

Figuring “Success” in a Bilingual High School

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Using the concept of figured worlds, this article demonstrates how the faculty, staff, and students of Gregorio Luperón High School in New York City figured “success” by prioritizing the students’ linguistic and cultural resources. “Success” was constructed specifically through granting Spanish high status, developing positive teacher–student relationships, and relying upon the cultural artifact of the opportunity narrative. This qualitative ethnographic study focuses on the school-related social interactions that took place among students, teachers and staff, to explore the socially and locally constructed model of success within this bilingual high school for newly arrived, Spanish-speaking immigrant youth.

KEY WORDS: bilingual education; newcomer immigrant schools; English language learners (ELLs).

Escuelas regulares hacen daño—los muchachos se sienten aislados. Aquí uno entiende y aprendemos los dos idiomas. Es muy bueno.

Regular schools are harmful—teenagers are left to feel isolated. Here one understands, and we are learning two languages. This is very good (Interview, 04.26.2006).

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Educational researchers who consider the schooling of Latino first- and second-generation immigrant youth regularly describe conditions in which students are ignored, devalued, and even humiliated. For example, in her moving ethnography *Subtractive Schooling*, Valenzuela (1999) details how the faculty and staff in one Texas high school divested students of their social, cultural, and linguistic resources, exposing them to academic failure. Focusing on immigrants in New York City, Lopez (2003) found that first- and second-generation Caribbean students left schools because of boredom, inattention, alienated teachers, discouraging authorities and overcrowding. Cortina and Gendreau (2003) wrote at length about the kinds of cultural disconnects and misinformation that negatively affected the academic aspirations of first-generation Mexican immigrant children and youth in New York City. Negative reports of immigrant schooling are, unfortunately, reflective of an all too common reality.

In this paper, we discuss a markedly different scenario: a high school for Latino first-generation immigrant youth in which students' social, cultural, and linguistic resources are valued and enhanced. As we demonstrate in this article, this high school manages to create a local culture that positions students as successful. As Conchas (2001) argues, institutional arrangements greatly affect the academic success of both immigrant and native-born Latino students. Here, we report on a particular institutional arrangement that positively impacts the educational trajectories of immigrant youth.

To discuss this noteworthy model, we adopt the concept of *figured worlds*. According to anthropologists Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), a figured world is a "realm of interpretation in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). The notion of figured worlds accurately describes the small, tightly bound universe of Luperón High School, a place in which social actors have produced and maintained a figured world that promotes academic success. When students register to attend Luperón High School, often because they have been turned away from overcrowded neighborhood schools, they rarely have any notion that Luperón will be different from other schools. Upon enrolling, students enter a figured world in which their linguistic and cultural resources are valued and made essential to academic achievement, thereby promoting their success.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figured worlds, according to Holland et al. (1998), are stable, shared, idealized realms involving identifiable character types and actions. They are evoked by discourses and the *cultural artifacts* of those discourses, or objects

and symbols inscribed by a collective attribution of meaning in relation to figured worlds. Cultural artifacts are the “means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful” (p. 61). Books, grades, and labels like “bad boy” or “good student” are often relevant cultural artifacts in schools. According to Holland et al., people use discourses and cultural artifacts, which evoke and represent figured worlds, to manage personal feelings and actions on a broad scale and to continuously produce identities, or senses of self. Holland et al. write that “selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts” (p. 26).

Wortham’s (2006) recent work on learning identity offers further insight into processes of social identification in figured worlds. Drawing on Lemke (2000), Wortham argues that scholars must attend to figured worlds that develop at different levels of proximity to the local as well as over different time periods (what he calls *timescales*). According to Wortham, social actors draw upon and are constrained by widely circulating sociohistorical models, or figured worlds, that develop over long periods of time, and overlap with more specific, immediate, locally figured worlds (p. 8). Thus the figured world within Gregorio Luperón High School is not independent of the sociohistorical model of “success.”

Several important models or figured worlds inform the cultural work done at Luperón High. First, as McDermott and Varenne (1995, 1998) have noted, American schools are founded upon and routinely culturally produce categories of “success” and “failure.” McDermott and Varenne (1995) demonstrate that “success” and “failure” are products “... of cultural arrangements—a product of our own activities—as much as a product of isolated facts about the neurology, personality, language, or culture of any child” (p. 331). They urge analysts to focus on how the school’s “institutionalized discourses and rituals” (McDermott & Varenne, p. 209) produce success and failure.

Overwhelmingly, American schools have relegated students whose first language is something other than English to categories of failure, rather than setting up cultural arrangements that define students’ linguistic and cultural resources as assets. Valenzuela’s (1999) ethnography, *Subtractive Schooling*, provides a clear example of a school where spaces of “failure” were routinely created for Spanish-speaking students to occupy. Valenzuela demonstrates that institutional mechanisms and authority figures denigrated the cultural resources of Spanish speaking students. For example, when Spanish speaking students entered Seguí, they were placed in separate ESL tracks, which did not lead to honors or Advanced Placement opportunities. Teachers’ preconceptions about student dress and attitudes led them to characterize students as gangsters or soon-to-be drop-outs. Teachers’

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prejudices prevented them from demonstrating “authentic caring” towards students. As a result, Valenzuela (1999) writes, “a 50–75 percent dropout rate at Seguín [wa]s systematically rationalized—year after year—as an individual-level problem” (p. 110). As Valenzuela describes, students not only failed to achieve academic “success,” but their cultural and linguistic resources were actually “subtracted” from them in the process. The widely circulating sociohistorical model of schooling for Spanish-speaking students is one that defines students as suffering from a deficit.¹

This deficit model is compounded by recent accountability policies, such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act and corresponding state and local policies that establish standardized tests as critical measures (and producers) of academic success and failure. As Koyama (2004) has shown, across the United States, high-stakes tests construct positions of failure for second language learners. In New York state, students are required to pass Regents exams in order to secure a diploma. These culturally and linguistically arbitrary exams² are difficult even for native English speakers who received all of their schooling in the U.S. However, New York City requires students to take these exams within three years of entering the school system, despite the fact that the development of academic literacy in a second language takes at least 5–7 years (Cummins, 1981a, b; Wong Fillmore, 1983). As a result, most New York City high schools with large immigrant populations have gradually increased the intensity of English language instruction. The effect has been to slowly abandon bilingual education at the high school level, perhaps the place where immigrant students most need their native language to learn difficult academic content (García & Menken, forthcoming; Menken, 2005).

In contrast to the dominant trend, Luperón maintained bilingual education. This strategic move has been critical to Luperón’s construction of “success” for Spanish-dominant students. Unlike most high schools, Luperón took advantage of the fact that, in New York, content area Regents exams are available in Spanish. This provision allowed the school to treat students’ Spanish language and literacy as a resource and teach content area courses in Spanish while developing targeted English, such as the specific English skills needed to pass the state Regents English exam required for graduation.

We argue that, in decided opposition to the widely circulating sociohistorical models of Latino school failure, the faculty, staff, and students at Luperón High School constructed a figured world of success by defining success according to students’ linguistic and cultural resources (Ruiz, 1984). Luperón High’s institutionalized discourses, rituals, and practices highly valued written and spoken Spanish and immigrant striving in ways that categorized students, *a priori*, as successful. The figured world of success at

Luperón depended on three things: treating students' Spanish language and literacy proficiency as a resource; relationships of "authentic caring" (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999) between teachers and students; and a key cultural artifact, the discourse of opportunity.

SETTING

Gregorio Luperón High School was established in 1992 as a language transition program in Washington Heights, a majority Latino neighborhood in northern Manhattan. It originally aimed to provide Spanish-speaking immigrant youth with the linguistic skills necessary to join mainstream classes at other high schools within a period of six months to a year. However, faculty and administrators were saddened to see how discouraged students became after enrolling in other high schools, and they petitioned to become a high school with the capacity to grant diplomas; they achieved this status in 2001.

The faculty at Luperón was highly educated; in 2005, 87.5% of the faculty held masters degrees or higher in their respective fields. More than half of the teachers and administrators were themselves immigrants whose first language was Spanish.³ In 2006–2007, Luperón's student population averaged 400 students. In 2005, of the 405 enrolled students, 381 were classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). The student population had an even number of boys and girls.⁴ The majority of the students (67%) were Dominican.⁵ In general, the students enrolled at Luperón High hailed from families with high rates of poverty and low levels of education. Ninety-nine percent of the student body qualified for free lunch. Notably, poverty did not stigmatize in this respect, as the school provided free lunch to all students. When students first enrolled at Luperón, they received Spanish instruction in all subject areas as well as instruction in English as a second language (ESL); as they progressed, students had the opportunity to take some advanced level content area courses in English.

Even by conventional measures, Luperón has achieved considerable success with its students. Luperón boasts a 92.4% attendance rate. It has a 10.2% dropout rate (what some call a "pushout" rate), which is significantly lower than the 25% dropout rate for newcomer Dominicans throughout the city (Cortina and Rosenbaum nd, Figure 2) and the citywide dropout rate of 14.7% (Klein, 2005). In 2004, Luperón graduated 45% of its students within four years, according to official data (Klein, 2005). More than 80% of the original cohort had graduated by the following year (Kovac, 2004). This graduation rate far exceeded the 1999 citywide graduation rate for newcomer Dominicans of 38% (Cortina and Rosenbaum nd).⁶ Luperón also had remarkably high pass rates on Regents exams, considering the obstacles

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faced by its students. Because New York state offers Regents content-area exams in Spanish, students at Luperón could study content area coursework in their native language and progress in their content knowledge while learning English.⁷

Luperón is a unique school, and so comparison to other area schools is almost impossible. However, in its annual accountability report for each school, the New York Board of Regents provides information on so-called “similar schools,” defined as schools with “comparable proportions of low-income families, Special Education students, and ELLs in combination” (Klein, 2005). According to the 2004–2005 New York City school report (Klein, 2005), despite having a much higher poverty rate, a higher average student age, an over-enrollment rate, and a much larger ELL population than so-called similar schools, Luperón performed better on measures of attendance, dropouts, and college entrance. Luperón stands in marked contrast to the kind of schooling experienced by most Latino immigrant students in New York City.

METHODS

This article is based on three years of ethnographic research at a bilingual, four-year high school in Washington Heights, New York City. Other researchers involved with the project include Ofelia García and César Fernández Geara. César, a Fulbright scholar from the Dominican Republic (D.R.), conducted fieldwork in the project’s third year and provided all the English translations used in this paper. Lesley Bartlett was the principal investigator. She and Ofelia García wrote the initial research proposal; both conducted participant observation in the school for 6 months in 2003, during which time they also conducted eight focus groups with students, two focus groups with teachers, individual interviews with several administrators, and professional development sessions with the faculty over the course of a semester. Ali Michael, a white American non-native Spanish speaker, and resident of Washington Heights, was invited to join the project during its second year. Over the course of a year and a half, she conducted many of the observations and interviews, averaging two days of research per week at the school. Norma Andrade, a native Spanish speaker who grew up in New York City, also joined the project in its second year; she participated in the interviews and the observations, averaging one day per week at the school over a period of a year and a half.

In September 2004, we initiated a formal, four-year longitudinal study of the educational trajectories of students at the school. The questions guiding our study were: *How are recently-arrived Dominican immigrant youth negotiating the new social structures, institutions, and social relations they find*

upon arrival to New York in their quest to graduate from high school? What is Luperón High School doing to help students negotiate those structures? For the past two years, we have conducted annual interviews with a cohort of twenty students and in-depth participant-observation “shadowing” of eight focal students. For the interview portion of the study, we chose to interview students who had been in the U.S. for less than six months and were enrolled in the first level of ESL classes at Luperón High. Of the 20 students who volunteered for the interview study, eight focal students were selected for observation. These eight were chosen to represent the larger pool in terms of sex and level of English language achievement. Student participation was completely voluntary. Participating students were offered some enrichment activities, such as a digital story-telling workshop and field-trips to area educational institutions. The corpus of data for this article includes two annual interviews with the cohort of 20 students, five observations of each of the six focal students, eight student focus groups, two teacher focus groups, and approximately 140 hours of general observations at the school.

To analyze the data, we used an analytic inductive approach (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). We shared fieldnotes with each other, reading them as they were produced. We met biweekly as a team to discuss developments in the data. After the first six months of data collection, we began developing codes for the data, which were periodically revised in light of developing interpretations. Ali Michael managed the NVivo database, which we used to code and organize our data. Writing together has been a further step of analysis; the process of co-authoring this article has forced us to check our interpretation of events with each other, as we developed hypotheses and searched the data for support and counter-evidence.

FINDINGS

While conducting research at Luperón, we were repeatedly struck by the optimistic atmosphere of the school. By and large, students seemed happy at the school. They were remarkably respectful to teachers and administrators; many seemed engaged and earnest in the classroom, and they welcomed us as new observers. Many of the students we met were serious strivers, engaging in multiple extracurricular activities and taking advantage of all tutoring options. Even students who were floundering academically seemed to feel safe and cared for at school. How, we wondered, were the faculty, staff, and students able to make Luperón such a generally positive environment?

As stated above, the figured world of success at Luperón depended on three key features. First, the high school treated students’ Spanish language and literacy proficiency as a resource. Second, teachers and students

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developed relationships of “authentic caring” (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999). Third, students employed a key cultural artifact, the discourse of opportunity, to manage their powerful feelings of loss at leaving their homes and families behind and to remind themselves to take advantage of schooling. We explore each of these features in greater depth below.

SPANISH AS A RESOURCE

In their work, “Culture as Disability,” McDermott and Varenne (1995) describe how cultures “actively organize ways for persons to be disabled” (p. 337). In other words, schools set up culturally arbitrary categories and expectations, and then punitively label students who do not fit within those parameters, rather than changing the categories and parameters to make them more inclusive. In the United States, at predominantly English speaking schools, Spanish-dominant students are often seen as lacking English, and then are tracked out of mainstream classes into classes reserved for the linguistically different. As Nieto (2002) writes, bilingualism is “viewed as a problem and a deficit in a context where speakers of a particular language are held in low esteem or seen as a threat to national unity. This is the case of bilingual education in the United States, and especially for children who speak Spanish” (p. 15). In contrast, the faculty, staff, and students of Luperón High culturally construct the Spanish language as a resource to be developed and supported through the curriculum (Ruiz, 1984; Nieto, 2002). The discourse of Spanish as resource is a key element of the figured world of success at Luperón.

First, Spanish is granted a high status at Luperón. Many of the authority figures in the school (including the principal, more than half of the teaching staff, the office staff, and the custodial staff) are native speakers of Spanish. They often live in the surrounding neighborhoods, and some are immersed in Dominican politics. Students in schools where English is the sole or dominant language sometimes feel they “have to choose between being Dominican or being American” (Pita & Utakis, 2002, p. 320), or between linguistic allegiance and school success. At Luperón, the pressure to choose is minimized because students regularly see models of adults who are academically accomplished, fluent in Spanish and English, and fully engaged in (though not limited to) their ethnic communities.

Spanish is so normalized at Luperón that students sometimes found it problematic when a teacher did not speak Spanish. We noticed that, especially in the first levels of English, students were less attentive and sometimes less respectful towards teachers who did not speak Spanish. Students were more critical of teachers who did not know Spanish. For example, when one

interviewer asked, “What do you think of the teachers who don’t speak Spanish?” the student responded that they should learn:

Jose⁸: *Que aprendan...español. Porque aquí la mayoría de los muchachos no hablan inglés, so ellos tienen que comunicarse con ellos.*

Ali: *¿Y son diferentes los estudiantes cuando el maestro no habla español? ¿Cómo son los estudiantes?*

Jose: *Ellos son como, como que se sienten ahí como en el aire, como que no aprenden nada, porque como ellos no saben inglés ellos no aprenden nada de lo que el maestro les dice.*

[Jose: They should learn Spanish. Because here most of the kids don’t speak English, so they [the teachers] have to be able to communicate with them [the students].

Ali: And are the students different when the teacher doesn’t speak Spanish? How are the students?

Jose: They are like, like they are sitting there like in the air, like they aren’t learning anything; since they don’t know English, they aren’t learning anything that the teacher is saying] (Interview, 02.06.2006).

This quote demonstrates the confidence one Luperón student felt in regard to students’ rights to learn in their own language and to have expectations of their school regarding the requirements for teachers. His words contrast starkly to an interview conducted by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) in which the student said, “When I sat in class those first few months, I was lost. I couldn’t follow the teacher...I felt stupid and ignorant for years before learning that there was nothing abnormal with me” (p. 129). In schools with a deficit perspective, students feel deficient for their lack of English or believe they need to learn English to understand their teachers. When Luperón students did not understand a lesson given in English, they felt part of the responsibility lay with the teacher. The bilingualism that permeated every aspect of their school lives taught them that they deserved to understand what their teachers said. For example, when asked what happens when a teacher does not speak Spanish Flor said,

Uno no entiende la clase; tiene uno que estar preguntándole a los compañeros; y el maestro nunca entiende a uno.

[You don’t understand the class; you have to be asking your fellow classmates; and the teacher never understands you] (Interview, 02.02.2006).

When asked how students act in those classes, Flor responded, “*Nada, se quedan así, sentados ahí, aunque no entiendan.*” [Nothing, they just stay

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there, they just sit there doing nothing, even if they don't understand] (Interview, 02.02.2006).

Flor's words describe the situation of many Spanish speaking students in monolingual schools all over New York. Students who do not understand are sitting at their desks, growing frustrated and impatient with the school and the material. Or worse, they are not sitting at their desks because they have stopped going to school. In other words, by educating ELLs only in English, without honoring the social aspects of learning and the value of their home language, the school system begins the process of constructing failure, the weight of which lies most heavily on the student.

This equalization of status between English and Spanish at Luperón has led to very positive attitudes toward *both* languages. For example, a student told us,

El español es como la lengua con la que tú te comunicas con tu cultura. El inglés es como la superación. Si uno no sabe inglés, uno no va a llegar a ningún lado. Es lo más importante después del español. [Spanish is the language in which you communicate with your culture. English is like improving oneself. If you don't know English, you're not getting anywhere. It is the most important thing after Spanish] (Focus Group, 03.22.2004).

Second, the members of Luperón created a truly bilingual aural and print environment. Upon entering the school, visitors were greeted by copies of the bilingual school newspaper and weekly and monthly calendars. The hallways were decorated with student work, announcements, and motivational quotes, all of which were in both Spanish and in English. Wandering through the school or into offices, one heard Spanish as well as English. Stepping into the main office, one was greeted by bilingual staff members, who warmly addressed parents in Spanish or switched into English to greet English-speaking visitors. Public announcements were made in either Spanish or English, and then translated. Such bilingualism afforded parents and students full participation in the daily life of the school. This point was reinforced while observing Diana, one of the focal students who had very low English proficiency. An announcement came over the loudspeaker in both Spanish and English, asking Diana and several other students to come to the office. When they arrived at the meeting, which was conducted in Spanish, the students learned that they had mistakenly registered for two different English courses over the summer session, when they could only select one class. The fact that the students were called to the office in Spanish and the meeting was conducted in Spanish, guaranteed that they were all properly registered for their English classes for the summer (Observation 06.10.2005). As obvious as this procedure sounds, at many schools, Spanish-

dominant students might be denied English support services simply because information about those services is relayed to them in English. Diana was able to participate in extracurricular activities and receive tutoring because the faculty and staff were bilingual.

Third, most of the content area courses for students in their first two years are taught in Spanish, with some brief English translation and communication, so that students accumulate content knowledge while learning English. In what follows, we give an example of the ways in which teachers used the native language to teach content courses:

The teacher, Mr. Molina, put two problems on the board as a warm up, and the students worked on them:

Do Now:

Solve and check: $x - 2y = 2$ $3x + y = 6$

Flor solved the problems, then copied the grid onto graph paper using a ruler. When her classmates were confused, she explained in Spanish to two other students why the answer must be negative, then she said, “*Deja de molestarte para poder hacer mi trabajo.*” [Stop bothering me so I can do my work]. She set to work, talking out the steps to herself in Spanish. Then she said to her teacher, “U+00A1Teacher—*mira, venga acá!*” (Teacher—look, come here!” When the teacher approved her answer, Flor moved on to the next problem.

The teacher began the review minutes later and Flor whined, “Teacher, *espérese, no tan rápido.*” [Teacher, wait, not so fast]. Molina said in English, “Stop now. Let’s go through this together.” Flor nodded. Next, he said in Spanish and in English, “¿*Cuál fue tu respuesta?* What was your solution?” Molina proceeded to explain the problem in Spanish and when he came to the conclusion of the lesson, students sat up and smiled. One said, “¡*Oh! ‘Tá jevi, ‘tá jevi!*” [Oh, it’s cool, it’s cool!] Another said, “¡*Tá fácil!*” [It’s easy!...] [A third] student shouted, “¡*Yo entendí algo!*” [I understood something!] Students practiced the second example and then Molina went through the explanation a second time, again in Spanish (Observation, 03.02.2006).

The students in this math class were in their second year at Luperón; most were in the second level of ESL classes. Most would probably not have been able to follow the complex logic of the lesson in English. But, provided the instruction in Spanish, most were able to solve the equations. They even seemed enthusiastic about the work, and several expressed excitement over their accomplishment. The use of Spanish in content-area courses afforded students the opportunity to feel successful on a daily basis in school. The figured world of “success” at Luperón depended on bilingualism to challenge students appropriately with the subject material and connect them to ability appropriate content.

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Even in English classes, teachers often engaged Spanish. For example, several teachers used Spanish to teach cognates and make connections between the languages. One teacher explained, “I use cognates to make the students aware of how many words they already know in English, and to draw parallels to show that English and Spanish grammar are similar, to make connections.... [I also use cognates] to check in on them, and to develop study skills” (Focus group with ESL teachers, 02.03.2005). Several of the ESL teachers, especially in the entry level ESL classes, allowed students to speak Spanish to each other as they collaborated on projects. For example, we observed the following in Flor’s ESL class:

Ms. Fiorini encouraged students to collaborate and use Spanish to find the answers. Flor wrote: ‘1. Marie likes to go to swimming in the beach.’ She scrutinized the sentence, aware that something was wrong and asked her desk partner to help. A friend came and looked over her shoulder. He corrected her, saying “to go swimming.” Flor asked, “*Tengo que poner* ‘in the beach?’” They continued to discuss her answer in Spanish, using English only in reference to the potential answers. Ms. Fiorini explicitly encouraged them to keep working together until they figured it out (Observation, 04.22. 2005).

In content area classes and in the early levels of English classes, teachers and students used Spanish as a valuable resource to explain content, communicate, and solve problems.

In the higher levels of English classes, faculty often required students to speak only English in the classroom. In these circumstances, we often observed that students with less proficiency relied on students with more English facility for help. For example, the following interaction occurred during one of our observations of Esteban, one of our focal students:

In English 6, Mr. Mayer spoke only English to his students. He used big words and complex sentences, but he spoke slowly and intentionally. He asked students to move into groups and work on their essays about the Holocaust. He asked that they speak “natural English” in their groups. As soon as he made this request, the room grew quieter.

In Esteban’s group, two of the boys ignored the group while the only girl took notes on what Esteban said. Mr. Mayer came over and said that the essay would come from the students putting their heads together, not from the internet or from the book. He suggested the boys participate in the group. Miguel responded in Spanish that he did not know how to do what they were doing. Esteban reassured him in English, “Don’t worry, we’ll do that together.” Miguel then moved his desk over to form a triangle with Esteban and the girl; Freddy continued reading his book. Esteban tried to bring Freddy into the

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conversation by saying in English, “Remember when you found that thing on the internet? Where was that?” Freddy looked up from his book and said, “www... Um.” Esteban asked, “www.holocaustmem?” Freddy broke into Spanish in a whisper. He looked at Mr. Mayer and then changed back to English.

Though Mr. Mayer was not standing over the students with a grading sheet, the students clearly understood that he expected them to speak English. The atmosphere was not threatening, but it was clearly challenging to the students. They spoke English significantly more slowly than when they spoke Spanish. When they got stuck, they would switch into Spanish.

When Miguel started speaking in Spanish, Esteban repeated Miguel’s Spanish comments in English saying, “the Star of David have like a double meaning, that’s what

you’re saying?” Miguel agreed. Esteban then asked in English if they felt comfortable using the words “positive and negative” instead of “good and bad.” The group nodded in consensus. Miguel then rephrased his own point in English, incorporating Esteban’s suggestion, “The Star of David has a positive moment, positive and negative moment in history.” Through this incredibly slow and labored exchange, the group started to write their essay together in English (Observation, 03.07.2006).

In these situations, students with greater English proficiency became resources in the classroom. However, because they were also fluent in Spanish, they could understand a peer who was unable to communicate something in English. Spanish speaking peers were also less intimidating than a native English speaker might have been. As Garcia and Bartlett (2007) argued in earlier work on Luperón, the absence of native English speakers was an important ingredient of the school’s success. Without native speakers of English, Luperón students were not positioned as failed speakers of English and were not measured by what they lacked. Instead, classrooms were able to establish a linguistically safe space for Latino students to try out their English slowly, in a context of support, where Spanish was seen as an asset in the context of English language acquisition. Further, since English monolingualism was not marked as the norm, learning English posed no threat to students’ Spanish language identity (Canagarajah 2004).

TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Positive teacher–student relationships provided another key element of the figured world of success at Luperón. Strong, constructive relationships with teachers helped to affirm students’ identities as bilingual people and as individuals. Because almost all of their teachers spoke Spanish, students

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could begin building relationships immediately upon arriving at school, without having to learn English first. Student–teacher relationships at Luperón were characterized by high levels of teasing and playfulness. Teachers were actively engaged with students, knew them by name, and often grew to know their families.

The saliency of these relationships for students was regularly reinforced during interviews and observations. One veteran teacher, for example, regularly exchanged letters with one of our focal students when she took a leave from school due to illness. In an interview, when asked to describe Luperón to a hypothetical new student, Teodoro responded by talking about the teachers. He said “*Aquí te dan un consejo, si te ven que tú vas medio mal o algo. Allí casi nadie te da un consejo.*” [Here they give you advice, if they see that you’re struggling a bit or something. There (in the D.R.) they almost never give you advice] (Interview, 02.15.2006).

At the end of Esteban’s first interview, which was conducted in English, he mentioned his relationship with Mr. Mayer. He met the teacher when he started working on the school’s bilingual newspaper:

Ali: Is there anything else you’d like us to know?

Esteban: Maybe I speak a lot with Mr. Mayer... I used to be in the newspaper that he runs. I like to talk to him and I like his ideas and the way he thinks about things. Ali: What kinds of things do you guys talk about?

Esteban: Oh everything, about college, my life, my points of view about political things, social things. He’s kind of like my mentor, I think. Like now that my brother is away, he has shown me I can think by myself (Interview, 12.16.2005).

For Esteban, this teacher was filling the role of his absent brother, encouraging him to “think by [him]self.” Indeed, many students adopted fictive kin terms for faculty and staff at the school. For example, when asked what she would say about Luperón to a hypothetical student, Cristina leaned forward on her arms and smiled, saying:

¡Ay! Luperón. Que es la mejor escuela en la que yo he podido estar. A mí me encanta esta escuela. Yo me quedo aquí a veces hasta las 7 de la noche, porque aquí tú te sientes como en familia, como que tú estás en tu casa, que tú estás en la República Dominicana Mas la gente con la que tú estas, tú te sientes como en familia. A Pérez yo le digo tío, a Lourdes yo le digo ‘grandmother’, a toditos le tengo otro nombre, y yo me siento como en familia aquí... Una escuela que tú aprendes el inglés rápido, que tú aprendes bien, que te ayudan cuando tú lo necesitas... si ven como que te va mal en las clases ellos buscan la mejor solución para

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acercarse a ti y explicarte las cosas como son, y los profesores sienten como que tú eres su hijo. Y de hecho como para tu futuro, como que ellos se entran en tu vida, no para mal, sino para ayudarte.

[Oh, Luperón. (I would say) that it is the best school I ever could have been in. I love this school. I sometimes stay here until 7:00 p.m., because here you feel like a family, like if you were home, as if you were in the Dominican Republic (D.R.). It is also the people you are with that make you feel like you are amongst family. I call Pérez (the principal) “uncle”; I call Lourdes “grand-mother.” I have a name for everyone, and I feel like we are family here... It is a school where you learn English fast, and you learn it well, and they help you when you need it... If they see you are not doing well in class, they find the best way to approach you and explain to you how things are and should be. And the teachers feel as if you were their child. And even in what concerns your future, like they get deeply involved in your life, not for wrong, but to help you out] (Interview, 01.25.2006).

The faculty and staff of Luperón demonstrate what Valenzuela (1999) termed “authentic caring.”

Authentic caring comes about when teachers of Latino students embrace a culturally congruent definition of *educación*, one that includes not only book knowledge but interpersonal relationships. Within a social capital framework, these student–teacher relationships are critical to student success. In all schools, teachers have the potential to act as “institutional agents,” helping students to navigate different social worlds and access “key forms of institutional support” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 9). This is especially important for youth who are navigating U.S. schools for the first time. As Stanton-Salazar (1997) writes:

Given that working-class minority children and youths are structurally more dependent on non-familial institutional agents for various forms of institutional support, the problematics of interweaving extended trust and solidarity become ever so salient, especially because in the absence of such solidarity, institutional support rarely occurs (p. 17).

The strong relationships between teachers and students at Luperón stand in stark contrast to what Stanton-Salazar (1997) calls “the institutionalization of distrust and detachment” (p. 17), in which even teachers who want to act as institutional agents for their students are bound by school, district, union and other organizational constraints from doing so. Such a situation typifies large schools, but can exist in any school that does not create the requisite structures to facilitate successful student-teacher relationships.

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Teachers at Luperón demonstrated authentic caring in part through the high standards they held for their students. For example, during observations at the end of one grading period, Lesley saw one teacher asking students to show him their report cards. To students who earned less than an "A," he made comments such as, "Where's the rest of this grade?" or "It will be an 'A' next time, right?" This was not an isolated incident. During a separate observation, Ali saw one student brag to her teacher about her grade of 82 in Sanchez's history class. The teacher remarked in Spanish, "You're missing 18 points!" The two smiled at each other (Observation, 02.04.2005). This aspect of school culture contrasts starkly with the findings of Villenas and Deyhle (1999) in their review of ethnographies on Latino education in the U.S. Citing the work of Valdes (1996), Villenas and Deyhle (1999) demonstrate that throughout the ethnographies, American teachers tended to show "lowered teacher expectations, based on a deficit view of Latino cultures, [which] assured that few youth were motivated to high classroom performance" (p. 427).

OPPORTUNITY NARRATIVES

A final, key element of the figured world of success at Luperón is the widespread opportunity narrative voiced by students. First-generation immigrants are famed for subscribing to an optimistic opportunity narrative, often accepting difficult work and living conditions while demonstrating great faith that their schooling will create better opportunities (Ogbu and Simons, 1998; Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 1997).⁹ Whether they are able to maintain their optimism depends in large part on the "receiving" conditions they find at the school.¹⁰

At Luperón, the students seemed to use the key artifact of the opportunity discourse in order to manage their feelings of loss concerning their move to the U.S. According to Holland et al. (1998), people use cultural artifacts to manage their own feelings and actions on a broad scale and to continuously produce their identities, or senses of self. For example, they explained how participants in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings use the symbolic device of personal stories in meetings to transform their senses of self and manage their drinking behavior. Similarly, students at Luperón seemed to use the opportunity discourse to convince themselves that academic achievement would make their sacrifices, and those of their families, worthwhile.

"Opportunity" was the term most commonly used to describe students' reasons for coming to the U.S. For example, in her first interview, when asked about the process of coming to the U.S. Beli explained,

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Yo decidí venir porque es mejor por la escuela, y la educación es mejor aquí. Y si yo puedo aprender inglés, tengo más oportunidades, porque me puedo ir para Santo Domingo a trabajar, y es mejor, porque puedo trabajar en una compañía que necesite a una persona bilingüe, que pueda hablar los dos idiomas. Entonces aquí hay mucha oportunidad para uno estudiar.

I decided to come [to N.Y] because the school is better; education is better here. And if I can learn English I would have more opportunities, because I could go back to Santo Domingo to work, and it is better, because I could work in a company that needs a bilingual person that can speak both languages. So here there are a lot opportunities for you to study (Interview, 3/30/05).

Later in the interview, when asked what she felt is better about life in the U.S., Beli answered, “*La escuela es mejor, uno aprende más, hay oportunidades de avanzar más en la escuela.*” [The school is better, one learns more, there are opportunities for one to advance further in school] (Interview, 3.30.2005). When asked to compare schools in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, students tended to stress the greater opportunity in the U.S. For example, Martin said, “*Aquí hay más oportunidad de terminar la escuela. Allá tú te vas cansando y cansando. Y si terminas la escuela tú tienes que irte a una factoría*” [Here there are more opportunities to finish school. There (in the D.R.) you just tire yourself out. And if you finish school, you have to go work in a factory] (Interview, 02.12.2006).

The students described their opportunities with tempered optimism. Many of them used the word as if describing a burden or a family obligation. The students who did not describe their experience in terms of “opportunity” may have chosen to reject the burden of future, uncertain “opportunities,” even though the immediate “opportunities” that did exist for them may still have had deep relevance and importance to them. In the following excerpt, Joskenia spoke of opportunities as something she must embrace, because so many people would love to be in her position. And yet, she still missed home. She was asked whether she had wanted to come to the U.S. She responded:

Sí, hay muchas personas que quisieran estar en mi lugar y mira... realmente yo quisiera estar allá porque, o sea...well, aquí es mejor porque hay muchas oportunidades. (Starts crying) Pero quisiera estar allá, ¿no?

[Yes. There are many people who would like to be in my place, and look... I would really like to be there (in the D.R.), because, I mean... well things are better here because there are many opportunities. But (*starts crying*) I would have wanted to be there, you know what I mean?] (Interview, 01.11.2005)

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Joskenia poignantly communicated the high price paid by immigrant youth in uprooting their lives. During Julio's interview, he also spoke of "opportunity" only fifteen minutes after crying in remembrance of his arrival in the U.S. At the time of the interview he had been in the U.S. for one year, leaving his mother behind in the Dominican Republic. Ali wrote:

When I asked Julio how he felt, he said, "*triste*" quietly. I asked if he cried when he left; he hesitated and then said, "sí." His eyes started getting wet and red. I asked what he did when he got to the U.S., expecting him to tell me about his apartment or neighborhood. Instead, he responded that he missed his mom. A tear rolled down his cheek. I asked if he'd rather talk about something else; he said in English, "Yeah." Fifteen minutes later in the interview, I asked Julio what he liked about living in the United States. He said in English, "Here is better because there are more opportunities." (Interview, 10.25.2005).

Almost without exception, students discussed the immense sacrifices their families made to bring them to the U.S. and their determination to take advantage of the opportunity. When Cristina was asked, during her second interview, what she would tell a new student arriving from the D.R., Cristina first expounded on sacrifice and then on opportunity:

Primeramente hablaría con ella y le diría que yo tuve la misma experiencia que ella. Y que hay veces que uno se siente sola, y como que el mundo te viene encima, como que la vida tuya cambia. Pero que nunca se deje vencer por los obstáculos... Y que aquí tú tienes muchas oportunidades que en tu país tú no tienes, y que la debes aprovechar. O si no que, que vea como el esfuerzo que han hecho su papá y su mamá por traerla aquí, y que valore el sacrificio de sus padres; porque para ella también es muy difícil dejar a su mamá y a su papá allá y venir aquí a una nueva vida. Y que aquí en América, cuando tú le coges como el sentido, es bien divertida la vida de aquí y es bien chula, porque tu conoces muchas cosas que en tu país tú no las ibas a ver...y tienes más oportunidades.

[First, I would talk to her, and tell her that I went through the same experience she is going through. And that there are some times that you feel alone, like your world is falling apart, like your life is changing. But that she should never let obstacles get in her way and defeat her... And that here you have many opportunities that you don't have in your country, and you should take advantage of them... She should see the great effort her mom and dad have put into bringing her here (to New York); she should value the sacrifice of her parents; and also for her it is difficult to come here and leave her mom and dad behind (in the D.R.). And that here in America, when you get the hang of it, life is fun and cool, because you get to know many things that in your country you

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were never going to get to know... and you have more opportunities] (Interview, 01.25.2006).

In these and other moments, students discussed opportunities in conjunction with their remorse over their sacrifices. They continuously reminded themselves of the “opportunities” in the United States while acknowledging that these came at a high price. Many of the students clung to the word “opportunity” because it represented the gratification they hoped to receive for the suffering they endured at the time of migration, and continued to endure in separation from their country and, for many, parts of their families. Students seemed to use the opportunity narrative to manage their feelings of loss and to focus themselves on school achievement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The faculty, staff and students of Gregorio Luperón carefully constructed a locally figured world of success by valuing students’ linguistic and cultural resources. They valued students’ Spanish literacy and language proficiency, which they used not only to teach content courses but also as a support in the learning of English. They developed caring teacher–student relations congruent with students’ notions of *educación*. And they encouraged the kind of academic striving inherent in the key cultural artifact of the first-generation immigrant opportunity narrative. This figured world established a context in which newcomer immigrant youth were encouraged to identify with the school and to pursue academic success.

Luperón’s locally figured world, however, was constrained by larger sociohistorical models and forces. Though they managed to reshape “institutionalized discourses and rituals” in order to employ an asset approach to immigrant students, the locally figured world still depended heavily upon the categories of success and failure that saturate American schools (McDermott & Varenne, 1998). Further, the school continues to struggle with the constraints placed on them by key externally-defined measures of success, such as standardized tests. In order to survive, the school must continue to meet the sort of benchmarks established by these policies—policies that devalue students’ bilingual and cultural resources.

Educational scholars who employ the concept of figured worlds have done important, micro-level analyses on how power relations play out at the local level in processes of identity work. However, as Wortham (2006) has cautioned, we need also to attend to the multiple timescales and sociohistorical models that impinge upon the production and maintenance of figured worlds. As Wortham argues, all phenomena are “constrained and

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made possible by processes at several disparate timescales,” as no single timescale is foundational or determinant (p. 9). While larger sociohistorical models only take effect as they are successfully engaged in very local events of cultural production, they are nevertheless powerful influences. Larger sociohistorical models hampered local efforts to positively value students’ cultural and linguistic resources at Luperón, which is why national language policy that values bilingualism is critical to successful local school models.

Many students learned to identify with the figured world of success at Luperón and to position themselves securely within it. In the bilingual environment of Luperón High School, students found their Spanish speaking, reading and writing skills to be valued as resources to be developed along with their English skills, preventing them from feeling pressure to abandon parts of their identities connected to Spanish. Students developed strong relationships with teachers that they credited with giving them a strong sense of support and understanding. And they used the immigrant opportunity narrative, in part, to manage their complicated feelings of loss over all that they had left behind. All this was made possible by bilingualism and was critical to the construction of success at Luperón. Foremost in educating English Language Learners is the understanding that student success and failure are institutional constructs as much as they are reflections of student ability. Widespread failure of immigrant students in any district is an indication of institutional rituals and discourses of exclusion, which must be restructured in order for students to be acquired by “success.”

NOTES

1. See, for example, Flores, Tefft Cousin, & Diaz, 1991.
2. As McDermott and Varenne (2006) have noted, “race” and ethnicity are managed tautologically in school reform efforts: first policies define racial/ethnic groups as problem, then they set up measures of school performance to document them as problems. In this way, “the same interpretive machinery that delivers arbitrary distinctions between kinds of persons also delivers arbitrary measures of learning and techniques for noticing and explaining their correlation” (p. 23).
3. Whereas most high schools in New York City struggle to find competent bilingual Math and Science teachers, Gregorio Luperón has attracted highly qualified teachers of these subjects. In fact, the three science teachers were all medical doctors, certified in their home countries, and the math department included several engineers and professional accountants.
4. <http://schools.nyc.gov/daa/SchoolReports/05asr/106552.PDF>
5. In 1999, Dominican New Yorkers had a poverty rate of 32 percent (Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2000), and in 2000, reportedly 55.6% of Dominican immigrants to New York 25 years or older had not graduated from high school and only 10.6% had graduated from college (Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2000).

6. The Cortina and Rosenbaum data provides the best comparable data for newcomer Dominican students; their figures report, by national origin, the drop-out and graduation rates for students who have immigrated to New York within the previous three years. Most other data sources either do not distinguish first and second-generation students and/or do not disaggregate students by nationality.
7. Spanish speaking students in English-only high schools are frequently unprepared to test in either language, because they learn the tested material in English but lack the advanced English academic literacy proficiency required by standardized tests. Unless students first learn the tested material in Spanish, the option to test in Spanish does little for them (Menken, 2005).
8. All person names in this article are pseudonyms.
9. Children in the second-generation, who have witnessed the degradation of their parents and the limited racist opportunity structures in the U.S., tend to reject the idea that schooling will give them opportunities. They realize that the emerging "hourglass economy" (Zhou, 1997, p. 67) in the U.S. allows very few poor families to achieve economic mobility, regardless of educational achievement.
10. As widely demonstrated by sociologists and political scientists, communities experience segmented assimilation depending largely on human capital, family type, and modes of incorporation (see Portes & Zhou, 1993; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2005). Schools are an important component of the modes of incorporation, and success in school obviously relates to human capital.

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