. 10). A picture emerges through providing these “transient examples” of students’ “shaped behavior”, enough at least to provide a glimpse into what their lives are like at particular moments in time. These students are in the throes of adolescence, adding another layer of variability and complexity. With a necessary “tolerance for ambiguity” that stems from the nature of ethnography itself and also from the shifting nature of adolescent perspective, it is still possible to find meaning and to try and understand how these students understand their academic, social and linguistic experiences, what meanings and significance these experiences have for them (Merriam, 1998, p.20).

What is happening to these students and what they experience, connects to the larger situation of immigrants across the nation who, regardless of legal status, attempt to find their footing in a society in which they fully live, but are not necessarily fully a part of (Rumbaut and Portes). What they experience also adds to existing literature that chronicles the experience of immigrant youth in the United States and challenges any notion of “typical adolescence” that is most often based on a white, middle class model. The reality is, most often, much more complicated.

**Site Selection**

Webster is one of many California schools with a high English language learner population, and a student body rich in racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. California itself is a notable example of the increasing linguistic and racial diversity of the United States. In 2005, California public schools had more than 1.5 million English language learner (ELL) students enrolled, making up approximately one third of its student population. California’s general youth population also reflects a large number of immigrant youth: 24% of California’s 13-24 year olds identify as first generation immigrants, another 25% identify as second generation (born to immigrant parents) (California Tomorrow, 2005). While varied in language background and cultural origin, the immigrant youth population share some common experiences. The majority of the immigrant student population comes from lower income households, attends under-resourced schools, and then graduates from high school at dismal rates. Most students
classified as English language learners actually only attend only a small percentage of schools (Rumberger, Gandara, and Merino, 2006).

While California ranks third nationwide in the racial diversity of its student body, the larger county around Ocean City ranks within the top range of the 58 counties across California in terms of diversity. Ocean City Unified School District is a reflection of this racial and ethnic makeup. Webster Middle School is one of over twenty middle schools in the district. Webster is situated in the San Marino district of Ocean City. Ocean City itself is recognized as racially diverse, and the San Marino district in particular is known for the mix of people living within one residential area. Since 1990, the proportion of racial groups has shifted; the Latino and Asian populations have increased while the number of African Americans has decreased (Marech, 2002). The 2000 census, recorded the population of San Antonio: 34% Asian, 27% Latino, 23% African American, 12% Caucasian and 3% biracial.

Teachers made reference to the demographic shift in racial and ethnic makeup at Webster over the past years that paralleled the shift in the residential neighborhood population. Ms. Sampson recalled a time when there were more Latino students and fewer Asians, and said in recent years the numbers had essentially switched. Having been a teacher at Webster since 1980, she has been firsthand witness to the demographic changes in the school.

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 detail the racial and linguistic make up of Webster over the course of the 2007-2008 year span.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic or Latino</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Other Filipino</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaska Native</th>
<th>Multiple or No Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007-8</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th>Early Advanced</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Early Intermediate</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Students tested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007-8</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the 2007-8 school year, there were 764 students enrolled; 232 of those students were classified as English language learners (about 30%). Among Webster’s Asian and Latino student population, there are a mix of recent immigrants, children born to immigrant parents, and also students who are third generation or beyond. Eighty five percent of Webster’s students receive free or reduced price lunch.

Webster’s API (Academic Performance Index) of 2007-8 measured a 651 out of a possible scale of 800. After the passage of the California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, API scores have been uniformly adopted as a very public measure of a school’s academic performance and growth. Despite the challenges of the linguistic and ethnic diversity of its population, and the socioeconomic profile of the majority of the
student body, Webster has made notable gains as a school in the past five years, as measured through its steady progress in API scores, increase in student attendance, and decrease in suspensions and disciplinary proceedings. Webster has 86% fully credentialed teachers among its staff and the ratio of student to teacher is 21.7 students per one teacher.

Table 3 illustrates the current linguistic diversity of Webster: specifically, the primary languages of the students and the corresponding percentage of the student population.

Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Language</th>
<th>% of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer (Cambodian)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mien (Yao)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other non-English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>languages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino (Tagalog)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongan</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The current number of English language learners (about 30%) is a notable drop from previous years; (in 2004-5 38% of students were classified as English learners). There has been a steady decrease in the number of students classified as English language learners; most notably in 2003-4, 33% (162 students) were redesignated from being classified as English learners to Fully English Proficient. As reported by the teachers at Webster, this substantial shift was due to district-wide mandate by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) to follow the procedures necessary to be in compliance and receive the funding for bilingual education, falling under Title VII. Sometime during the course of the 1989-99 school year, it was found that Webster was among the many schools not redesignating enough students in order to move them into mainstream classes. Thus, the steady decrease in the number and percentage of classified English language learners at Webster may not reflect a sudden or significant shift in actual language ability. It may be little more than an index of the shifting policy regarding funding and bilingual education.

*Language tracking at Webster*

*Student Placement in High Point*

**High Point** came to Webster in the 2002 school year by district mandate, though the school initially protested the mandate. Explained on former English and history core teacher:

We had the results. We had the data. We went and presented that to the school board, and it was almost as if we didn’t show up. We had good data, we had good, hard, fast data that showed attendance improvement,
that showed our API going up, our suspensions going down—we had everything that anyone would have based a data-driven decision on. We had it all there and it was looking good. And they just basically said no, you’re part of the group, we’re throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

This teacher elaborated that the enforcement of HP within the district was not consistent; other schools were allowed exemptions or major adjustments in their implementation of HP (i.e. having HP as an additional period to their already existing classes and curriculum, rather than a replacement).

For a period of three years, students at Webster were tested using the CAT6 and CELDT at the beginning of the year and designated into either High Point or “regular” classes. They were also tested using High Point’s own assessment materials (which include multiple choice and short answer tests, and running records). Since High Point is an intervention program, only those students who are reading at least two grade levels behind their actual grade are required to use High Point. Students who test higher than this level continue to receive instruction using other reading materials (i.e. literature centered curriculum offered by Harcourt, Brace, & Javonovich).

As a result, the High Point group included both English language learners and low achieving native speakers of English. These native English speakers are primarily African American students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Thus, students who were learning English as a second language and students who were native speakers were in the same classes. The implementation of the High Point curriculum effectively created a school-wide tracking system based on student reading level. Students who were placed in High Point remained with the same homogenous cohort of students in all subjects all day, not just for language arts. In addition, High Point was intended to supplant regular English and social studies instruction. This school site, however, decided to teach High Point for two periods, and to continued to teach history for one period per day. Webster uses a core system, wherein one teacher teaches language and history, and another teaches math and science.

Prior to the implementation of HP, a different type of de facto tracking system prevailed: students were separated into an English only track, which consisted of a majority of African American students and a small minority of Asian and Latino students who had been reclassified as English proficient; and an ELL track, made up of Asian and Latino students who were classified as ELD (English Language Development—what I have called ELL) students. This was to ensure that the ELD designated students would be taught by appropriately certified teachers. There was no separation of classes by ‘honors’ or ‘GATE’ or any other such designation; thus students were not leveled into their classes by academic ability grouping. The only leveled classes prior to the arrival of High Point were the math classes offered in 8th grade: Algebra I and Pre-Algebra.

**Current Placements**

In the 2007-8 school year, Webster adopted a new approach to its language arts classes. Webster’s English classes were divided into three tracks: a grade level English class for students who scored above the 30th percentile on the CST, a High Point class for designated English language learners (who scored below the 30th percentile CST), and an English Strategic class for non ELL students (who scored below the 30th percentile on the CST). While the grade level English class was one class period, both the High Point class and English Strategic class covered two class periods (with the premise that one class period was a “lab” class to reinforce language skills).
Principal Sims and Ms. Sampson, who taught all three classes for 7th graders, openly identified the English program as a tracking system and expressed their discontent with the approach. Principal Sims stated, “What I don’t support is tracking of students and that’s what we’ve done. High Point, the other intervention program, Language! or Read 180, in the end it comes out with tracking and because of the English language learners, and you’re looking at African American children on the same level, all motivation, and they have no other ability levels to pull on and to help learn. We need a better system, and we haven’t found it yet…there has to be a better way…than putting them in a class that’s going to track them for the entire day.”

Ms. Sampson had similar thoughts: “I just don’t like the fact that the students are homogenously grouped. I feel that students learn from each other and…when you have low achieving students grouped together I think that’s bad.” She also spoke of the difficulty of motivating the students in High Point and English strategic classes, and noted that most students had been in the same track from the year prior. She also pointed out that there were a number of special education students in her English strategic and High Point classes, making it more challenging to address the various learning needs of the students.

Ms. Clark, the ESL coordinator, had a different perspective of the English classes. She explained, “The regular English is the Holt English, that’s the program—English 6, English 7, English 8. Then if their CST scores were below 300, which puts them below basics, then they were given…English strategic…and these were lab periods. They weren’t English classes. They were periods in which the teacher could reinforce the learnings of the regular coursework. Then the LEP students had one of four levels they could be assigned to by the district master plan for bilingual education.” Ms. Clark did not see the English classes as a tracking system, and though she acknowledged that English language learners had specific language support needs, she also pointed out that “struggling native English speakers of course would also be English learners.”

Generally, students were aware of the different English classes, though they were not always clear to the details of how students were placed into the classes. Many of them directly identified CST scores as the direct cause of their placement, some also said that students were placed by “mostly your spelling and grammar and knowing well the English language, like …where to put punctuation marks and things like that.” Students frequently used the term “double English” or spoke of “two periods of the same class” to describe the High Point and English Strategic class. Webster used the same “lab class” approach with math classes. Isaiah explained his situation: “English is not my subject and…I got two English classes. I wasn’t doing as well and I had two math classes, but now I’m doing perfect in math so I only got one math class now…Some people have Ms. Bogey twice…cause they didn’t do great, they didn’t do good on the CST…or they didn’t get good grades on their report card so they probably have two each teachers.”

Participant Selection

I originally intended to follow one cohort of designated ELL students placed into a High Point class. With this in mind, I sought out a successful teacher and classroom. My intention was to focus on students’ and student experiences rather than move into a critique of the teaching or curriculum. And so after talking to a few school administrators about teachers who successfully worked with ELL students, I found myself in Ms. Sampson’s classroom. She agreed to participate in the study, and I began observations.
with all three of her English classes: her general 7th grade English class, her 7th grade *High Point* English class, and her 7th grade English strategic class. Though I originally intended to only follow the *High Point* class, upon advisement from my dissertation committee, I expanded my observations to all three cohorts. In turn, I chose twelve focal students from all three cohorts. I attempted to balance my selection across all three classes, with a mix of female and male students, and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. However, I was also restricted by choosing from the pool of students who had returned consent forms and were available for one-on-one interviews.

The following table (Table 3.4) shows the racial make up of Ms. Sampson’s English classes: regular 7th grade English, the *High Point* class, and the English Strategic class. Table 3.5 gives information about the focal students (who came from all three English classes).

Table 3.4
Racial make up of Ms. Sampson’s 7th grade English classes, 2007-8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>Latino/a</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English (regular)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>11 (46%)</td>
<td>9 (37.5%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>High Point</em> English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic English</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
<td>8 (44%)</td>
<td>4 (22%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5
Focal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (Fall 07)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>English class</th>
<th>Home language</th>
<th>Birthplace/ethnic background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Regular English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Born in Mexico, came to US as an infant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Regular English</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Born in Vietnam, came to US at age 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Regular English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Born in El Salvador, came to US at age 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td><em>High Point</em></td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Born in El Salvador, came to US at age 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chao</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td><em>High Point</em></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Born in US; Chinese American (2nd generation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javier</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td><em>High Point</em></td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Born in Mexico, came to US at age 11 or 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>School District</td>
<td>Language(s)</td>
<td>Birthplace and Migration Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High Point</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Born in US, Chinese American (2nd generation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High Point</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Born in US, Mexican American (2nd generation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinh</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>English Strategic</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Born in Vietnam, came to US at age 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>English Strategic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Born in US, African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English Strategic</td>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>Born in US, Cambodian American (2nd generation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English Strategic</td>
<td>Spanish and English</td>
<td>Born in US, Mexican American (2nd generation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alicia is a high achieving bilingual student in regular 8th grade English. She immigrated from Mexico when she was an infant, and so “do[esn’t] know anything about the situation over there” and has no future plans to visit. For Alicia, her family and life are firmly rooted in the US. Though she struggled with English early on, Alicia currently comfortably uses both English and Spanish, using Spanish at home with her parents, and a mixture of Spanish and English with her siblings at home and friends at school. Her 7th grade English teacher identified her as a good student who worked hard and also socially blossomed during the year. Alicia is a Jehovah’s Witness and on a typical week, spends four to five days at church or engaged in church related activities. As a Jehovah’s Witness, Alicia does not participate in holiday celebrations or political elections. During her 7th grade year, church seemed the focal point of Alicia’s social life.

Bao was born in Vietnam and came to the US at age seven with his parents. An only child, Bao uses Vietnamese at home with his parents, but says he is equally comfortable with English and with Vietnamese—in his words, “it doesn’t matter.” Bao regularly travels back to Vietnam to visit, and most recently stayed for a long period over the summer between 7th and 8th grade. Bao was identified by his 7th grade English teacher as a very bright student who regularly tested well but who had consistent behavioral issues and “was disliked by several boys since 6th grade”, though she wasn’t sure why this was so. Though Bao had his social issues in class, he seemed to have a regular group of school friends with whom he socialized after school, most often breakdancing on the school grounds. He explained, “there’s like a dance school, so we do breakdance and stuff.” If he did not spend time with friends, he would play video games by himself on the computer. He stated that his future goal was to eventually design video games.

Christina is a soft spoken student who was placed into regular English for both 7th and 8th grade. Born in El Salvador, Christina came to the US at the age of five with her mother, father, and brother. In 7th grade, Christina identified Spanish as the language she was most comfortable using. In 8th grade, she stated that Spanish was the language she used at home, but that she felt “better” speaking English. Christina seemed quite focused and serious in her studies; her 7th grade English teacher Ms. Sampson attributed
Christina’s academic progress to this diligence rather than natural academic ability. She noted that Christina would often come by after school for help. Christina spoke highly of Ms. Sampson, and said that their relationship was “special.” While Christina cited a sizeable group of friends, like many other students, she did not see her friends outside of school, but rather spent time with immediate family, relatives, and her church.

Fernando was born in El Salvador and came to the US at age eleven. Though not very talktative in interviews, Fernando appeared very social in class. Fernando lived with his mother and older brother, and said he used both Spanish and English at home, especially since his mother was attending school to learn English. Through Fernando was often reprimanded in class by Ms. Sampson for his frequent socializing, he praised her as a good teacher who disciplined students and gave the students a lot of work to practice their English. Fernando had other relatives in the US who had immigrated before him (a sister, an aunt, his grandmother, etc.). Though he said he missed his friends in El Salvador, Fernando expressed that he was glad to have moved because there was a lot of gang activity in El Salvador and the US was much safer. Outside of school, Fernando liked to play racing games with his friends over the computer, ride his bike, and play sports like basketball, baseball, and soccer with his father. He said that one day he hoped to become a car mechanic, dentist, or policeman.

Chao is a 2nd generation Chinese student in High Point English. Although he was born in the US and only visited China once at the age of three, Chao was identified as an English language learner. Identified as having “a serious discipline problem” in the beginning of his 7th grade year, Chao was reticent and reluctant to speak at length in class and in interviews. He often answered directly posed questions with a shrug or an “I don’t know” answer. There were several incidents in the classroom in which Chao appeared to grow visibly angry or frustrated with his fellow classmates and English teacher. Chao, like many of the focal students whom I interviewed, did not see his school friends after school or on weekends. He would use MySpace or AIM to communicate with them outside of school time, and would play with “other” friends from the neighborhood. Sometimes he said he would go shopping with his aunt for items such as clothing. He said his summer was spent doing “nothing”, and when pressed for details, he said most days were spent watching TV or on the computer at home.

Javier is one of the more recently immigrated students at Webster. He recalls moving from Mexico to the US at the age of 11 or 12 with his family for “more opportunities”. While Javier has made friends at school and seemed exceptionally communicative in his interviews, he also expressed an increasing sense of alienation due to his limited English abilities. In school, he appeared very aware and self conscious of how his lack of fluency in English was perceived by other students. Though Javier’s class participation was somewhat minimal, he seemed to have a positive relationship with Ms. Sampson. Javier consistently conveyed an extreme loyalty to his family, and strove to fulfill his sense of duty and obligation toward them. Javier had an avid interest in soccer, playing as often as he could after school and on the weekends, and watching his favorite international teams compete on television. He rarely talked on the phone or used to computer to communicate with friends. Instead, he would play soccer at every opportunity outside of school.

Tommy is a 14-year-old Chinese American in the High Point class who lives with his mother, father, and three sisters. Tommy was born in the U.S. and says he has never
been to China. Tommy says he is comfortable using Chinese or English; he uses Chinese at home and has mostly Chinese speaking friends at school. Tommy identified Ms. Sampson as a good teacher because she “respects other languages and other people from another culture or city.” Tommy did not see his friends from school outside of school, but would sometimes talk on the phone, chat online, or use email to communicate with them. He often spent time with family friends and neighbors, playing basketball, baseball, or football. He also had cousins in Las Vegas whom he would spend time with in the summers. He aspired to go to college and eventually get a job “so I can earn more money for my family.”

Jessica is a soft-spoken 13-year-old in the High Point English class who lives with her father and older brother. Though she was born in the US, Jessica identified Spanish as her home language and also the language she was most comfortable speaking. She said she also spoke Spanish with friends at school. Jessica explained that she was in High Point because “I don’t speak English that much.” She did not report seeing friends in person outside of school, but she said she would talk to them on the phone sometimes, or at times use MySpace to talk online. After school, Jessica would engage in art projects or sometimes play basketball at her brother’s house (where he lived with his girlfriend and their sons). Jessica expressed frustration about school, saying the hardest thing about being her age was that “sometimes you could flunk and study like me and study again in the same grade.” Despite these difficulties, Jessica expressed a desire to one day be a doctor or dentist.

Vinh is a recently immigrated student who was placed into English strategic class for 7th grade. He said his family had moved over for “education” and also because his family did not make much money and “we don’t have enough money I think.” Though he had only been in the US for a few years, he said that English and Vietnamese were both languages he could comfortably speak. He used Vietnamese at home with his parents and English with his younger six-year-old sister, whom his parents were trying to teach Vietnamese. Vinh said that he liked his school and his English class, but also mentioned that it had been difficult for him and because he had only been in the US for two years. His 7th grade English teacher Ms. Sampson spoke of him as one of her favorite students who tried hard in class, participated, and got along well with other students. On many occasions, I noticed other students asking him for help—either to borrow school supplies or to explain class activities. Vinh did not seem shy about asking for help himself or participating in class discussions and answering questions.

Isaiah is an African American student who moved from English Strategic class in 7th grade to grade level English in 8th grade. Pleasant and talkative in his interviews, Isaiah spoke enthusiastically of school, his teachers, his participation in sports, and his family life. He identified himself as a good student-- one who did well in his classes and was also somewhat of a leader socially. Isaiah participated in numerous sports activities through his local recreation center, playing basketball, football, and baseball both after school and on the weekends. He spent little time on the computer (20 to 30 minutes per day on MySpace) or phone and usually engaged with school friends through playing sports at the rec center. Isaiah also spoke of his active responsibility in his family. With two older brothers and two younger sisters, Isaiah often helped with childcare. Isaiah’s demeanor during interviews appeared to be quite different from the way he acted in class.
In the classroom, he often engaged in what his 7th grade teacher Ms. Sampson identified as “attention seeking behavior.”

Lisa is a bubbly second generation Cambodian American student who lives with her parents and older brother and sister. She uses Cambodian at home, but says she is equally comfortable with English and Cambodian. Lisa was enthusiastic about her teacher and her fellow classmates, speaking positively of both. She said she had visited Cambodia once the previous summer where she met relatives, and also told me she had relatives living in Richmond. Lisa spend time outside of school at her cousin’s house or with friends either in Chinatown or at their houses. She said she often ended up helping her mother and watching relatives’ kids. She usually spend weekends at “auntie or uncle’s houses” with family members, eating, watching movies together and sometimes engaging in activities like karaoke.

Tiffany is a second generation Mexican American who lives with her mother (who is expecting) and three younger siblings. Both her parents, who are now separated, were born in Mexico; Tiffany herself has been “back and forth” to Mexico. Tiffany said she uses both English and Spanish at home: Spanish with her grandparents and father, and English with her mother and sibling. Though she felt she had ended up in her English strategic class because she did not pay attention in English last year, she spoke highly of Ms. Sampson as a “great teacher…because she makes you learn stuff.” While Tiffany seemed very social in class, she said she rarely saw school friends outside of school, but instead often went to her grandmother’s house and spent time with her cousins. There she would help her mother care for her younger cousins—she told me there would be up to twelve children there at a time. Tiffany aspired to be a model or cheerleader in the future, to generally be “successful, just like [her] uncle” who was about to graduate from college and become an engineer.

Researcher Role

While at Webster, I was mostly mistaken by staff and students to be another staff member. On one occasion, I was assumed to be the parent of a student there by a staff member. I felt that I had an “etic” perspective to the students’ lives. Though I am the second generation child of immigrants, and this has greatly affected my understanding and interest in immigration and the experience of immigrants, I also realize what a rapidly evolving situation this is and also how much the experience of these students must differ from my own. At the same time, I had an “emic” perspective to the teachers’ experiences. Having previously been a public school teacher, I often viewed the school and classroom activities through this lens. Most often, the participant classroom teacher would talk to me as another former teacher, asking for opinions about students or venting about particular teaching frustrations. Even with some general explanation of my presence in their classroom, students would most often perceive that I was another teacher in training, or there to help in the classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

Beginning in the fall of 2007, I conducted observations in Ms. Sampson’s 7th grade English classes across her three cohorts (regular 7th grade English, 7th grade High Point English, 7th grade English strategic class). Working in the ethnographic tradition, I primarily used interviews and field notes with the awareness that both tools are limited and selective. I began to visit Ms. Sampson’s class on an average of three times a week, attempting to spread my observations evenly across all three classes. I usually observed
no more than two classes per visit. I took handwritten notes while in class, then later typed them up to both review them and make a more usable record. I was very aware of this process of “transformation”—taking actual events, interactions, and people, and making them into a product of fieldnotes through observation and recording. While it was literally impossible to capture all of what was happening in the classroom at any given moment, I attempted to record all that I could see and hear in a close vicinity, and also those things that did seem interesting or important (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

I especially made an effort to record all directly personal interactions, i.e. all the informal conversations with the classroom teacher before or after class and all the direct conversations with students. As previously mentioned, students most often viewed or interacted with me as a teacher or helper, and sometimes Ms. Sampson would direct them to ask me for help with work. While I was aware that participation in the classroom might create more bias for me as a researcher, I found it virtually impossible not to interact with the students and teacher during and outside of class. At times I would help Ms. Sampson correct student work, which also allowed me to see what kinds of work was being turned in, or how students were doing on various assignments or tests. She would often share her concerns if several students had not done well on a particular assignment or test, or if one class was struggling with a task.

I conducted pilot interviews in the fall with a few students from each English class, revised and expanded my questions afterward, and then interviewed the focal students in the 2007-8 school year, and then returned during their 8th grade year to do a follow up interview. All interviews were conducted entirely in English, and took between a half hour and an hour. As my body of data grew and the school year drew to a close, I began to look for broad patterns in my fieldnotes and interviews, and made an attempt at open coding. Even making an attempt to move from data to literature (to “zig zag” between them), I found myself struggling with a broad attempt at coding as I faced unexpected findings and also was no longer as certain of my research questions as the guiding focus for my findings. I first tried to code the nature of interactions (between students and the teacher, between student and researcher, etc.). These codes were not useful in the least, so I began to code my observations around topic areas, such as use of language (i.e. using Spanish in the classroom), overt mentions of race and ethnicity, and any mentions of achievement and learning. These, too, proved minimally useful. Upon advisement, I moved to writing analytic memos on the focal students themselves. From these initial memos, more solid themes began to emerge, and I moved to writing more thematic analytic memos and returning to the fieldnotes and interviews once again to code with more focus and intent. I noticed clearer patterns across student experience, and looked for more indications of these patterns in the observations. With this approach, I moved between writing, referring back to literature, and honing my analytic themes and foci (Heath & Street, 2008).

Conclusion

The ethnographer is concerned not with members’ indigenous meanings simply as static categories but with how members of settings invoke those meanings in specific relations and interactions.

Heath & Street, 2008, p.28
Following the focal students over the course of their 7th grade year and through part of their 8th grade year, I was fully reminded of the shifting nature of identity itself, and the especially transient nature of adolescent identity. The meanings that these students constructed as members of communities are themselves fluid across time and also across settings. And so in developing an ethnographic portrait of these individuals and their various communities, I was capturing a very specific period in time—a transitory period between childhood and adulthood, between the academic demands of elementary school and high school, and between the social demands and growing complications of home and community expectations. The close nature of these descriptions makes them, as Geertz (1973) explains, “microscopic” but in no sense “typical” or “natural”; in these descriptions, I hope to be only true to the students themselves and their experiences rather than create any greater cultural theory to be applied in any attempts to be predictive or prescriptive.

This ethnography will hopefully broaden or deepen understanding of experiences of some of our youngest immigrants and children of immigrants. Immigration is itself a process that is far from completed long after an initial arrival in the US. While these young inhabitants of the U.S. may learn American notions of success and what it means to belong to this state, they may never participate in a simple process of assimilation or feel fully embraced as members and citizens. The categories we have used to define our values, our traits, and our markers of identification (race, language, birthplace) are no longer relevant or useful. So we must continue the conversation and look at what is actually happening in our neighborhoods, schools, classrooms, and homes—a far more complex and changing picture than we may imagine.
CHAPTER 4

Why do you think some students are successful in class?
Behave well, do what you have to do, practice English.
Fernando, 7th grade Webster student

The educational system is led to give its de facto sanction to initial cultural inequalities. The formal equality which governs pedagogical practice is in fact a cloak for and a justification of indifference to the real inequalities with regard to the body of knowledge taught or rather demanded.

Bourdieu, 1974, p.113

You have to look at the theory of learning and...you cannot progress unless you have a base and a foundation. I used to love it when they used to walk into Webster and the teacher would write on the board, write about what you did this summer. And the kids would look at ‘em and they don’t write anything and the teacher is like well you gotta write what you did this summer, what did the kids do? Well, they didn’t go anywhere, they didn’t do anything.

Ms. Clark, ESL coordinator for Webster

Adolescence is a critical juncture socially and academically. Especially for recent immigrant students, it is a time of flux, socializing to new school environments in a larger environment that is also new. For these seventh grade students at Webster, it is a time in which they are forming ideas about who they are as students, and what it means to be successful in school. Though many of the focal students seemed to feel positively about various aspects of schools, those who had been placed in High Point English or English Strategic class did not view themselves as successful (with the exception of Isaiah). They spoke with varying degrees of optimism about improving their grades and performance. But all of them also held themselves ultimately responsible for their performance in school. One student explained, “Last year I think I was failing English and I had two periods of English. I just didn’t do some homework and stuff. I guess I deserved it cause I didn’t do anything.” She elaborated that those students who made it to grade level English “worked harder to just get one period of English.” But for those students who “have two periods of English” (the way most students understood both High Point and Strategic English), she stated firmly, “They just never try.”

This chapter will focus on the kinds of attitudes and views the students at Webster developed of themselves as language users, based on the structures and curriculum of language learning and English instruction. It will also address how their ideas of how language and culture are related to one another, and how they view their own language use and capabilities and personally identify in terms of culture and language. The first section details student ideas around academic achievement: what leads to success or failure in school and how choice factors into achievement. The next section moves into students’ school experiences around language (the curriculum, instruction and school structures) and looks at how and if they learn English. The chapter then moves into students’ personal understandings of their own language use and the ties between language and cultural belonging. The last section of the chapter moves outward, to
examine the role of the teacher in students’ school experience, the larger attitudes of the staff toward students and their achievement, and the broader student attitudes across immigrant generational lines.

Success and Achievement: A Matter of Choice

Students at Webster held themselves accountable for their academic achievement. This attitude reflects a wider belief that individual achievement is indeed, ultimately about the individual—the belief that to be successful or not is accepted fundamentally as a matter of choice, without any question to the larger institution of school or structures of public education. American school culture is steeped in an overarching philosophy of individualism; in American public schools, each student is ultimately deemed accountable for realizing his or her learning goals (Olsen, 1997; Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001). This notion of individualism is part of the greater American myth of self-determination, in which class, socioeconomic circumstance, and even at times ethnicity and race are considered matters of choice (Waters, 1990). For immigrant students figuring out how to negotiate the tensions between the home culture, which is often guided by a collective orientation, with the decidedly individual orientation of the school culture, this can result in a kind of “ambivalence and forms of contradictory consciousness”; in fact, Lopez and Stanton-Salazar conclude that the conflicts “require downplaying personal victimization to sustain some degree of academic motivation” (2001, p. 76).

For some students like Javier, who was a struggling 7th grader in the High Point English class, this means holding himself directly responsible for both his behavior and his grades and seeing the causal relationship between the two. Javier felt that his low English grades were his fault, in part because he failed to ask questions in class. He explained, “As soon as I don’t get it…I don’t ask for help… I don’t listen to the teacher, but I’m wrong.” He also cited his socializing in class as a reason for his low grades. Ms. Sampson had explained that he had a “discipline problem” in the beginning of the school year; Javier elaborated on one incident:

I got suspended from here cause I got in a fight, but wasn’t a real fight…A guy said that I hit him, but I didn’t, but didn’t try to fight with the principal and say that I didn’t do it. I just let him do his job and I got suspended, then my mom got the surgery and I was with her the whole day the hospital and I would take her home and I was carrying her. The only thing that I want is my mom to be happy with me and my family.

Though Javier felt that he really had not participated in the fight, he acquiesced to the outcome, also relieving the principal of any blame or failed responsibility, as he was “just doing his job.” He continually contextualized his school goals in terms of the ultimate larger goal: to help support his family financially and emotionally and fulfill his duty to his parents.

Isaiah, the only non-immigrant student within the focal group, did not appear to be conflicted about the divide between his view of success and his own performance as a student. He explained that in order to be a successful student, “You have to do all your homework, pay attention, listen to the teacher, respect others, and stay in school.” In turn, he said, “the people who’s not doing well, that means they don’t want to learn… cause they just want to stay on the streets and do drugs and do all kind of stuff and they don’t want to do education, they don’t want to go to college, they don’t want to get a job.
Isaiah thought of himself as a successful student, and gave examples of how he was a leader. He explained that he befriended a new student in school, introducing him to his own friends. He would also redirect problematic talk, as when his friends would be “talking about fights and jumping people and stuff and gangs. And sometimes when they talk about gangs and stuff...I just talk about sports and classes and what school you’re going to next year and stuff like that.” When asked how he was doing in class, he answered, “I’m doing good. Turn in my work, my homework, paying attention. Gotta an A, I got a B on the report card.” By contrast, Isaiah was frequently observed off task in the classroom. He often engaged in what his 7th grade teacher Ms. Sampson identified as “attention seeking behavior.” As a result, Isaiah would be redirected by the teacher, receive detention, or get sent to the vice principal’s office. Despite this frequent discipline, Isaiah appeared genuinely happy and well adjusted when talking about school. He did not appear to internalize conflicts between his own performance and other students whom he viewed as successful. In this aspect, he was unique from the other students.

Most of the focal students felt that success was tied to certain behaviors, such as doing all your homework and class work, listening to and respecting the teacher, and paying attention. None of the students identified being smart as a reason for academic success. Doing well in class seemed an attainable goal; it was perceived as a choice to engage (or not) in specific actions that would lead to success. Bao speculated that the reason students were motivated to work hard and come to class was “they really want to get knowledge or they scared to cut.” A few of them added that it was important to ask questions when there was confusion. The rest of the students in the classes were in line with this thinking. In a survey given to all three English classes (regular grade level, High Point, English Strategic) the majority of the students felt that doing homework and following the rules were the main reasons that students were successful. The majority of the regular English and English Strategic class felt that understanding the class material was another reason for student success, and the majority of the High Point English class felt being respectful to the teacher was essential for success.

Students’ ideas about what led to a lack of academic success were consistent, both with one another and with their views of what led to success. They believed that failing grades were caused by disrespectful behavior, socializing in class, and cutting class. Some focal students mentioned that these unsuccessful students “did not want to learn.” They attributed traits of laziness and willful failure to these students. A few focal students also hypothesized that some students randomly filled in standardized tests and “didn’t try”, which led to their placement in High Point or English Strategic class. As one student put it, “When we have tests, they just guess. They don’t read the question or read the story for the test.” Tiffany, who herself was in English Strategic class, traced the possible lack of motivation to the family: “Their parents don’t encourage them to do good”, but then she added, “I guess they really don’t care if they end up going to college or they fail or they just don’t want to listen to their parents.”

In the same survey, students across all three English classes agreed that the two major reasons students are not successful in class are violating rules and failing to complete homework. While the regular English class felt that not understanding the class material was a third reason students were not successful, the High Point and English Strategic class felt that not being respectful to the teacher was the third significant cause.
of students’ lack of success. It is interesting to note that the students who were the most successful academically (placed in the regular English class) cited a reason that did not directly blame individual students for their lack of success. While in reality students may fail to understand class material for reasons other than personal choice or disregard for the teacher, only those students in grade level English openly considered this possibility.

Lopez and Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that Mexican-American second generation youth are aware of barriers such as discrimination, but nevertheless display “a strong ethic of self-reliance and rugged individualism” (p. 76). This is especially apparent in urban school settings, in which students are faced with the contradiction between the teachers and administrators who pledge commitment to meet student educational needs and the absence of any “clearly articulated help-giving and help-seeking norms and values typically embodied in cooperative contexts” (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 77). Students at Webster were primarily consistent with this attitude, especially those who were less successful academically. Javier explained how students were placed in other English classes (outside of his own High Point English class), “Well, they know more than you. I think they study more, they get prepare on the assignment so they can come to school and be ready to learn. I think if they, they are smart they are good to be in another class.” Jessica reported that she had flunked and stayed in the same grade, taking glum responsibility in the matter.

Christina and Alicia, who were placed in grade level English and were reported to be good students, also displayed a sense of self reliance in maintaining their grades. Christina participated in an after school program that paired her with an academic mentor. She was vocal about being unhappy with her first mentor, so the program paired her again with her current mentor. Alicia related the story of how her PE uniform had been taken. Though she first understood that she was going to be excused for not dressing in uniform, the teacher later told her it would negatively affect her grade. So she explained. “So if I want a higher grade then I have to run all week. So then we all agreed that we’re going to run this whole week, like the entire whole week so we get more points to get a better grade.” Rather than dwelling on the fairness or unfairness of the teacher’s decision, Alicia simply responded by working to better her grade.

Learning and Not Learning English

These notions of academic and success and failure and the accompanying “contradictory consciousness” extended to English class placements and language proficiency. Students spoke openly of their struggles learning English. Vinh said that he liked his school and his English class, but also mentioned that it had been difficult for him; because he had only been in the U.S. for two years there were “too many trouble.” He also said that his classmates in English were “smart” whereas he felt “like I’m stupid…cause they’re all smart.” He surmised that students who weren’t successful were probably “lazy”. While Vinh said that the U.S. felt like home and socialized easily with classmates, he still felt frustrated about his English language learning and held himself accountable. Clearly, like so many of the other students, he attributed failure to his own behaviors and choices.

For other students like Chao, this contradictory consciousness seemed to manifest in observable frustration. Although he was born in the U.S. and only visited China once at the age of three, Chao was identified as an English language learner. His 7th grade English teacher Ms. Sampson felt it was an inappropriate placement for him. She also
mentioned that Chao often wrote in his notebook for class how bad he felt about being in the class. When directly asked about his English class, Chao claimed that he did not know how the English classes were organized or why he was in his particular English class. When pressed further, he said that if he could choose, he would be in “regular English” and not have “two periods of the exact same class.” He described his fellow students as “bad” because they were often “talking” and “throwing stuff”, unlike what he experienced in his other classes. He still could not or would not explain the English placements in 8th grade, but did agree that he was in the right class that year when he was placed in grade level 8th grade English.

Chao, like Jessica and Tommy, was American born, spoke a language other than English at home and had been identified as an English language learner. The experience of these students point to a larger complication: students who are born in the U.S., attend American public schools throughout elementary, and enter middle school without a full social and/or academic command of English. While the case of Chao may have been a matter of misclassification, there were certainly students, like Jessica, who did not identify English as their first language and/or did not demonstrate English proficiency despite having been born and raised in Ocean City neighborhoods and attending local public schools. Ms. Clark acknowledged this phenomenon, remarking, “You know one of the problems in Ocean City is many of these students were born in Ocean City and don’t speak English. And so what we’re trying to do is say you know you went through grade school for six years, kindergarten through 5th grade and you still have not become proficient in English. Okay, now’s the time, you’re going to be going to high school after here, now’s the time. You really have to knuckle down and get real.” When asked why this happened, she answered that she herself did not understand why this occurred.

Rumbaut and Portes (2006) point out that socioeconomic factors have the biggest impact on how quickly adult immigrants learn English and on the nature of bilingualism the second generation develops. Contrary to simple models of language acquisition and assimilation that assume a binary between cultural pluralism (and bilingualism) or non-assimilation among the second generation immigrants, the reality proves to be much more fractured and complicated. In some schools, the English-only approaches call for linguistic assimilation and also, in turn, a kind of cultural subtraction (Valenzuela, 1999).

In addition, Valdés (2001) illustrates that without meaningful instruction and exposure, students pass through school actively engaging in not learning English, much like the students at Webster. Valdés’ ethnography offers a portrait of how students struggle to learn English in the current climate of English only policies, and how “immigrant schools together collude to bring about what Kohl (1991) has referred to as not-learning…a milder, less oppositional form of resistance [than failure]” (Valdés, 2001, p.3). For two years, Valdés followed the recently immigrated students who began their schooling at Garden Middle School and then diverged along various paths academically and personally as they attempted to “acquire not only interpersonal communicative proficiency in English…[but] also acquire academic proficiency” (Valdés, 2001, p.6).

As Valdés makes abundantly clear, the process of truly acquiring “proficient social and academic English” cannot be addressed by superficial and formulaic measures. The acquisition of “advanced English literacy”, in reality requires a complex cross-section of knowledge, a kind of knowledge that would encompass the “multiple,
interrelated competencies related to reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (Scarcella, 2002). As noted by Wong Fillmore (2004), a supportive language learning environment would provide ELLs with models--“speakers of the target language who know it well enough to provide the learners with access to the language and the help they need for learning it” as well as “a social setting which brings learners and target language speakers into frequent enough contact to make language learning possible” (p. 52-3).

Valdés’ final recommendations include the following points: ELL students need to be instructed to develop academic English in particular, have access to interpersonal English, academic English, and content matter of subject areas. She calls for an end to the isolation of these students, and advises: “programs for immigrant students must be seen as school-wide initiatives for which all teachers are responsible.” Valdés also makes the strong point that it is not possible to learn English in a year, and observes that English is approached as a content subject without a real intent to provide support for learning and development. Even in the best case scenario with concerned teachers and invested students, without school-wide structures and thoughtful pedagogy in place, there exists no real possibility of advancement for students.

With students at Webster divided into tracked English language classes, in most cases, they do not receive enough intensive and focused instruction to make notable gains in their English ability. Cases like Jessica and Tommy are not uncommon, when years of English only instruction and schooling do not translate into English proficiency, even for students born in the United States. A command of academic English in particular requires years of thoughtful instruction, even for native English speakers (Cummins, 2000). “Academic English,” a form of language that has specific linguistic properties that are unique to the disciplines of schooling, presents substantial challenges for students at all levels (Scarcella, 2003; Rumberger and Gandara, 2000; Fillmore and Snow, 2000). As Scarcella states in her analysis of the research, there has been much debate over the definition of “academic English” and its implications for teaching and learning. Fillmore and Snow noted that academic English “entails a broad range of language proficiency…[it is] cognitively demanding [and] decontextualized. It relies on a broad knowledge of words, phraseology, grammar, and pragmatic conventions for expression, understanding, and interpretation” (2000, p. 27). Academic English has particular structures and functions that make it cognitively demanding to understand and produce, in both written and spoken forms.

While the principal and various staff members appeared very aware of student language needs, and attempted to meet them, the curriculum, programs, and teachers at Webster were not equipped to make up for the lack of resources and/or meaningful instruction that the students had likely encountered at their previous schools. Ms. Clark explained the process of students’ classification and English instruction for English language learners:

if they speak another language other than English they are tested by the bilingual assessment testing center and put in a program until they satisfy the requirements for reclassification…[in] two years they almost have minimal English school proficiency in speaking and listening. And after two years many teachers say why is he in an ELD class. Why he speaks as well as I do. But, they’re not literate. It’s only that third year where we start seeing that kind of growth and of course it’s quite dramatic as it goes on…
Ms. Clark went on to explain the curricular approaches at different levels:
After they develop their language you’re going to have a lot of work on root words, prefixes, suffixes, putting words together, playing with words, labeling things along conceptual areas, then when they get to ELD A, which is now called ELD 2, as you see their listening and speaking is really good… ELD 3 is we’re only giving them one hour of ELD and one hour of Holt. And what we’re doing there is we’re starting to introduce a lot of reading and writing, a lot of practice, bringing in the newspaper, a lot of expository writing what I see what I saw, a lot of autobiographies, using reference materials in the simplest way and so forth and then by ELD 4 those kids are pretty much like the regular population, they just haven’t been able to bring their CST scores up so that they could be reclassified. They have pretty high level classes in ELD 4 or what was called C last year.

However, Ms. Clark explained in the same interview that High Point was at best an incomplete program that largely failed to meet the language learning needs of ELL students, and also that there were a large number of students who did not ever proficiently learn English by middle school, despite attending Ocean City public schools their entire lives. And in both High Point English and English Strategic class, there was no clear separation of a “lab” period and a “regular” period. Rather, Ms. Sampson simply extended the same lessons in all her classes, or made the choice to supplement the High Point class with materials from the Holt literature (which was designated as the grade level literature book). In addition, she supplemented her High Point class with core 7th grade literature novels such as The Outsiders and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. However, Ms. Sampson was recognized as an exceptional veteran teacher who was notable in her teaching ability and years of experience.

Developing bilingualism

Despite the possible challenges they may have faced, some of the focal students demonstrated a developing bilingualism. They appeared to moving along the trajectory of learning English but, unlike so many students in today’s post-Proposition 227 California schools, they did strive to maintain their home language. Alicia remembered the difficulties she had achieving fluency in English early in her elementary years. She explained that she participated in “an after school program called Princeton Review because I was behind in my English and I wasn’t really good at it, but that program specialized in English and grammar and spelling and it really helped me a lot.” In her middle school years, Alicia appeared to be comfortable with both English and Spanish at home and in school and church. Christina was another student placed into regular English for both 7th and 8th grade. Born in El Salvador, she explained that she had immigrated because her family “wanted me to get a better education because over there for school we had to pay money to go to school and so they wanted me to get a better education over here and to learn English.” While she still actively used Spanish at home and in her community church activities, she reported a developing confidence in her English during her 8th grade year.

The English proficiency of Webster’s students did not clearly correspond with their birthplace, age of immigration, or home language background. The majority of students came from a very similar socioeconomic background. In the case of Alicia and Christina, it appeared that the use of outside resources and programs had supported their
English development. They both actively used Spanish at home and felt positively about their English use. Both had been placed in “regular” grade level 7th and 8th grade English and were recognized as good students by their teacher. Both of them were actively involved in Spanish speaking church communities outside of school, and, at least in part due to their church activities, both limited their participation in school activities. It is impossible to determine what bearing these factors will have on their future academic achievement, and whether they will be able to achieve their goals of higher education. For Alicia and Christina, this involves at least attending four-year college, and then possible pursuits of business school and medical school.

Alicia and Christina’s developing bilingualism was accompanied by academic success and ambitious future goals. In her multiyear study of Vietnamese immigrant adolescents in San Diego, Zhou found that “fluent bilingualism significantly boosted self-esteem, reduced depression, and raised educational aspiration” (2001, p.216). In turn, for some youth, the “learning of English and American ways is accompanied by the abandonment of their parents’ language and culture…also accompanied by the breakdown of intrafamily communication and loss of parental control” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 267). The implications are clear: language retention or loss is most often accompanied by cultural retention or loss. For these students, full bilingualism accompanied by biculturalism is the best possibility. Unfortunately, it also seems to be a somewhat elusive one.

Language and Belonging

For other students like Javier who were not acquiring English proficiency, his continuing lack of academic success this meant an increasing sense of distance from ideas of belonging to the US. Though he conceded in his 7th grade interview that life in the US was “good…better than Mexico” and that schools were better in the US because “in Mexico they don’t use the computer, they don’t have nothing and here the schools help with books, if you need pencils”, he also expressed that “sometimes I miss my family that I have over there.” The following year, his attitude changed; he directly stated that he considered Mexico home and that he “didn’t want to came here, but I have to, all my family’s here. So I cannot stay over there but I want to go back.” Javier clearly recognized the role that language played in communication, explaining that in Mexico “they talk all Spanish. You get, like, to do the things better. I mean, not better like, you get like, if they tell you to do something, you know how to do it cause they tell you in the same language and you understand what they saying. And that’s what I think make it easy.” He further explained that “if you’re Chinese you talk in Chinese to your friend, if you’re Mexican, you say in Spanish. I mean, if you go walking with your friend from your…background, and you don’t know how to say a word, he’s not gonna get it, like, he’s not gonna get what you try to say. And that’s different cause in Mexico you speak Spanish and they understand everything.”

It is well documented that more affluent immigrant groups are able to deal with contradictory cultural demands imposed by cultural pluralism and additive bilingualism (Rumbaut & Portes, 2006, p. 236). Without economic pressures, young immigrants, first and second generation, are not faced with a zero sum choice. Where does this leave the students at Webster? These students, more often than not, make a choice of belonging along with some kind of sacrifice. Javier was alone in expressing his longing for another country as home. For all other students, a sense of home was concretely rooted in their
daily lives—their own school, families, and neighborhoods. Even for students like Vinh, who had immigrated only a few years prior, the United States is home and their hopes and visions for the future all involve lives in the U.S.

Students’ Ideas About Using Language

When asked about their language use inside the classroom versus outside the classroom, students interpreted this question to mean *how* they spoke, rather than the use of specific languages, English and otherwise. Students associated specific language use with behavior, reflecting their ideas about the correlation between student behavior and achievement. The focal students differentiated their language use along the lines of “respectful” talk while in the classroom and the use of “slang”, “cussing” and “bad words” while outside of the classroom or amongst friends. Christina explained, “Some people inside the classroom they’re more respectful then once they get outside the classroom they start saying bad stuff, bad words, like they’re using improper English.”

In the class survey given to all three classes, the students were asked to identify the specific language they spoke at home and at school. The following table illustrates the number of students who reported using two or more languages at home and at school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students using two or more languages</th>
<th>English (grade level)</th>
<th>High Point English</th>
<th>Strategic English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>Approx. 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Approx. 39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While a sizeable number of students reporting using more than two languages, students generally seemed unreflective about their use of languages other than English. To them, questions of language had to do with register rather than speaking English or not. Students were observed on several occasions using Spanish in the classroom for social interactions and to discuss class work. On a few occasions, in class student exchanges were also observed in Chinese. The High Point students had the highest self reported use of two or more language in the classroom, and the observations corresponded with these results. Students in the High Point class were the most frequently observed speaking in Spanish, most often at the start of class when they would enter the classroom, chatting with one another. In class conversation would also often be conducted in Spanish; sometimes this conversation would be about class work and sometimes it appeared to be purely social. While Ms. Sampson supplemented the High Point curriculum with literature selections from the Holt reader and structured opportunities for English practice, the students engaged in speaking languages other than English for large amounts of time within their English class.

Students expressed various levels of understanding about learning academic English in the classroom and what, exactly, it was. Isaiah explained of his English class, “We’re learning about grammar and punctuations and some people learning how to read like to say it an expression, like if you’re happy or excited, you say it like that, and yeah.” While Lisa and Bao used the term “Standard Academic English”, they had some
difficulty explaining what it was. Lisa stated, “I’m still learning more and I learned something else that I didn’t know before, like the SAE… like Standard Academic English…like you have to put, combine sentences with other words that you’re not really using before and now I’m getting used to those other words. And like have more vocabularies to learn and they’re harder.” Bao struggled to explain, “We learning Standard Academic English, stuff like that up in there…it’s like, language like, not the right words, but like how we like learn it, like when outside people use language…” He eventually dissolved into laughter and gave up his attempt to explain.

The Role of the Teacher

For all students, it seemed that the teacher played a critical role in shaping the students’ attitudes toward English class. Ms. Sampson was regarded, on the whole, with a combination of fear, respect, and affection. Ms. Sampson was a veteran teacher of Webster, who regularly had former students (now in high school or even college) come back and visit. Her firm classroom discipline was recognized by students, and regarded as somewhat of an exception. Christina explained, “Most of my other classes…they’re not well behaved and the teacher tells them something, they just scream back at the teacher and they just leave. But Ms. Sampson has it controlled, most of the students.” Another student expressed her admiration, “I like her because like she makes you learn stuff and if you don’t want to learn stuff she just tells you the truth like you don’t need to be here you can leave. I think that’s a great thing.”

Ms. Sampson often referenced her familiarity with students’ families — namely, their parents, in both her personal exchanges with students and her verbal reprimands. For instance, in one exchange, she asked the students the following question in preparation for an in class writing assignment, “What can you do to show your parents that they are appreciated? I know you all have wonderful parents.” A few students answered by saying, “I don’t.” Ms. Sampson’s response to one student was, “Stop that. I know your mother.” The students were indeed redirected by Ms. Sampson and began to work on the assignment without protest. She often used this method of citing her relationships with students’ families to discipline students, drawing upon the authority of her relationship with the parents. In shushing one student who was socializing during class, she said, “When I’m talking Trung, you don’t have a conversation. You know your dad doesn’t like it, does he.” The student answered, “No, he doesn’t” and ceased his conversation.

Ms. Sampson was also undeterred by possible language barriers, and would imply this to students. Addressing one Chinese American student, she said, “Tommy, I hope your parents speak English so when I call, I won’t need a translator.” And to another student Fernando who just won a class award for most improved student, the implication
was also very clear: “Do your parents speak English? Are you gonna make me regret giving that award?”

Students generally felt very positively about Ms. Sampson’s ability as a teacher. Students described her as “nice” and “funny”, and one student acknowledged that she felt a “special” connection with Ms. Sampson. Students also pointed out that she “pushes us to be the best we can…treats us equally” and that she “respects other language[s] and other people from [other] culture[s]”. Javier appreciated her intervention when he felt students teased him for his developing English skills. Isaiah explained that Ms. Sampson was also aware of how well students understood her instruction in class, “If people don’t get it, she’ll teach us more about it she’ll say it in other different words… sometimes she’ll be saying big words we don’t know, sometime she’ll be saying words that don’t confuse us and know what she talking about.” Bao surmised that Ms. Sampson was a good teacher due to “knowledge, experience and stuff like that.”

Ms. Sampson managed to strike this balance between pushing her students to work hard and learn the material, and providing support for their learning abilities and levels. She personally expressed her concern to me about her English strategic class, in particular over one quiz on a reading assignment entitled “An Earthquake Strikes.” She told me that most of the class had received Ds, and then there were some Fs as well. She gave me one example of a question on the passage that all of the students had answered incorrectly: “The earthquake actually lasted for a.) 5 minutes b.) 50 minutes c.) a day d.) a week.” She told me that most of the students had chosen the answer “d.) a week.” When she asked the student directly how many had experienced an earthquake, they all raised their hands. She then asked how long the earthquake had lasted and they answered a few seconds. She pointed out a lack of connection between lived experience and the material in the reading, and told me she was worried about how they would handle the CST test. Rather than assuming a lack on the students’ part, in terms of effort, ability, or prior knowledge, Ms. Sampson framed the problem as a purely academic one, and wondered how she would address this as a learning issue in class. This same attitude was evident in another class exchange when Ms. Sampson asked the students to identify the two states outside of the continental 48 states. She specifically directed the students, “Don’t yell out anything” in order to have them consider their answers. Despite this, the students answered, “Washington”, “Africa”, and “Yellowstone Park.” Ms. Sampson responded by asking, “Where are you getting these? I’m going to help you with your map reading skills [and] geography.” Again, Ms. Sampson addressed the issue as an academic one, and considered a possible approach.

Students perceived Ms. Sampson as fair and strict, but also as caring. This presence or absence of this particular trait in teachers and staff, as Valenzuela’s study *Subtractive Schooling* demonstrated, is critical to how students orient themselves to school. Students recognized a difference between aesthetic and authentic caring and perceived that most teachers gave them the message that “no one is forcing you to be here” rather than investing in a mutual interest in their education. Further, teachers’ views of students are “embedded in a larger framework that co-identifies underachievement and students’ dress, demeanor, and friendship choices” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.74). While authentic caring would involve a deep enough relationship to consider these kinds of student choices in context, the aesthetic caring climate of the school doomed these students to early and lasting judgment by these decidedly surface factors.
In the case of Ms. Sampson, students perceived her to be an authentically caring teacher, as evidenced by not only how they described her, but how they acted toward her in class. Students would respond to her compliments with obvious pleasure. She would specifically point out individual student progress, walking through class and making comments such as “Telitha, I’m proud of you… You’ve stopped making Fs and have started making As.” Students would openly seek her approval as well, asking her questions such as, “Am I doing good today?” or “Ms. Sampson, am I being good?” Students were observed visiting her during lunchtime; former students who had graduated from Webster and were attending high school also came by to visit. Ms. Sampson told me that former students who were even in college occasionally came by to visit.

This attitude of authentic caring was further demonstrated by how Ms. Sampson redirected student behavior. In one instance, she walked over to a table at which five boys had their heads down on top of the desks. She told them to “sit up”, then asked “What time you went to bed last night?” One student answered, “Eleven”, to which she replied “That’s too late… you are a growing young man.” Though she certainly did not accept the behavior of the students putting their heads down, she accepted the cause as lack of sleep rather than defiance or disinterest. In another case, two boys were involved in an exchange with female students, in which one student Hector referred to them as “putas.” She reprimanded him by saying, “You know right from wrong” to which he quietly and immediately agreed. Rather than focusing on the surface rule breaking (or the aesthetic dimension), Ms. Sampson personalized her redirection of the student.

Ms. Sampson successfully used this approach to subdue the frustrated outbursts of other students as well. There were several incidents in the classroom in which Chao appeared to grow visibly angry with his fellow classmates and with Ms. Sampson. Ms. Sampson would occasionally move his seat because of his behavior, or was able to redirect his behavior with a firm word. In one instance she asked him, “Remember our conversation about the seat where you’re sitting?” Chao immediately answered defiantly. “What? No.” Ms. Sampson walked over, placed a hand on his shoulder and asked again, “Do you?” To this Chao answered, “Yeah” and appeared to calm down. In another instance the teacher reprimanded Chao and a few other students for neglecting to bring their books, after she had allowed them to leave class and retrieve them, stating “I’m not going to let you do that again… It’s important that you bring your books with you to class every day.” Chao whispered “bitch” loudly enough for his teammates to hear, though this swearing was unnoticed by his teacher. A few minutes later, Chao, speaking about a vocabulary exercise, said plaintively to the teacher, “Ms. Sampson, it’s hard.” For Chao, these opposing modes of behavior were common. While he expressed his anger and frustration with his English placement through sullen or defiant behavior in class, he also recognized the authority of the teacher and ultimately heeded her attempts to discipline him and communicate with him.

There were many components to the experience of schooling for these students at Webster. Even though these students were in 7th grade, in the middle of their junior high school years, a time when adolescents typically move further into their social groups and further from their families and adult relationships, their teacher was clearly a significant part of their schooling experience and a significant relationship within school. Ms. Sampson took an approach of familiarity and directness to create an environment in
which the students felt both accountable for their behavior yet supported in their efforts. However, it is also notable that these students still held firmly to beliefs that they themselves were most responsible for academic successes and failures and for achieving learning goals. And for students who had yet to acquire proficiency in social and academic English after completing kindergarten through 7th grade in U.S. public schools, the future is not certain.

**A Larger Belief System: Diversity or Cultural Deficit**

While students are encouraged to celebrate their academic successes and look toward a bright future, they do so in the context of a dominant culture of individualism, with individual behaviors (effort and attributes) viewed as the ultimate determinants of academic achievement. These ideas, in turn, are embedded in a broader climate around academic achievement and failure. Some teachers and administrators acknowledge that Ocean City schools are not known for their academic successes; to the contrary, they are better known for being part of a larger, failing system. This overt public discourse of the “failing urban public school” is problematic and overly simplistic in many ways: it locates the failure of education in the school itself, blaming failure on the lack of quality or experience of the teaching staff or the inability of the students themselves to learn. This serves to reinforce notions of cognitive deficiencies or “bell curve” theories (there is always someone at the bottom) to explain patterns of low achievement.

Ocean City consistently reports dismal high school graduation rates: in 2005, less than 60% of students who entered in 9th grade actually graduated from high school, lower than all the neighboring school districts. The recently enforced high school exit exam has exacerbated these negative rates, especially for low performing minority students (Murphy, 2009). When the root of such failure is linked back to individual students’ ability and effort, academic failure pathologizes particular communities of students who consistently do not succeed at school, perform well on standardized tests, and or graduate from high school.

Some of the staff members at Webster attributed the students’ lack of English proficiency to the students themselves, reflecting a theory of cultural deficit. An 8th grade Webster English teacher, Ms. Wright, and the ESL coordinator, Ms. Clark, spoke of a kind of language community isolation that occurred with students, which resulted in a lack of meaningful exposure to and practice of English, especially academic English. Ms. Wright, one of the 8th grade English teachers, said that the biggest problem facing ELL students was that they “did not have literacy in their first language.” She further explained that students had “no social motivation to learn English” because they traveled in “peer groups which [were] majority Spanish speaking.” She gave the example of one of her classes, which could be 70% Spanish speaking and therefore did not give the students an opportunity for English immersion. She said that students moved about in their home lives, through their communities, and passed all the way through elementary school without learning English proficiently, regardless of whether or not they were born in the U.S. She pointed out that the same was true of other ethnic language communities, such as Chinese and Cambodian.

Ms. Clark agreed with Ms. Wright that many parents of students “were not literate”, and this was a problem. Ms. Clark said that this problem of “uneducated” and “young” parents who operated entirely within their communities was a longstanding one that went back to Ocean City’s “zoot suit days”. In her estimation, the problem was
worse in Asian communities than in the Latino communities because parents were less willing to assimilate to American cultural values, forcing their children to be in a kind of cultural limbo in which they did not know “what culture they’re operating in.” As she stated, “culture is language.” She said an additional problem was the transient student population, with students coming and going each year. Ms. Clark also noted that the students at Webster were generally “sheltered in terms of knowledge”, and that this lack of “prior knowledge” translated into an obstacle in the classroom. Beyond the issue of language exposure alone, Ms. Clark believed that students were “not literate in Spanish and in English” and also did “not value” the languages. She also spoke to the larger challenges of staff turnover and student transfers, explaining that “the ones who left were primarily the gifted students, thinking they could do better at one of the academies. And the ones who showed up had really low CST scores…”

Principal Sims said that despite the barrier encountered with building relationships with students and families, they had been able to make progress, having monthly parenting meeting “the first Thursday of the month by language group.” She said that such approaches were helpful, and that having other in school support such as reading specialists would also help students build up necessary language skills. Ms. Wright suggested that if students were to receive instruction in English and their primary language, their learning trajectory would greatly improve. Ms. Clark expressed her “concern for out young African American males and the lack of role models for them”, but then explained that two recent African American administrative hires at Webster addressed this very issue of providing role models from their own community. Both Principal Sims and Ms. Clark pointed out that Webster’s teacher population had shifted from a majority of veteran teachers to newer teachers with little or no experience; Ms. Clark stated that 25% of the 2007-8 English staff were Teach for America teachers. If Webster were staffed with adequately trained and experienced teachers, students would receive effective instruction to improve their language skills.

Despite the accompanying challenges, the principal and focal teacher Ms. Sampson identified the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Webster as the strength and appeal of Webster. Principal Sims said that biggest challenge as an administrator was “how the bridge the performance gap” for students of color, but that she was committed to making these changes. The principal spoke of facilitating a “shift in understanding children by ethnicity” and implementing a school-wide approach to teaching students based on “build[ing] relationships.” She says the staff also was attempting to “take in strategies to use in the classroom that promote active engagement” as another method “that was effective with students of color.” Ms. Sampson, a 7th grade English teacher who had been at Webster since 1980, viewed Webster’s diversity as a distinctive trait of the school that had motivated her to stay at Webster throughout the years despite other professional opportunities.

Immigrant Students Across Generations: Not So Clearly Divided

Ethnographies of immigrant students often illustrate a marked social divide between immigrant students and the larger non-immigrant student body or more recently immigrated students and those who are second generation immigrants (Olsen, 1997; Sarroub, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela’s study highlights the notable differences between the generations of immigrant students in their attitudes toward schooling and being American. This portrait complicates the matrix provided by Ogbu (1987) in his
work classifying the different kinds of immigrant student populations and their corresponding orientations to schooling. Valenzuela examines the opposition between different groups of students and notes how all students are oppressed by the school structures and expectations, yet they actively participate in critiquing the performance and attitude of other students. However, despite their differing outward orientations toward schooling and their teachers, what is apparent for all students is that the “schooling process…[is] a powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification, or de-Mexicanization” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.161).

In addressing the division within generations of immigrant groups, Valenzuela shows how immigrants are positioned in their national identity with their reference point to Mexico. Rather than adopting a resistant attitude toward schooling, the “immigrant youth appear to infer high levels of support from teachers even against evidence to the contrary” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.15). On the other hand, Valenzuela writes that the “U.S. born youth I observed do not oppose education, nor are they uniformly hostile to the equation of education with upward mobility. What they reject is schooling—the content of their education and the way it is offered to them” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.19). The immigrant youth regard the U.S. born youth as disrespectful toward school authority and disparage their lack of Spanish language skills, equating this with a loss of Mexican identity. The U.S. born youth, in turn, view the immigrant youth as passively compliant and blind to the real attitudes of teachers and negative implications of schooling. Despite their inter-group opposition, they share a larger acknowledgement of education as an entity that goes beyond the institution of school itself. Valenzuela (1999) speaks of the idea of educación, in which many of the goals of education reside outside of school and extend beyond mere academic learning.

In Webster’s students, the picture is again more complicated than it appears to be in other settings. The demarcation between student generations and their attitudes toward schooling is not so clear. Their orientations of preferred language use, language learning, attitudes toward education, and social interactions inside and outside of school did not directly correspond to birthplace and/or immigration status (as a 1st, 2nd, or 1.5 generation student). Students did not openly demonstrate any rejection of schooling, and seemed to respect the authority of their teacher. Students commonly upheld the ideals of meritocracy in which American school culture is steeped.

But like the students in Valenzuela’s study, many students also seemed to value their communities outside of school, and their relationships, activities, and lives outside of school were of great significance. For many school is not the central focus. Lopez and Stanton-Salazar find that success for Mexican immigrants is found through “stable families acting collectively to achieve economic goals, rather than through education…[or] professional development” (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 68). For many students, school may be of limited importance, socially and academically. In middle school, as their focus solidifies outside of school, these immigrant students and students of immigrant communities seem to follow the pattern of looking outside of education to achieve their economic goals. Rather than being defined by their resistance to schooling or failure of academic success, they may simply look elsewhere and opt out of secondary school, failing to acquire a foundation for future higher education and economic prosperity.
The students at Webster had yet to demonstrate any kind of outward rejection of schooling, but for many of them, they were not experiencing their lack of academic success was consistent, and they were failing to make noticeable strides in their English proficiency. What is further evident is the lack of effective instruction in the Ocean City public schools. While there were certainly caring and committed teachers and administrators at Webster, and most likely at the other schools these students attended, that alone is not enough to meet the challenges of teaching a large number of English language learners and low income students who face a number of difficulties in their personal lives. The larger failure of the Ocean City public schools is evident in the sizeable number of dropouts and also those students who fail to graduate from high school with a diploma. Nationally, youth criminal activity is again on the rise, and considerable number of Ocean City youth (especially minority youth) continues to be involved in violence and crime as both perpetrators and victims (Noguera, 1996). While these students at Webster depend upon the support networks of family and community, this alone will not be enough to guarantee their academic success and wider options for their futures. The need for systematic, widespread change in the public schools is evident, but when and if this change will happen is not. If these Webster students succeed, it will be despite their education, not because of it.
CHAPTER 5

Immigrant children must constantly straddle these different worlds—that of their adolescent peers and that of the adults. In the process of growing up, they are unlike other American adolescents, who simply fight between an adolescent world and an adult world. They also have to struggle to make sense of the inconsistencies between two separate adult worlds: that of the immigrant family or community and that of the larger society.

Zhou, 2001, p. 214

Ethnicity cannot be reduced to identical sociological functions…ethnicity is a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions, and…these dynamics of intercultural knowledge provide reservoirs for renewing humane values. Ethnic memory is thus, or ought to be, future, not past, oriented.

Fischer, 1986, p 201

The Vietnamese people, they speak Vietnamese. Or Spanish, speak Spanish with my friends. So I think that’s like, some people from here, from Ocean City, talk with us, talk with the Mexican people, it’s like it’s not, it’s not normal to see a Chinese guy with a Mexican guy ‘cause they gonna say, ‘Ohh, who’s that? Why he’s with him? He’s not Mexican.’ But I think it’s good to be, to know different people from different cultures.

Javier, 7th grade student, High Point English

For students like Javier, there is a clear link between linguistic identity and ethnic identity, both in the way they define themselves and the way they are perceived by others. However, for Javier and for many Webster students, the process of acculturation (whether linguistic, social, or cultural) is not a straightforward, linear path. As his 7th grade year progressed, Javier’s initial optimism about attending school in the U.S. diminished considerably, though he voiced positive feelings about his English teacher and his home life. He expressed both excitement and apprehension about growing older, reporting somewhat jokingly that the best thing about his age was that he might work in three years and then also the worst thing about his age was that he might work in three years. As Javier’s case illustrates, adolescent immigrant youth often feel conflicted between many competing elements within their school lives and their home lives, between the expectations of looming adulthood and the lingering developments of adolescence.

This chapter will focus on these elements of identity for adolescent immigrant youth, on the construction of identities based on the categories of race, language, and achievement. It will attempt to address the racialized identities students construct for themselves and other students, and to explore the basis of these constructions.
language is not English and by the 7th grade, some have still yet to achieve a full social command of English, let alone a proficiency in academic English. Even more so than language identification and ability, the racial and ethnic self-identification of adolescent immigrants and children of immigrants does not follow any kind of consistent, predictable shift across generations. Adolescence in particular is a time of identity confusion and shifting “along dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and social status” (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p.68). Even race may be both a “variable and a constant” as an index of identity; thus students are prone to identify themselves differently based on a number of outside circumstances within a given point in time (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 72).

For Javier, as his 7th grade school year passed on, he failed to raise his grades, change his assigned English class (in other words, he did not get redesignated and move to grade level 8th grade English), and improve his confidence in his English skills. Rather, he experienced an increasing sense of dissonance with school and learning English. He started to lose his optimistic outlook on living in the U.S. and clearly stated that he did not feel like the U.S. was home. Javier was acutely aware of his status as an immigrant, and did not seem inclined to identify as an American. Asked about his views on the election, Javier said, “I think… immigrant other peoples watching all those things because they want to know what is going to be the thing in the future, if the president is going to be good.” But then he also spoke somewhat hopefully of the future, agreeing that things would change “cause [the] other president always promise things they don’t do.”

As pointed out by Rumbaut and Portes in their theory of segmented assimilation, the question is not “whether the second generation will assimilate to American society, but to what segment of that society it will assimilate” (2006, p. 253). Background parental factors such as family structure and financial status, intergenerational patterns and the various obstacles they may encounter in the U.S. (i.e. racial discrimination) all factor into if the second generation will experience downward or upward assimilation, to what degree and if they will do so with any degree of bilingualism or biculturalism.

For Javier, he began to perceive diminished possibilities as his duration of living in the U.S. lengthened. He was more resolute in his desire to someday return to Mexico as his home. This phenomenon is documented in studies of adolescent immigrants, whose increased sense of racial discrimination (both in future economic opportunities and in the school environment) is sometimes matched by an increased identification with their ethnic group of origin (Zhou, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). This “ethnic resilience” is one possible response to an increasingly negative association with American school culture and larger expectations (Zhou, 2001).

For other students, their trajectory follows another path, as in the case of Vinh. Vinh is a recently immigrated Vietnamese student who was placed into English strategic class for 7th grade. He said his family had moved over for “education” and also because his family did not make much money and “we don’t have enough money I think.” Though he had only been in the U.S. for a few years, he said that both English and Vietnamese were both languages he could comfortably speak. He used Vietnamese at home with his parents and English with his younger six-year-old sister, whom his parents were trying to teach Vietnamese. Vinh had recently visited Vietnam and said that he had been “glad to come back here” and felt that home was “right here.” Though Vinh openly
spoke of his struggles in acquiring English and attending a new school in a new country, he seemed to have a generally positive outlook on his school experience.

Issues such as legal status and family future plans also factor into if and how the students will stay on in the United States, and how they will fare if they do so. As Tiffany explained, “Well, my dad’s parents, they weren’t born here they were born in Mexico and my dad was born in Mexico, too, but he got papers. And so does my mom. And my mom’s parents were born in Mexico but they got papers too. Well, my mom’s parents and my dad’s parents got papers. Well, everybody’s got papers.” Students displayed some level of awareness about the importance of legal status even if they did not understand the particulars. Another student explained that her father had “fixed it” so that they could continue to live in the U.S. Other students like Christina were aware that their stay in the U.S. might not be permanent. She stated, “We’re planning to go back [to El Salvador], but, I don’t know… they wanted me to get a better education because over there for school we had to pay money to go to school and so they wanted me to get a better education over here and to learn English.”

The cases of these students at Webster illustrate the complex relationships for immigrant youth between language acquisition, acculturation to American society, and racial and ethnic self identification. As Zhou points out, “patterns of identity shifts are multidirectional” for immigrant adolescents (2001, p. 202). Declaring oneself American as well as Mexican, Vietnamese, or any other ethnicity are not mutually exclusive actions or categories. On the contrary, this embrace of a multilayered identity is “uniquely American” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2001).

Race and Ethnicity: Dynamic Categories, Shifting Meanings

As defined by Fischer (1986), “ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided... ethnicity is a deeply rooted emotional component of identity” (p.195-6). Ethnicity, like many other components of adolescent identity, is indeed a dynamic category. For many immigrants, both adult and adolescent, ethnicity is more of a salient category initially upon arrival to the U.S.; the process of racialization happens after arrival as part of acculturation into the U.S. culture and perceptions (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006; Olsen, 1997). Ethnicity is most often equated with one’s national origin; for first and second generation adolescent immigrants who may have little or no familiarity with the “home” country, ethnicity is more of a cultural and familial association. While the students at Webster used racial and ethnic labels almost interchangeably (as is discussed later), the issue of race itself remains a much more complicated and tenuous one. In some school settings, students are socialized in to specific American understandings of race, in which associations between race and achievement, identity and belonging translate into often negative perceptions of limited potential and the consequence of diminished expectations (Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

In the considerably diverse environment of Webster, how do students perceive and categorize one another? How does this process of ethnic identification and racialization take place within schools? Webster’s student population is almost entirely non-White, and the racial categories offered to explain its demographics offer an incomplete explanation. In other environments, students may feel compelled to measure
themselves against those students who are clearly perceived as American, by race, birthplace, language, or all of these (Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). At Webster Middle School, these boundaries are not so clearly demarcated. Lopez and Stanton-Salazar (2001) observed that children of immigrant parents, as well as immigrant students themselves, may have ambivalent feelings about the meaning of racial categories; this was most certainly true at Webster. In a school in which there was no middle class, white, English speaking, American ideal, students did not appear to hold themselves in comparison against this standard or even be aware of it on any significant level.

Students used ethnic and racial labels almost interchangeably, not displaying any awareness of a discernable difference between the categories or perhaps not assigning any significance to these differences. In surveys administered by class, students identified their cultural backgrounds with various labels and explanations, using both ethnic and racial descriptions. Some used racial categories: “Asian American”, “Latina”, “African American”. Some signaled a mixed ethnic heritage: “Chinese from Vietnam”, “mostly Cambodian, mixed with Thai.” Others simply used descriptions: “traditional”, “just being lucky”, and “cool.” None of the students used the term “American” by itself, though one student explained that he felt “more American than Vietnamese” and another put down that she was “Chinese, but race doesn’t really matter.”

Class Discussions of Racial Identity

In a class discussion in Ms. Sampson’s class, race and ethnicity came up if directly related to story themes and ideas, i.e. a biography of baseball player Jackie Robinson or the story “Koden” in which Japanese funeral traditions were discussed. Ms. Sampson used the 7th grade Holt literature with all three of her English classes. She included stories from the Holt literature anthology in her High Point class as well, integrating specific literature to supplement the High Point curriculum. Both Holt and High Point literature anthologies seem to take a “multicultural” approach to their selections, including stories written by an ethnically diverse group of authors. (Ms. Clark, the ESL coordinator on staff at Webster, was very critical of High Point, saying that though it fulfilled multiculturalism on a surface level, the actual content of the stories was culturally and academically irrelevant for students and did not meet their language learning needs.) In class discussion, there was also an ongoing attempt to honor holidays such as Lunar New Year by writing thematically related essays or events such as Black History Month by learning about African American historical figures, such as Malcolm X.

Students generally did not express a particular interest in, knowledge of, or personal connection to these points of culture and history. When Malcolm X was introduced as a historical figure for class discussion in the English Strategic class, one student reacted by asking, “Who the hell was Malcolm X?” Students answered, “He’s a black person…a famous jazz musician… a Native American.” Finally one student answered that “he was a black person who fought for [a] civilized nation.” In the discussion generated by reading the story “Koden”, the teacher asked the students about their family and cultural traditions around funeral services. One female African American student shared, “There’s food. I can’t say. They get drunk. Ghett-ooooo. Fried chicken.” Another Asian male student stated that, “Everybody goes to my grandma’s house and we do a lot of stuff.” The teacher prompted, “Well, name some of the stuff that you do.” Another student interjected, “Kill a pig.” The Asian male student ignored
him and replied, “Well, we burn incense.” The discussion curtailed at this point, with the African American female student groaning under her breath, “All this Asian stuff.” The tenor of these discussions was typical of the classroom, in that students would frequently interject personal comments and often incorrect ideas about the cultural or historical topics in discussion. However, teacher and students never seemed to take offense at the assumptions made, as the discussions themselves were made up of students’ offhand comments, and students would often take the opportunity to tease one another.

Generally in these discussions that involved race or racial and cultural identity, students’ contributions and comments were not based on personal anecdotes. One discussion about immigrants and what it meant to be an immigrant came up in Ms. Sampson’s English Strategic class. Ms. Sampson presented the following writing prompt: problems that children of immigrants face. Ms. Sampson asked the students to define “immigrant”, and the students answered that immigrants were “people that wasn’t born here” and “they don’t know nobody here.” When the teacher pressed the students further to brainstorm what kinds of problems immigrants faced, the students shared thoughts such as, “They don’t know how to read or write.” Students chimed in with a list of potential problems immigrants could face: “[problems with] learning the laws out here”, a “problem with grammar”, a “problem with learning to get around” and “a hard time getting a job.” However, though some of the students who answered were themselves immigrants or children of immigrants, none of the answers or experiences were personalized. When the discussion turned to what the definition of a “migrant” was (in relation to a story about a migrant farmworker family), the students first supplied the definition of a migrant as: “to be illegally here… a person that works for free” before using the classroom dictionaries and finding a more accurate description.

Writing at times provided a medium for students to more express more personal feelings. The week following the discussion of immigrants, students read through an excerpt of a book entitled *Barrio Boy* by Ernesto Galarza (included in their Holt anthologies), about the author’s experiences as a young boy growing up in the United States as a Mexican immigrant. Javier, one of the focal students included in this study wrote the following about the story: “*Barrio Boy* is a story tells what a few people lived. In American learning English is a hard cause. They make funny about how you pronounce all those words. Is good the they write story abased on the life. This makes me happy the people can read what we passed to be here. We cross the border then we don’t talk English. So I feel happy to be learning new words.”

Javier clearly identified with Galarza’s story and felt gratified that other students might be exposed to his own experience of learning English as an immigrant in the US. This self identification seemed unusual; in his focal interview, Javier openly identified himself as a transplant, and spoke of immigrant issues as separate from the general population. Other students (as discussed in the previous section) alluded to their families’ legal and citizenship status. However, this did not seem to have any bearing on them also identifying themselves as immigrants, and somehow separate from the U.S. population.

Social Lives: In and Out of School

Students at Webster moved between various social worlds—those in school and outside of school. And even within school, students recognized differences in their behaviors and expectations (i.e. in language use) inside and outside of the classroom.
Though all the focal students appeared to have a solid set of friends at school, these school social lives did not define their social identities outside of school; in fact, they seem to take a back seat to their involvement with family and the friends from their own neighborhoods or churches. At least for their middle school experience, these students occupy two distinctly separate social spheres.

**Socializing in the Classroom**

In English classes, students were largely allowed to choose their own seating (unless moved by the teacher because of behavior). With the exception of one or two desks, most students sat in circular tables and often worked in groups for class work. Some tables were all one gender, while others were mixed. The same was true for racial background—some students were noticeably seated in homogenous groups of all Asian, Latino, or African American students, while other tables were somewhat mixed. Students were observed on numerous occasions engaging in talk about the class work or in personal conversation using Spanish, Cantonese, or a language other than English, and these linguistic commonalities also appeared to affect their seat choices. Students also regularly passed or threw notes to one another, and engaged in personal conversation or teased one another.

Students’ style of dress seemed to reflect their position as adolescence, caught or stuck between childhood and adulthood. While many students dressed in popular styles (baggy pants for boys, tight jeans for girls, large print hooded sweatshirts for both), these students also commonly carried backpacks with childish prints (i.e. Dora the Explorer, or SpongeBob). One student walked around with a pacifier around her neck, in stark contrast to her adultlike dress. The vice principal Mr. Nguyen addressed student dress code violations, and stated that there had been an increase in “inappropriate clothing.” He reiterated the dress code of Webster: no solid red t-shirts or t-shirts promoting hustling, gambling, sexuality, gang activity, no cleavage or midriffs or underwear showing.

Students’ social discussion also reflected their post-childhood, pre-adulthood status. I observed many female discussions centered around the differences in students’ home cultures and family expectations. One typical female student exchange dealt with the use of language, and then quickly moved to the topic of dating. One student asked another, “Do you say bad words?” She answered, “In a way, I say ‘F you’.” They went on to discuss what kind of language they were allowed to use at home, then the student asked her tablemate, “Are you allowed to have a boyfriend?” She answered, “No” with the students at her table expressing various reactions. One commented, “Damn, are you living in a military house?” The talk continued as the girls discussed who was allowed to have cell phones.

This discussion did not seem atypical among female friends. Christina and Alicia also mentioned talking with friends of differences in parental rules and home culture. For Christina, she attempted to avoid actively participating in the discussions around boys and dating, and said they made her uncomfortable. For Alicia, she seemed to remove herself from those environments as much as possible (not attending school activities such as dances), but she also said that though her friends were aware of the differences in her life as a Jehovah’s Witness, they were respectful. The focal boys mentioned that they might talk about school with their friends, but they mostly reported engaging in activities. They did not tell me of any talk with friends around dating, home rules, or family.
School Friendship Groups

The majority of focal students seemed to agree: students’ racial or linguistic backgrounds were not the primary factors in determining friendship groups. While many recognized that some groups of friends were racially homogenous, they cited reasons such as common interests or common classes for generating those friendships (i.e. attending the same elementary school, having classes together, or having common interests such as basketball). Many of the focal students who were interviewed talked about having a diverse group of friends and recognized the diversity within their school, but at the same time they also claimed that race and cultural background was not a consequential factor in their own friendship groups or relationships among one another.

One female student explained, “There’s no mix. Cause I see like there’s a group of Mexican girls who speak their language. I don’t know—we have our own groups. We normally don’t mix. But like the people that I hang out with they’re like Latin—Latino or something, white, black, African American. I hang out with those people cause I don’t judge people by their race.” Another student gave a similar explanation about how students at Webster chose their friends: “Maybe with the same background, like if they’re Viet or Cambodian or Mexican they end up really hanging out with them. But I don’t think everyone’s set up in those kind of groups cause there’s also people that friends with a lot of different people and their ethnicities.” She went on to similarly point out that she herself had a very diverse group of friends and did not chose her friends on the basis of cultural background or race. The teacher Ms. Sampson surmised that “it’s a combination of both. You always have students who like to hang out with students of their own culture, own ethnicity. You have students who seem to not take that into consideration in their friendships.”

Language played a role in students sitting together in class, and also spending time together at lunch. Javier sat with other Spanish speaking male students in class, and spoke Spanish with them the majority of the time. Javier identified language as a factor in friendship, explaining that the students at Webster were “friends with similar backgrounds cause they can speak the same language. He noted that common interests could bridge differences in background, for instance “they get like one person, like if he’s a Chinese guy and a Mexican, I mean, sometimes they don’t like each other, but they like the same class or, the same—they have something similar they like and that’s how they get to be friend. They like something they both like.”

Most students noted a distinction between “their own” friendship practices and those that generally prevailed, pointing out that their own group of friends was racially diverse but that they also noticed that students did sometimes group together by racial background, sitting together or playing sports at lunchtime. Christina explained, “Yeah, well, hmm. Like there’s um, Mexican girls that hang out with other Mexican girls. And then there’s African American girls that hang out with African American girls, but there’s also like groups that are mixed. Like…there’s Asian, Mexican, African American, like there’s a bunch of girls, they just hang out with each other. Like it’s really defined like the people who are artsy and like sports and or the people who just like hang around during lunchtime.”

Focal students did not differentiate between ethnicity and race but seemed to use the two interchangeably. Christina, herself an immigrant from El Salvador, identified groups of “Mexican girls” who hung out with one another, as an equivalent category to
the “African American” and “Asian” girls who also noticeably socialized in groups. As Rumbaut and Portes (2006) assert, the parent generation of immigrants continue to use ethnicity and nationality as a “prime self-identifier” while the children of such immigrants learn to “describe their ethnicity, and even race, according to pan-national labels” (p. 159). For the students at Webster, they generally had not discerned any significant difference between the categories and labels of race and ethnicity.

*Community Networks: Family, Neighborhood, and Church*

For the majority of these students, their social lives in school were limited to their time within the school day. While they socialized with each other in class, at lunchtime, and occasionally after school, most of the students rarely or never saw their school friends after school or on weekends. Their social networks were made up of neighborhood friends, family, and church groups. Of the 12 focal students, only Isaiah, Bao, and Javier reported seeing their school friends after school or on the weekends. Bao regularly spent time after school on school grounds with his “dance crew”, made up of other Webster students. He reported spending time with them on the weekends as well, sometimes going to the movies. Isaiah and Javier encountered friends from school on occasion purely by chance and coincidence. Isaiah participated in sports through a local recreation center, and he would play sports with school friends if they were involved in the same center and present during the times he visited. On weekends he would occasionally go to the center to play video games and pool, and if school friends were there, he would also engage with them at this time. Javier spent the majority of time with his family out of school, but if went to the park to play soccer, he would sometimes incidentally meet friends from school.

However, while the other focal students sometimes communicated by phone or computer with their friends (using instant messaging or MySpace most commonly), they did not see their school friends. Alicia spent time with family and church friends, engaging in chores, playing at the park, and also “preaching” on the weekends as part of her Jehovah’s Witness faith. Christina, too, spent the majority of her time with family, often engaged in church related activities. Chao said he spent time with family, shopping for groceries or clothes on the weekend. A few students had responsibilities involving childcare. Isaiah reported regularly helping with his younger sister, and Lisa most often went to her “auntie’s house” after school, where herself, her mother, and occasionally her grandfather would look after up to a dozen young cousins.

On the weekends, the students all reported spending time with their families. One student told me, “I don’t see my friends during the weekend. I go to parties with my mom or we go visit my grandma. Yeah, we go to like the store.” Several students reported family meals, such as going to “buffets or restaurants to eat” or “eat[ing] dinner with my whole family.” Students also often engaged in activities such as playing sports or watching movies with their cousins or adult relatives. One student described her weekends, “On the weekends I be with my mom, my auntie, like my family, we just hang out. Sometime go to go buy movies and we just watch at home and my family they just talk around the house and stuff.”

The students recognized the importance of their family networks. Most students openly spoke of a strong family bond and involvement with their family. For instance, Javier consistently conveyed an extreme loyalty to his family. His plans after high school were to get a job because he “just want[ed] to help my mom and my dad.” He just
wanted “to work, I don’t care where I kind of work, nothing that has to be bad things. To help my parents, that’s the only thing that I want. What I’m doing is, what I try to do is to help my parents, my mom.” Javier seemed highly aware that this loyalty to his family translated to duty and obligation, both of which he strove to fulfill, but also felt to be a heavy responsibility. Tommy voiced similar future plans for “doing college and then try to get a job so I could earn more money for my family.”

Students’ outside interests and hobbies were also balanced with an awareness of family obligation and duty. Javier had an avid interest in soccer, playing as often as he could after school and on the weekends, and watching his favorite international teams compete on television. He rarely talked on the phone or used to computer to communicate with friends. Instead, he would play soccer at every opportunity outside of school. However, even this hobby was viewed through a lens of guilt and obligation to his family; Javier explained, “I like to play soccer…I think it’s better to me, for me to play soccer, but…I think I have to do my work and I do it. It’s not just for me, it’s for my family, that I have to do my work. My parents are, they are waiting the report card to get a good grade so I have to do it for them cause they’re wasting their money to buy me clothes and these things, so I can pay them, like that.”

These students illustrated a notable “family cohesion” rather than an intergenerational conflict, as experienced by some immigrant families (Zhou, 2001; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001, 2006). Students like Vinh expressed job aspirations that echoed their parents. Speaking of his father, Vinh explained, “My dad going to the college right now. He try to do the construction thing.” When he spoke of his own future plans, he said he also planned to attend college and perhaps pursue work in construction. Even Isaiah and Bao, who had been identified by their teacher as discipline problems in the classroom, spoke of spending large amounts of time with their families and did not express any sense of conflict with their families’ expectations.

Language played a large role in maintaining the close and cohesive family ties for these students. Rumbaut and Portes have found, through their longitudinal studies on immigrant youth, that individuals who function as “fluent bilinguals in early adolescence (at age fourteen, on average) experienced better family relations and personal psychosocial adjustment outcomes than English monolingual but that these effects remain significant after controlling for age, sex, length of U.S. residence, and a number of other variables.” (2006, p.267) Further, “when second generation children acculturate to American ways without abandoning their parents’ language and key elements of their culture, it is easier for parents to guide and support in the children’s quest for achievement and success” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 267).

Church provided another forum by which families spent large amounts of time together engaging in a group task. For Christina and Alicia, church was a central focus in their time outside of school. Along with their family members, church provided another network that served to bring their own extended families together on a regular basis, and also broaden their community and ethnic networks as well. Church serves as a social focal center for many immigrant communities, but especially for recent immigrants who “have felt the need to reaffirm their religious roots or, alternatively, to find new ones, with consequences that have been momentous, both individually and collectively” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 301). A few other students in the classroom also
mentioned their family involvement in church, and implied that it occupied large amounts of time outside of school.

Whether or not students attended church, the importance of larger community networks was clear. As Zhou (2001) reports, “generation dissonance [between parents and children] need not always cause a loss of parental control.” Instead, “the structure of social relations within the family and immigrant community” can provide the reinforcement of parental and cultural expectations and norms (p.211). For the time being, the focal students at Webster seem to be provided with a foundation of support from their families and communities. However, it must be recognized that “not all families possess the means to promote educational success and ward off the threats posed by discrimination, narrowing labor market options, and street gangs and drugs” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 266).

It is difficult to predict if and how these adolescents will succeed academically and beyond, and if their families will be adequate support to succeed beyond the very real challenges of poverty, crime, and rampant student failure in the greater community of Ocean City.

**Facing Challenges at Webster and Beyond: Youth, Poverty, and Violence**

While teachers acknowledged the vast change and improvement in Webster both academically and socially over the past several years, students continued to face issues of poverty and violence in their greater communities. A former teacher recalled his first days at Webster in which several students would walk around with the local neighborhood gang numbers on their backpacks (the numbered streets and avenues which served as their “territories” and gang names). This was not the case while I was at Webster. Another staff member also spoke to the issue of gang violence that the students faced in their communities, while it was no longer a great presence within the school. Despite these improvements in the immediate school environment, students acknowledged an awareness of violence and an acceptance of its presence in their communities with a matter of fact attitude. In a class discussion centered around an article entitled “The Day I Left My Gang” (written by the cousin of Ms. Sampson’s former student), students easily provided a long list of local gangs, and provided much input when considering why someone would join a gang.

In interviews, many focal students voiced their complaints about all the fighting between students that took place at Webster, and some expressed more serious concerns. Isaiah said he chose to stay out of any kind of trouble his peers might be involved in, such as “robbery and stuff.” Alicia recounted the tale of one friend with a family heavily involved in gang activity. She explained that she and her family members had tried to help, telling “her to go to counseling.” Alicia reflected, “it’s a terrible thing to see, someone getting hurt…it paralyzes you.” For other students like Fernando, the U.S. seemed a safe haven compared to their homelands. He spoke of feeling safer in general in the U.S., as he explained, “in El Salvador, there’s a lot of gangs and…the friends that I have there, they get killed with gangs.”

Ms. Sampson mentioned several students dealing with difficult family and personal problems such as domestic violence and unplanned pregnancies, and stressed that her students were not “bad kids”, they were actually “good kids” caught up in tough situations. Ms. Clark expressed similar sentiments: “The neighborhood becomes increasingly violent and many of our students have experienced or seen in some way
violence in the community… we’re seeing more students coming in having seen or experienced violence within their family or relatives or friends… also the gang activity is increasing, not in the school but in the community.”

The larger reality of their neighborhood and Ocean City itself is clear. Poverty and violence are a real presence, affecting the youth on an immediate level. For students to eventually drop out of school and then live in the same conditions as adults is not uncommon; Ocean City’s high school drop out rate is reported to be at a staggering high of 37% for a four year average (Murphy, 2008). A large portion of Ocean City youth belong to the immigrant communities, and as a part of their American urban adolescence, they run a real risk of academic failure, and beyond this, of poverty and involvement with crime (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006).

For the students at Webster, students like Jessica and Javier openly admitted to their academic failures with some sense of shame and responsibility. In equal measure, they all spoke of making efforts to do better in the future, to improve their grades, their English, and their overall performance at school. Even for students who are academically successful at the time of middle school, given the statistics, their chances for academic success during high school and beyond are uncertain.

Homelands: Finding a Place and Sense of Belonging

For these students, family was the central locus of belonging. Families were the linguistic and cultural center. From this central focus of family, students determined their relationships within school based on family expectations and attitudes about schooling. These relationships shaped their notions of who they were as language users, students, and as members of ethnic or national groups. Immigrant students were wholly aware of the circumstances through which their families had come to the U.S.; most spoke of economic and educational opportunities. Some had relatives previously established in the states, as in the case of Vinh and his family. Vinh spoke of his uncle assisting his family in coming to the U.S. Extended family networks were often in the immediate communities of these families, whether they were made up of blood relatives, church congregations, or both. Ms. Clark explained that young, uneducated parents chose to immigrate to the states for economic reasons, “for survival”, and then upon arrival, operated “entirely within [their] communities.” While this characterization may have been a bit extreme, it is abundantly clear that community networks were essential for the students and their families to establish themselves socially and also somewhat economically. These networks were most often built around family and relatives, and occasionally included neighbors or fellow church members. Consequently, they were also unified by linguistic and sometimes ethnic connections.

For these students, linguistic and cultural identities are rooted in these community networks rather than in a geographic locale. Homeland, in essence, is more of a representation than an actual, physical place. For Jessica, who has never been to Mexico, she strongly identifies as Mexican and speaks Spanish as her first language. Still struggling with English, she speaks of someday becoming a dentist like the ones she knows from her local Clinic de la Raza. In class, completing as assignment describing their “dream vacation”, one student spoke of going to China and another dreamed about going to Vietnam. Whether students have physically been to their “home” countries is almost irrelevant. They identify the U.S. as home and are socialized here, yet at the same
time, they identify linguistically and culturally with their parent or home languages and cultures.

In her ethnography of Yemeni female students living in a suburb of Detroit, Sarroub (2005) speaks to this phenomenon. She explores how culture, ethnicity, and language inform a sense of “homeland” when birthplace and residence are mere technicalities. All of the Yemeni students were either U.S. born or immigrated to the U.S. under the age of six; English usage per se did not present a barrier in their schooling experiences. Like the students in Valenzuela’s study, while these young women consistently negotiated the conflicting demands and expectations of schooling and their home culture, they also criticized the newly arrived Yemeni immigrants and were quick to differentiate between themselves and the “boater” population of students.

In discussing the meaning of a homeland for the hijabat, Sarroub explains how the imagined and real homeland are one and the same. For the hijabat “home is not only a space; it is also a set of relationships and ideas the proffer a different set of expectations from those of school” (Sarroub, 2005, p.21). Furthermore, “for girls like Layla, Yemen and its cultural and religious values were ever present in their lives, even when they had never traveled there. However, the hijabat were sojourners who did not completely identify with the United States or Yemen as their home, but instead found a ‘home’ in managing their liminal space” (Sarroub 2005, p.45). The experience of these students challenges the idea of what homeland and immigration mean. Home itself was a temporal space and more of an idea than a finite locale; immigration, in turn, seems more of a consistent state of being than a completed act.

For these adolescent immigrant students at Webster, identity and belonging become more of a complex and dimensional question. However students may identify with racial or ethnic categories, none of the possible answers are necessarily in contradiction with being American. In fact, their linguistic, cultural, and academic identities are uniquely American—a cross section that is a product of modern American urban culture.

Part of the real challenge for these youth is that they are part of larger ethnic communities who do, in fact, have negative historical relations with the U.S. government, or whose current relationship is based upon uneven economic circumstances. Many ethnic and immigrant communities play a large role in supplying minimum wage or untrained labor for U.S. industry. For instance, while the Vietnamese are “still heavily concentrated in minimum wage occupations and still proportionately rely on public assistance to survive” (Zhou, 2001, p. 196). This may be traced back to their specific immigration history in the U.S. The Vietnamese American population is a result of, like the immigrant communities from Cambodia and Laos, the historical U.S. military involvement in their home country (Zhou, 2001). Immigrant youth growing up with these realities exhibit an increasing awareness of the accompanying discrimination. The second generation “inherit this preexisting stigma, and it is reinforced by their own life experiences.” (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p.73) In fact, “the more educated, proficient in English, and informed immigrants are, the more critical their views and the greater their perceptions of discrimination” (Zhou, 2001, p. 216).

Rumbaut and Portes (2006) state, “perhaps at no stage of life are assimilative processes more intensely experienced, or assimilative outcomes more sharply exhibited, than during the formative years of adolescence” (p.193). While assimilation is surely
neither a linear nor a uniform process as experienced by adolescents, there are many negative effects, both emotional and physical, associated with it. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) “found that for virtually every empirical indicator, second-generation youth had poorer physical outcomes and were more prone to engage in risk behavior than foreign-born youth. For example, second-generation youth were more likely than the first generation to have missed school due to a health or emotional problem in the previous month, to be obese, to have engaged in deviant behaviors (delinquency, violence, and substance abuse)” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 194). In addition, they found that “incarceration rates are much lower among immigrant men than the national norm, despite their lower levels of education and greater poverty, but increase significantly among the second generation… “. This suggests that “the process of Americanization can lead to downward mobility and greater risk of involvement with the criminal justice system for a significant segment of this population” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006, p. 197).

For all youth, adolescence is a time fraught with challenges and transition. But for these immigrant youth, first and second generation, it is a documented reality that it is a much more tenuous and precarious time. For these youth, the stakes are higher and much more permanent. It is critical to continue to take a closer look at the lives of these youth, who are at present a minority, but make up a significant portion of our American adolescents and continue to grow in number. Who we are as Americans is a constantly evolving picture, and how these youth define themselves as Americans is a reflection of this. It seems that despite insular family and community networks that provide stability and a closer linguistic and cultural ties to the home communities, these immigrant youth generally participate in a largely negative process of “Americanization”, wherein being part of the American society means a higher likelihood of delinquency, health issues, and a cultural or linguistic sacrifice.

Hopefully these students at Webster will not feel a limited choice over time of who they may be linguistically, academically, and culturally, as is the case with so many minority, immigrant youth in U.S. public schools (Sarroub, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1997). The definition of what it means to be American needs to expand to reflect the reality of who is, in fact, living in the U.S., making up large portion of its student population and work force. Webster is not unique in its contradictions, with teachers and staff celebrating its diversity as a strength of the school on one hand and then criticizing student linguistic and cultural differences as weaknesses on the other. Larger public rhetoric in the U.S. falls along the same lines.

While we may not be able to embrace the contradictions of our experiences and identity, it is crucial that we at least recognize them. In a land that claims to celebrate diversity, we should acknowledge the diversity inherent within each individual. After all, individualism is deeply embedded in the American sense of identity. It seems doesn’t seem too anti-American to advocate for a recognition of the complexity of the individual, to see the multiple intersecting and entangled threads of history within each of us, essentially, as Americans.
CHAPTER 6

What Lies Ahead: Implications for the Future

The students in this study remind us that what is learned in school extends far beyond the classes students take. Students also learn what it means to succeed or fail, and in doing so how to position themselves in relation to the larger American ideals of meritocracy and individualism. These students ultimately held themselves responsible for their learning, and though Ms. Sampson proved to be a strong, positive force in their schooling, larger institutional structures and practices were not in place to truly foster their academic success. For students like Javier, who is a first generation immigrant, an argument could be made that the U.S. and its public schooling represents improved academic and economic opportunity in comparison to the country, culture, and institutions he left in Mexico. But for students like Jessica, who were born and raised in the U.S. and attended American public schools all their lives, the fact that they still do not possess even social proficiency in English let alone academic proficiency shows that the failure is clear and is also as much ours as is theirs.

The experience of these students also reinforce what we know about the Matthew effect: the rich get richer, the poor get poorer; those with linguistic and cultural capital gain even more while those without it either fall farther behind. The reality is evident and troubling: students who demonstrate more recognized academic ability and success receive more resources and those who demonstrate less receive much less (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). English remains a means of exclusion and inclusion in the opportunity for higher education, future employment and social status in American society. Students unable to learn and achieve in unsupportive learning environments and under-resourced schools will continue to receive less and will continue to be excluded from opportunity. When I returned to Webster the year following my research, I found that only one of the focal students in the High Point and Strategic English cohorts had successfully moved into the grade level English track. In addition, the low rates of high school graduation show that for these students in Webster and for their Ocean City peers, going on to pursue higher education will be the exception for the few who manage.

The students at Webster overwhelmingly believed that they themselves were responsible for their academic successes and failures, and if they did not make the appropriate efforts, they would not succeed. Even Chao, who clearly was bitter about his placement with the English language learners, could never bring himself to openly express that he might possibly belong in another class. These beliefs extended to their language learning and use of language. They felt that not learning English or demonstrating enough proficiency to be moved to the grade level English track was their failure, whether it be for not doing their work or not paying enough attention in class. Even Vinh, who learned English rapidly in the short amount of time he had been in the U.S., was very hard on himself for continuing to make mistakes which made him feel “stupid”. The students were not alone in this belief—some of the staff members at Webster also felt that the students themselves brought a language and cultural deficit to the school, one that was way beyond the power of the school to address and “fix”.

School should not be a place where students are socialized into myths of achievement, identity, and belonging in the American landscape—to judge themselves and each other to be less by standards of language, race, language, and what it means to be
American. Language standardization serves as an active tool in enforcing a “legitimate” requirement for being a true American; the sanction of official English also sanctions an ideal speaker (Kroskrity, 2005). The U.S. has historically used these kinds of “nativist” measures in regards to citizenship (Delgado, 1999). These measures, which have frequently centered around literacy and the use of language (i.e. the literacy test for citizenship), are initially met with resistance, and then adopted as standard protocol. Labeled as the “Smith-Schuck argument” (named for the two “moderate liberals” from whom it originated), such reasoning argues that a nation should have “unlimited discretion in deciding whom it shall admit” (Delgado, p.249).

Language standardization, specifically located at the site of schooling, can then be viewed along a historical trajectory, as one of several measures used to sort and classify potential citizens of the state. What does this question of citizenship mean for the immigrant population and for these immigrant students growing up in this current climate? For these students, America is the only home they’ve ever known, regardless of their command of English. Even for those more recently immigrated, with the exception of Javier, they felt that America was their home. However, by larger American beliefs, becoming American means adopting, at least to some extent, the American attitudes toward exclusivity; as revealed in the previous ethnographies, the second generation children born to immigrants readily express negative American attitudes toward recent immigrants who are their peers.

The larger climate of the nation, both political and litigious, reflects this anti-immigrant sentiment. Legislation like the recent bill H.R. 4437 (officially entitled “The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005”) passed by the U.S. House of Representatives on December 16, 2005, has spurred a flurry of protests and debate about the place of undocumented immigrants in America. The bill includes provisions that would equate the status of undocumented immigrants to that of felons, to declare the children of such immigrants wards of the state, and even to classify foreign students studying in the U.S. registered for fewer than 12 units as felons (THOMAS (Library of Congress), 2006). Similar currents of resistance to the presence of undocumented immigrants are evident in the steadily rising number of deportations. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency estimates a 10% increase in deportations in the past year, equaling about 160,000 undocumented immigrants deported.

As Americans, we live with a strong imagined national identity which stubbornly adheres to a middle class, white ideal. For immigrants who operate outside of such an ideal, this means that along with discriminatory and punitive legislation, they are also faced with the inescapable task of forging new identities in the endeavor to become American and a “legitimate” citizen (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). As many of us fall outside of such classification, we live under the guise of being less than Americans, or hyphenated identities, in which being American is automatically attached to some other cultural tag.

However, it is an egregious oversight to simply view these students as some kind of victims of our American ideals and of public schooling, as outsiders to the American experience. Though most of the focal students were not especially academically successful, with few exceptions, they also displayed a sense of optimism and hope that also might be classified as a sort of American ideal. The kind of negative attitude and
animosity evident between first and second generation students, illustrated in the previous ethnographies was notably absent in these students. Instead these students embody a kind of hopefulness about diversity. While their lives outside of school consist of time spent within their family and community networks, their lives in school are spent surrounded by their peers, who come from a multitude of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They consistently displayed a kind of nonchalance about race and ethnicity. They typically responded, from Christina to Isaiah, that they themselves had a very diverse group of friends. Most of them insisted that race was not a major factor in determining friendship. They appreciated Ms. Sampson for her strict and unyielding discipline, but also for her fairness, and for the way she treated students with equal respect and concern. They recognized these values and believed they extended to the rest of school as well. When the school first took on their language arts adoption of High Point and so reconfigured the master schedule, students uniformly expressed the belief that the school had done so to racially integrate classes. These ideas reflect a belief in the schooling system and also an attitude toward diversity that is striking in its simple expectation of how things should be. Students had not learned any discomfort around discussing notions of race, culture or ethnicity. They had not learned to think of themselves as outsiders, or as the less fortunate, with fewer possibilities. For them, true diversity is a matter of fact and reality and is not recognized as any kind of barrier.

The students also considered their futures with a sense of hopefulness and possibility. The students either had future aspirations grounded in their family members’ occupations (Vinh wanting to enter into construction like his father) or based on youthful, limitless notions of future fame and success (i.e. Tiffany’s dreams of becoming a famous singer or model). All of these students also had a singularly solid foundation in their family and neighborhood communities. While contemporary middle class Americans have moved beyond traditional notions of a nuclear family and unified household, these students and their families revealed exceptionally strong ties to their immediate families and also their extended families, involving cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, church friends, and neighbors. For these adolescents, their social base is formed not their peers, but by their families. They demonstrated a belief in community values and responsibility. Many students spoke of responsibilities to their families, and displayed a collective orientation in viewing their own place as an individual within a family and a larger community.

We must question how we can balance notions of diversity and of individualism with a broader sense of collective goals, and what we can learn from the experience of these students. The students at Webster were noteworthy not only for their attitudes toward diversity, race and culture, but also for how these attitudes challenged steadfast notions of what it means to be American. It has been demonstrated through other ethnographies of immigrant students that immigrant students often experience the process of immigration and assimilation as a kind of suspension between two cultures, never quite settling in one or the other; or they experience a constant dissonance between two competing cultures with separate values, responsibilities, and world views. Most often, the story was one of feeling failure or cultural loss, as in the students in Valenzuela and Sarroub’s studies, or feeling trapped into limiting racial categories, as in Olson’s study. These students at Webster demonstrated an unexpected resilience evidenced in their optimism in their own futures, their loyalty and ties to their family and communities, and
most strikingly, their recognition of America as their home and of themselves as Americans.

The question is this: how can we re-imagine ourselves as Americans without losing a unifying definition of who we are? Appiah (1994) offers this advice, “One form of healing…is learning to see these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are.” Baquedano-Lopez (2004) points out that “the inherent heterogeneity of communities affords the possibility of collaboration for spaces of conflict and tension to occur” and that “tension and conflict can in fact be productive strategies for learning.” This echoes Bourdieu’s notion that the confines by which we conduct ourselves can both hinder and enable us (Bourdieu, 1986).

Appiah (2006) has also more recently introduced the idea of cosmopolitanism, an alternative to the liberal frame which imposes existing values upon the greater whole. This model does not advocate a blind embrace of all values either. Rather, Appiah strives for this delicate balance between universally placing value on all individuals’ lives and livelihoods while recognizing and respecting the deep differences between that are, in fact, central to determining our own values and meaning. Appiah urges us to enter into “conversation” with one another, in an attempt to understand each others’ value systems without necessarily adopting them.

The student beliefs reflected in this study may help us work toward a working model of Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism. At the very least, these students and their experiences push us to consider different way to consider race, diversity, and achievement. A true commitment to recognizing the value of all individuals is no easy feat. If we sincerely endeavor to reform public education from this standpoint of values, it would mean not only a shift in perspective, but an ongoing implementation of change in teacher training, instruction, and curriculum development. The truth is that beyond the surface rhetoric of meritocracy and achievement, honest conversations about our belief systems make us uncomfortable. As the numbers show, the demographics of the U.S. are rapidly shifting. Rather than seeing change as a threat, we need to embrace it as a doorway to possibility. We can no longer adhere to archaic definitions of what it means to be American. We hold a collective fate, and so we need to embrace the change and diversity that marks it.
References


