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Bilingual literacies, social identification, and educational trajectories

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how transnational students' educational trajectories are shaped by social relations and identity formation as developed in part through the medium of school-based bilingual literacy practices. By examining the educational trajectory of one young woman at an unusual, bilingual high school, I demonstrate that, in critical social interactions across classroom contexts, the student drew upon the locally defined model of school success to position herself – and be positioned – as a successful student through bilingual literacy practices. As her identity as a good student “thickened” over time, it shaped her opportunities for learning spoken and written English as well as other elements of the curriculum.

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1. Introduction

The population of bilingual youth attending schools in the United States is growing rapidly. According to Van Hook and Fix, “from 1970 to 1995, the number of immigrant children ages 5–20 living in the United States more than doubled, from 3.5 to 8.6 million. . . . 40% of this growth took place after 1990” (2000, p. 9). During this same period, immigrants came to represent an increasing percentage of all students enrolled in schools, moving “from 6% in 1970 to 16% in 1995 and 19% in 1997” (p. 9). By 1997, a full 57% of immigrant school-age children were from Latin America and the Caribbean (p. 10). Perhaps surprisingly, the population of foreign-born and immigrant¹ children represents a higher proportion of the high school student population (5.7%) than the primary school population (3.5%) (p. 10).

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¹ Immigrant is here defined as students in the U.S. for 5 years or less.

Despite the sudden increase in the population of English language learners at the secondary level, there is insufficient research on their needs (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999, p. 1). What does exist often debates the benefits of particular educational models, such as transitional bilingual education, structured immersion, etc. (Brisk, 1996, p. 7). As Leung notes, much of the extant literature argues for or against bilingual education “in terms of productivity (student attainment expressed as test scores), and that productivity is discussed in terms of division of time, curriculum and speakers” (Leung, 2005, p. 238). In other words, many studies reduce bilingual education and second academic language/literacy acquisition to technical questions about the correct inputs for the desired output. These studies ignore the critically important social processes at work in schooling multilingual youth.

At the same time, in recent years, many scholars of monolingual youth have explored the ways that social processes influence the acquisition and use of literacies. Research in social studies of literacy demonstrates that literacy practices are fully shaped by economic, political, and cultural contexts, and well as social interactions (Gee, 1999; Street, 1984; Street, 1993). Extending these initial insights, more recent work in literacy studies has examined the important role played by cultural resources and cultural or “figured” worlds in monolingual literacy events. For example, Leander (2002) discusses “identity artifacts,” and he analyzes classroom discourse to show how students and the teacher employ identity artifacts to “stabilize” a particular interpretation of one student. Pahl (2004) examines the role of artifacts in sustaining family narratives, which themselves are significant for family literacy. Bartlett (2007) explains how adults with emergent literacy proficiency draw upon labels or interpretations of self during literacy events to assert themselves as literate. However, few have attempted to link the burgeoning literature on literacy and identity to the unique issues of language and literacy acquisition in bilingual contexts.

In this article, I examine how students’ bilingual literacies and their educational trajectories are shaped by social relations and identity formation. By examining the educational trajectory of one young woman at an unusual, bilingual high school, I demonstrate that, in critical social interactions across classroom contexts, the young woman drew upon the locally defined model of school success to position herself as a successful student through bilingual literacy practices. As her identity as a good student “thickened” (or, as Leander (2002) explains, as a particular interpretation of identity becomes stabilized in practice), it shaped her opportunities for learning spoken and written English as well as other elements of the curriculum. I demonstrate how transnational youth engage sociohistorical and local models of school success and failure through the medium of bilingual literacy practices in order to position themselves socially in ways that critically affect their educational trajectories.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Successful failure

As McDermott and Varenne have noted, “success” and “failure” are particular positions available in American schools for students to inhabit; “being acquired by a position in a culture is difficult and unending work” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 337). The production of failure and success is “a product 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” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 331). Their careful studies show how success and failure are made consequential (or not) in event-level social interactions as the relevant social actors engage available cultural resources, rituals, and discourses (1998).

The authors note that early anthropological studies of schooling relied upon deficit models, which posited cognitive or cultural deficits in children; those were then supplanted by difference models, which took a more relativistic approach and questioned the arbitrariness of what gets valued in schools. Varenne and McDermott suggest that, instead of seeing culture as deficit or difference, we see it as disabling some and enabling others (1995). They urge educational researchers to forego presumptions about learning or cognitive ability and instead to focus on the “socially negotiated processes of schooling as relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world.” In other words, the authors suggest that scholars avoid the question of *what students are learning and how they are progressing through the curriculum* and focus instead on the school’s “*institutionalized discourses and rituals that produce success and failure*” (1998, p. 209).

2.2. *Social positioning in relation to figured worlds*

Recent anthropological theorizing around the processes of social identification illuminates how people use cultural resources during local social interactions in ways that contribute to the on-going production of categories like success and failure. In their work, [Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain \(1998\)](#) draw upon Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and actor-network theory to conceptualize the process of self-making in social interaction. Holland et al. stress the important role of *figured worlds*, or cultural “realm[s] 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” ([Holland et al., 1998](#), p. 52). Figured worlds are stable, shared, idealized realms involving identifiable character types and actions. They are evoked by *cultural artifacts*, which are objects or symbols inscribed by a collective attribution of meaning in relation to figured worlds. An artifact can assume a material aspect (which may be as transient as a spoken word or as durable as a book) and/or an ideal or conceptual aspect (such as a label, like “good girls” and “bad boys”).

Cultural artifacts are essential to identity work. According to Vygotsky’s notion of semiotic mediation, such artifacts are central to humans’ abilities to modulate their thoughts and actions. [Holland et al. \(1998\)](#) extend semiotic mediation to discuss how people use cultural artifacts, which are tied to figured worlds, to manage their own feelings and actions on a broad scale. In some instances, people engage these artifacts to challenge socially prescribed, “positional” aspects of identities, which “have to do with one’s position relative to socially identified others, one’s sense of social place, and entitlement” (p. 125). In other words, in specific, contingent events whose outcome is never predetermined, social actors can engage cultural artifacts that invoke figured worlds in ways that challenge what [Lave and Holland \(2001\)](#) call “enduring social struggles.” Further, [Lave and Holland \(2001\)](#) stress that local events and enduring social struggles are mutually constitutive; neither dictates the other, and yet both are shaped by the other.

Using this conceptual framework, we might think of success and failure as figured worlds that, as McDermott and Varenne have shown, fundamentally define school life in the United States. These figured worlds are invoked in local events by cultural artifacts such as grades, tracked classrooms and modified curricula, and labels like “the good student” or “the slow learner.” Whereas McDermott and Varenne talk about students being “acquired” by categories of success and failure, the concepts of figured worlds and cultural artifacts allow scholars to examine in-depth the agentic work that social actors do in the continuous and unpredictable process of producing success and failure in local social interactions (see, for example, [Bartlett, 2007](#)).

2.3. *Social identification in school contexts*

Recently, Wortham (2006) synthesized insights from linguistic anthropologists, Bourdieu, Foucault, Holland and Lave, and other sources in order to further develop the work on social identification in school contexts. Writing against the often dualistic, macro/micro conceptual frame of structure/agency that has dominated much of the field since the publication of Bourdieu's early work, Wortham offers three critical insights. First, drawing on Lemke (2000), Wortham argues that scholars of social identification must attend to multiple *timescales*, which he defines as “the spatiotemporal envelope within which a process happens” (2005, p. 4). All phenomena are “constrained and made possible by processes at several disparate timescales,” while no single timescale is foundational or determinant (2006, p. 9). In this way, Wortham historicizes what Holland et al. call figured worlds, and what he calls sociohistorical models; he emphasizes that such models develop across different timescales and are more or less widely shared.² According to Wortham, configurations of cross-timescale resources are available to processes of social identification. Widely circulating sociohistorical models that develop historically (e.g., the notion of “loud black girls” [Fordham, 1993] or “disruptive students”) only “take effect as they are successfully applied in events of identification;” more specific local models of identity are developed using the sociohistorical models as resources that “change as they move across time and space, and they are applied in contingent, sometimes unpredictable ways in actual events of identification” (p. 8).

Second, and relatedly, Wortham emphasizes the importance of examining social identification *over time and space*. In his own work, he studied how students and teachers drew upon widely circulating sociohistorical models, locally developed categories of identity, and the curriculum itself to socially position each other in a single classroom over the academic year. Wortham finds that “social identification depends on publicly *circulating* models of identity,” and he argues that we should conceive of culture and social identification as “motion and *trajectories*” rather than “objects and structures” (p. 38) (emphasis mine). Wortham noted “trajectories of identification,” in which social identities “emerge[d] over a chain of events” in which students enacted or displayed signs of identities “that more and more participants came to recognize and assume” as evidence of a solidifying identity model (p. 47). In other words, individuals' social identities “thickened” (Wortham, 2006, p. 161) across a series of contextualized events.

Third, Wortham does not separate learning and social positioning, as do McDermott and Varenne. According to Wortham, the curriculum affords opportunities for social identification, and social positioning affects who learns what. Wortham's research shows how “academic resources can be deeply implicated in social identification and apparently non-academic resources can be deeply implicated in academic learning” (p. 12). They “depend on each other” as social actors develop models of “self/knowledge.”

Wortham's theoretical innovations further help us to reconceptualize the insights offered by McDermott and Varenne around success and failure. First, success and failure are spatiotemporally specific sociohistorical models; their persistence depends in part on on-going social practice across chains of events. Second, models developed at lesser and greater temporal and spatial proximity to local events (say, for example, models that emerge across a decade at the level of the school or

² Further, Wortham uses the concept of “boundary object” in a way similar to how Holland et al. describe cultural artifacts. For Wortham, a boundary object “participates in processes at more than one timescale and constrains them both. The spatial layout of the classroom (Leander, 2002), textbooks (Apple, 1986), and the habitual embodied stances of teachers and students (Bourdieu, 1972/1977) for instance, both mediate longer timescale processes and constrain the emerging structure of particular events” (p. 46).

across the year at the level of the classroom) provide important cultural resources that constrain and afford new possibilities for social positioning. Third, Wortham argues that scholars should not bracket learning off from social identification; indeed, he argues, they mutually inform one another.

In this article, I draw on the insights and concepts developed by these scholars to examine the social production of school success and failure for one young Spanish-speaking newcomer immigrant. I attend specifically to her continuously developing social identities and to the ways in which these thickening identities afforded opportunities to acquire oral and written English. I argue that her opportunity to acquire English language and literacy depended, in part, on her educational trajectory and the thickening of her identity as a successful student.

3. The setting and research methods

3.1. *The setting*

The data reported in this article hail from a larger study of a bilingual high school for newcomer immigrant youth in Washington Heights, a large, predominantly Latino neighborhood in New York City.³ The vast majority of students at this school are from the Dominican Republic. Dominicans are a large and fast-growing part of the immigrant population in the U.S., where they constitute the fourth largest Latino group (numbering 1,041,910 in the 2000 Census). Dominicans are “the most transnational of all New York’s immigrants” (Pita & Utakis, 2002, p. 318; see also Guarnizo, 1997); their tendency to construct lives on both sides of the ocean necessitates bilingualism and biliteracy. In the United States, Dominicans are often incorporated into low-paying jobs in the secondary labor market (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Guarnizo, 1994; Portes & Grosfoguel, 1994). With a poverty rate of 32%, Dominicans are the poorest of all ethnic and racial groups in New York City. They also have comparatively low levels of education; in 2000, 55.6% of Dominican immigrants to New York 25 years or older had less than a high school diploma (Hernández & Rivera-Batiz, 2003).

The educational needs of this community led a group of Dominican activists to found Gregorio Luperón High School⁴ in the 1990s. Many of the teachers and half of the administrators are Dominicans, and most of these are immigrants themselves. At Luperon, all students take three periods of English as a Second Language or English Language Arts per day; most of the ESL teachers are themselves bilingual, and many of them speak Spanish. Students also take one period of Spanish Language Arts with Latino bilingual teachers. Especially in the freshman and sophomore years, most content area courses are taught in Spanish by Latino (usually Dominican) teachers.

The school’s enrollment of approximately 400 students fluctuates over the course of the year as new students arrive. The school explicitly serves newcomer immigrant youth; 82% of the students have been in the United States no more than three years. Approximately 85% of the students are from the Dominican Republic, which results in a school that is remarkably homogeneous in terms of not only language but also cultural background. Luperon has the greatest percentage of English language learners of all high schools of NYC (97%). Ninety-seven percent of the student body qualifies for free lunch. This poverty does not stigmatize students at Luperon because free lunch is provided to all.

Luperon has one of the highest attendance rates in the city (averages 90%), in spite of the fact that the school is at 111.1% of its official capacity (nycenet.edu, 2005). The school averages an

³ In 2000, 74% of the residents of Washington Heights were Latinos.

⁴ Luperón is the actual name of the high school. All names of administrators, teachers, and students are pseudonyms.

80% graduation rate,⁵ and an astoundingly low 2–3% drop-out rate; these rates are significantly better than city-wide or national averages.⁶ It is difficult to gauge Luperon's comparative success on the state standardized Regents exams, because the school is truly unique. Official measures show that Luperon is performing almost as well as other "high needs schools," although those schools have a much lower poverty rate⁷ and about half as many English language learners as Luperon.⁸ Further, 92.7% of Luperon's English language learners (ELLs) participate in Regents exams, whereas only 23.4% of the ELL students at similar schools did so.

The faculty, staff, and students of Luperon work very hard to maintain a distinct model of success at the high school. Luperon is set up to take advantage of students' linguistic, cultural, and social resources (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005) and works to build upon them. The people in this school work continuously to establish a pervasive institutional culture that frames all students as having great potential. Key features of this model, described elsewhere in greater detail (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007), are: the framing of Spanish as resource rather than problem, and the high status of Spanish; the use of Spanish in content classes; teachers' use of Spanish to check student comprehension, teach new language (e.g., cognates), and explain difficult concepts; the recognition of students as transmigrants who should continue to develop their oral and written Spanish in order to maintain relationships with family and friends in their home country and to afford the possibility of returning home as adults to work; the small size of the school; the presence of teachers who share ethnolinguistic backgrounds with the majority of the students, a fact which fostered warmer, more familial relationships; and a linguistically homogeneous student population, where the absence of native English speakers meant students were not failures when they attempted to use English. This institutional model of success drew upon the "opportunity narrative," a prevalent sociohistorical model of hard-working immigrants who see the opportunities provided by schooling in their new home, despite the considerable obstacles they face. The opportunity narrative was so prevalent at the school that it became what Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin (2006) call a prominent institutional discourse that provided important cultural resources for student identity formation. Students at Luperon frequently declared their intention to study hard and get ahead to compensate for the large sacrifices they and their families had made to come to the United States (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007).

3.2. *Methods*

The data presented in this article hail from a 4-year, collaborative longitudinal ethnographic study that examines the educational trajectories of 20 newcomer⁹ immigrant youth in a bilingual high school. The study involves annual interviews with a cohort of 20 students, including two annual interviews that had been conducted in Spanish with each student at the time this paper was

⁵ According to the principal's records, 58 of Luperon's 62 students graduated in 2005 (personal communication).

⁶ According to a 1999 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, 44.2% of Hispanic students born outside the U.S. dropped out of high school without graduating (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/dropout/index.asp>).

⁷ Poverty here is as proxied by numbers of students eligible for free lunch (76.7% compared to 97%, respectively. See <http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/04asr/106552.PDF> and <http://schools.nyc.gov/daa/SchoolReports/05asr/106552.PDF>? accessed October 16, 2006).

⁸ ELLs constitute 96.7% of the Luperon population but only 51.2% of the population at similar schools (<http://schools.nyc.gov/daa/SchoolReports/05asr/106552.PDF>? October 16, 2006).

⁹ By newcomer, I mean youth who had been in the United States for less than 6 months at the beginning of the study, when they joined Luperon High School.

written. It also draws upon regular participant observations at the school with 8 focal students (selected to represent the cohort of 20 in terms of Spanish and English proficiency as well as gender); classroom discourse and conversations with students often proceeded in both English and Spanish. Finally, the data set includes formal and informal interviews with teachers and administrators, conducted in English. The data were collected by several researchers affiliated with the project.¹⁰ In this article, I draw upon observations and interviews with only one of the eight focal students. Though this data includes participant references to family support and the cultural resources the participant enjoyed beyond the school, one significant limitation of the data is that all observations were done at school. As such, this article discusses identity models institutionally supported by the school and engaged by students in that educational context.

The data for this article were analyzed using an analytic inductive approach (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The members of the research team wrote fieldnotes immediately after each observation or interview. As data collection proceeded, we began to incorporate initial hypotheses and interpretations in fieldnotes as hunches subject to discredit or confirmation. We met approximately every 3 weeks to review our data collection and discuss developing analyses. At regular intervals of data collection, the researchers reviewed fieldnotes and wrote analytical memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2005; see also Richardson, 2003). These memos indicated which analyses needed further evidence, which was then collected. At this time, we consciously sought negative instances as well. As the author of this text, I re-read the full corpus of data; before conceptualizing and drafting this article, I asked the two research assistants who helped to collect the data presented in this article to read and comment upon the article, and I revised on the basis of their feedback.

Section 4 presents a case study of one of the focal students, Maria. As I read through the data looking for evidence on social positioning and literacy learning, I was surprised to see that, early in our study, Maria had been labeled by a teacher as a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE) student. SIFE is a powerful institutional label often used by international educators and educators of immigrant students (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2001; García, 1999). Technically, the “SIFE” term indicates students whose education was interrupted or limited because of social and political factors and who may, therefore, have limited literacy skills in the native language, below-average performance for their grade or age level, and a lack of understanding of school procedures. In our experiences at the school, the research team noticed that the term SIFE was usually reserved for students who were considered to have too many learning problems to have a chance for success at Luperon. Several teachers regularly lamented that the school was not equipped to meet the needs of SIFE students and they, therefore, should be at a separate school. In other words, while SIFE technically meant interrupted formal education, in practice it was often construed as something akin to “special needs.” The SIFE cultural artifact invoked the systemic, sociohistorical model of disability so prevalent in American educational settings; in the words of Varenne and McDermott (1998), this term threatened to disable some students while enabling others. I was surprised to see Maria labeled as SIFE precisely because, over the course of 2 years, her educational identity trajectory had evolved radically. By spring 2006, Maria had successfully become identified as a “good student,” one whose promise matched the local model of success at Luperon.

In what follows, I offer excerpts from observations and interviews with Maria to show how sociohistorical models of success and failure interacted with the institutionally- and peer-supported model of success at Luperon and important cultural artifacts like “SIFE student” and “good stu-

¹⁰ Those researchers include Lesley Bartlett, Ofelia Garcia, Ali Michael, Norma Gonzalez, and Cesar Fernandez Geara.

dent” to influence Maria’s educational trajectory of success. Whereas [Wortham \(2006\)](#) restricted himself to one classroom and used in-depth linguistic interactional data, I have chosen to draw data from across classrooms, to use observational and interview data, and to use reported as well as recorded speech. These decisions have certain implications. While there is a cost in terms of the precision of the data, there is a gain in breadth of interactional spaces. For example, this move allows me to show how the negative identity which developed for Maria in several classrooms with several teachers (notably, her English class) could be challenged by cultural resources and thickening identities cultivated in other classrooms and with other teachers; it also allows me to reflect on how Maria understood the connection between her home life, her peer relations, and her identity as a student.

4. Case study: Maria

In what follows, I draw upon observations of Maria over three semesters in various classes to illustrate the shifts in Maria’s educational trajectory. I argue that, despite the obstacles facing her, Maria successfully re-positioned herself as “the good student” by enacting the local model of success, including by assiduously completing her work (even when she did not fully understand it) and associating with high-achieving students. This repositioning required not only Maria’s assertive behavior but also the recognition from others of her shifting and thickening identity as “good student.” Her improved grades in English and her progress through the levels of English class suggest that the shifting identity also afforded her greater opportunities to learn oral and written English.

4.1. General observations: Fall 2004

When I first met Maria in September of 2004, she was 17 years old, had recently arrived from the Dominican Republic and had been in the United States for 3 months. She was living with her mother and three younger siblings. Because her mother worked long hours, Maria had the primary responsibility for taking care of her siblings, the house, and the family’s meals. For example, during the second interview, Maria suddenly wondered out loud what they would eat that evening because she forgot to pull the meat from the freezer to defrost before coming to school.

When she enrolled at Luperon, Maria had considerable difficulty in her English classes. She did not do well enough in English 1 the first semester to pass to the next level, and so she was placed in a class that would cover the same grammar using a slightly different curriculum. During our earliest observations, one of Maria’s English teachers told us that she was a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE student). A school administrator also shared this impression. Further, because she immigrated to the United States fairly late, Maria was already 2–3 years older than some of her classmates. Given her age, her difficulties with English, the SIFE label, and her considerable familial responsibilities, it seemed probable that Maria would be acquired by a deficit model of school failure and would not complete high school.

4.2. Interview #1: January 8, 2005

At the time of this first interview, Maria was repeating the first level English class but had progressed to the second level of Spanish class, suggesting she had successfully demonstrated adequate Spanish literacy proficiency. She was frustrated by her math class. She said,

[My] only difficulty is with the math class. If it were up to me I would have [that class] cancelled, I would suggest that they don't teach it any more! [she laughed]. . . . In one test I got a 100%; and then I took the same test again and I failed it. . . . I say that this is incredible, how could I possibly fail the test if I passed the other one. . . . I don't have problems, this is the only class in which I've had problems. . . . [The hard class is] algebra . . . , because the thing is that some [teachers] don't know how to explain it, like they wander around one idea and you get confused; but there are some that directly tell you "look, do this, and do that", they don't wander around their ideas, and you don't get confused.

When asked specifically whether she had interrupted her formal education in the Dominican Republic, Maria reported that she had been continuously enrolled in school in the Dominican Republic and had completed the eleventh grade there. She therefore presents information that challenges the SIFE label that had been attached to her.

In general, Maria reported in this interview that she did not feel that New York compared favorably to the Dominican Republic. She was especially critical of the "malice" she found in New York City. But she was happy with Luperon. Maria had almost enrolled in a different, comprehensive high school with more than 1000 students where all subject area classes were taught in English, but her English was judged insufficient and she was directed to enroll at Luperon. Maria's concern was not only linguistic; her comments revolved around issues of security and being around the right kind of people. Maria said, "I was lucky to get into [Luperon]. In other high schools there are gangs and they might even hit you if you speak to so-and-so." Maria was convinced that schooling was the path to success, and that Luperon would facilitate her social and economic mobility; she noted that "it is easier to study here. They help you more." She enrolled in a community-based after school program, and she was also taking Saturday classes at Luperon. She said, "I do not have friends outside of school; I do not have time for them. I leave the house at 7 A.M. every day and after school, so that I can earn credits, I take math, English, and computer classes. I leave here at 7 P.M. Saturdays I have more classes. My mom told me to take any classes that would give me university credit." Later, when asked what she did during her free time, Maria replied, "I do not have free time because I do not like wasting time."

During this interview, Maria did not discuss any problems in her English class, despite the fact that she had to repeat the course. Though she was frustrated by her math class, it is notable that interactions with her math teacher and low grades in the course did not make her doubt her own abilities; she attributed her difficulties to the teaching style instead. Maria's mother strongly encouraged Maria to take advantage of the opportunity structures offered by the school, and she made clear her expectation that Maria would attend college. Like most of her peers in the study, Maria strongly manifested the institutionally supported opportunity narrative of schooling. Maria believed that it was easier to study in the United States, and that studying was the clear path to university and to future success. This belief encouraged her to sacrifice her time and social life for the sake of schooling.

4.3. *Observation #1: November 28, 2005*

Because of low grades in English and math, Maria was required to attend summer school in summer 2005. By fall of 2005, Maria had advanced to the second level of English. Several days prior to this observation, Maria's English teacher reported that she was worried about Maria. She mentioned specifically that Maria worked hard but lacked organization skills. During this

observation, Maria reported that, though she was “always working on school work,” she was “behind and needed help in various subjects, especially math and English.”

In the first class, a math class, the teacher unexpectedly distributed a quiz. Maria seemed nervous but she delved into the exam, tackling each problem. Within 15 min, Maria had answered all of the questions. (In comparison, the girl sitting beside Maria had only answered three questions on the first page.) The teacher reviewed the quiz at the end of the period in Spanish; when he reviewed one particularly difficult question, Maria was surprised and pleased that she answered it correctly. She proudly proclaimed to Norma and her seatmate, “I got the hardest one right.”

In the next class, an English class, a substitute who did not speak Spanish handed out a worksheet for students to complete in class. Half of the students were unusually rowdy during the period; the other half completed the worksheet. In what we saw as a developing pattern, Maria was careful to set herself amongst the students who were diligently working throughout the period, and she pointedly ignored the other students. The research assistant conducting this observation noted:

I work with Maria and her partner on the skills-based worksheets, which asks them to fill in verb tenses. They both relied on me to clarify the instructions of the task and to assist them with translating phrases they didn't know. Maria [made multiple errors in writing English]; she needs clarification on her English writing. As other students are talking, Maria bulldozes through her work; she wants to get her work done as quickly as possible. She worked until the bell rang, and then she rushed out to go to her tutoring. Maria seems a bit impatient with this task and wants to get through the assignment as quickly as possible. She has a '*pronto para no perder tiempo*' attitude.

Signs in this observation suggested that Maria might be having difficulty in school. Maria reported that she was struggling in English and math. Her English teacher noted that Maria was having problems, though she attributed these to organization rather than to innate ability (or disability). Even in the entry-level English class, Maria was having trouble understanding the lesson, and she seemed more concerned with completing the task than with understanding the grammar.

However, many of the literacy tasks assigned in various classrooms did not, in fact, require comprehension. The task in her English class, which entailed filling in the blank and repetition, is a good example. Maria was ably performing the kinds of literacy practices valued in this school-based setting. Maria's resolve was apparent from this early observation. While she did not always understand the lesson, and despite the significant time limitations she faced due to responsibilities outside of school, she was determined to complete her work. Her commitment to completing the task allowed her to perform the “good student” identity that these literacy practices afforded. Further, Maria was careful to associate with students who were seen to be hard-working and intelligent. And she was proud of herself in the moments that, as with the math quiz, she succeeded on difficult academic tasks.

4.4. *Observation #2, February 6, 2006*

By February 2006, Maria had moved into the third level of English classes with new teachers. Maria's English reading teacher privately said that Maria was a student with interrupted formal schooling (SIFE), and that she was close to failing the class. On other occasions, Maria complained about this English teacher and tried to avoid the teacher's class whenever possible (for example, once she volunteered to do work for another teacher; another time, she cut the class). Maria also

complained about her history teacher. She said she did not want to be in this history class anymore because she did not think the teacher was a “good teacher.” She said she would prefer not to go to class and learn history on her own. Maria reported that she was failing the class and was planning to speak to administrators about switching classes.

During the February 6 observation, the history teacher lectured in Spanish for most of the period. The teacher-fronted activity gave very little opportunity for student input. Like the other students in the class, Maria seemed disengaged. However, none of the students interrupted the teacher. While other students put their heads down, looked through their binders, looked at the walls, or whispered to each other, Maria copied down the notes the teacher had written in Spanish on the board.

The next period, Maria’s science teacher presented a lesson on minerals in Spanish. Opportunities for student participation were numerous. Maria participated in Spanish orally and in writing, but she declined to read aloud in English, claiming her voice was hoarse. In general, it seemed that Maria was more intent on writing the notes than participating in the class discussion. Maria copied notes in English from the board, inadvertently omitting several key words, but she did not engage the material. In reviewing this event, we wondered how much of this material Maria understood.

Maria proceeded to her English grammar class, where due to an unusual staffing concern there was a new teacher who said she did not know anything about the curriculum. The teacher gave a lesson on “adverbs of frequency.” On the board, she wrote:

AIM: How do we use “adverbs of frequency?”

100% of the time: always, all the time

50–99% of the time: usually, generally, normally

1–19%: once in a while, now and again, hardly, seldom, rarely, never

About one-quarter of the students, those sitting in the back of the room, were raucous, chatting amongst themselves and ignoring the teacher. Another student (not Maria) told the observer that those were the “bad kids.” After reviewing the adverbs, the new teacher inadvertently assigned the students a textbook task that they had already completed. Some students refused to do the work. However, Maria and her deskmates copied the table (above) from the board, opened their books, and started the lesson, which required them to “interview” each other with questions like, “Do you like to watch TV?” and “Do you like to drink soda?” and record the response. By working diligently for the next 25 min, Maria and her friends completed the task.

At the time of this observation, we felt concerned for Maria. Once again, one of Maria’s English teachers had asserted the SIFE label, a powerful cultural artifact that invoked the figured world of deficit. She was failing another class as well. If the SIFE label were taken up by more teachers across more classes and Maria’s identity as a failing student thickened, then Maria’s educational trajectory would be derailed.

At this stage, Maria took a critical step that with important consequences for her developing identity. Like other students, she had easy access to administrators in the school. She convinced the principal to transfer her out of the English class with the teacher who doubted her ability to do the work. (A few months later, and for similar reasons, she transferred out of her history class too.) In her other classes, she continued to work diligently and to associate with students who were considered hard-working or “good.”

While to us it seemed that Maria was sometimes going through the motions of learning, rather than truly engaging the material, we realized that she was fully enacting the schooled literacy

practices valued in this setting, such as maintaining a neat, organized notebook, copying notes from the board, and completing workbook assignments. Maria did not orally participate much in class; she seemed to avoid opportunities for failure by not speaking up, especially when the task required speaking in English. However, at this school, English oral participation was not necessary to be labeled as a “good student.” By enacting the “good student” role by writing (in English and in Spanish), and by associating with high-achieving students, Maria actively worked to position herself – and be positioned – in ways that projected success. This was achieved in large part by seeking teachers who had higher opinions of her and who taught in ways she found more engaging.

4.5. *Observation #3: March 9, 2006*

By her fourth semester, Maria was progressing well through the curriculum in all content areas, especially Spanish and science. She had changed English classes; she was studying with a Dominican teacher who had a higher opinion of her and she was earning grades in the 90s. When asked informally to comment on her, one of Maria’s English teachers said she was “a good, hard-working student.” This shift alone was remarkable; in the space of a month, Maria went from being labeled SIFE to earning A’s in her English class. At the same time, Maria was still struggling in math class, where her grades were considerably lower.

On this date, in Maria’s English class, the teacher had the students read and answer questions about *La Malinche*, the indigenous interpreter, advisor, and mistress to Cortés. On this assignment, Maria used a methodical work strategy that we had noticed during other observations. Before reading the story, she took out a piece of paper, wrote down the heading, wrote down all the questions, and reserved space for her answers. Then she read the story to fill in the answers. For several of the questions, Maria asked the observer for the answer rather than resorting to reading the text. She worked assiduously but rather automatically to complete the assignment; though she completed the task, her interaction with the text was rather shallow. Maria was quiet throughout the entire class as she completed both her in-class and her take-home work. She finished her work early, about 5 min before the bell rang, submitted the work to the teacher, and packed away her materials.

After finishing her work, Maria proceeded to prepare for a test in her next class. She said she was worried about her test next period in her health class. She started reviewing her textbook, and then turned to her desk partner and began reciting to him a list she had memorized about “the factors that cause stress.” She did not engage this decontextualized knowledge; she merely repeated it. A few minutes later, Maria told her desk partner that she was passing to another level of math and wanted a different teacher “because he explains well.” She said her current teacher is not helping her.

I was surprised to discover that, at the time of this observation, Maria’s trajectory seemed to have shifted. She had managed to escape the deficit model of a SIFE student and had moved into the category of the “good student.” Two things seemed critical to this shift. First, Maria insisted on being transferred to classes with teachers who reported higher opinions of her and treated her, in the classroom, as capable of the work. She was highly critical of teachers who, in her words, cannot “explain well” and do not “help her.” Second, during her time at Luperon, Maria worked diligently, enacting the locally defined role of the good student. She completed all of the written assignments required of her, mostly in Spanish but (for her English classes) also in English. During no observation did Maria fail to turn in an assignment; she assiduously used class time to complete her homework. At times it seemed Maria did not fully understand the work; however,

many of the literacy tasks at the school required diligence more than comprehension. As a result, Maria was earning passing grades in most classes and was progressing through the curriculum at a reasonable pace, which positioned her as successful.

4.6. *Second interview, April 26, 2006*

At the time of the second interview, Maria still manifested a strong conviction that school success was necessary to “get ahead.” For example, in one part of this interview, we asked students to imagine that a friend had recently arrived from the Dominican Republic and to tell us what advice they would offer that person. Maria replied, “one should study because one would not find money on the street, so one should progress to be successful.” Maria repeatedly mentioned school as the key means to “get ahead”; she said she would warn the newcomer that she should be “wary of envious people who discourage one from studying.” And she mentioned, once again, that her mother encouraged her focus on her studies.

Further, despite the conflict she had with some teachers and the criticisms she had of the high school, Maria was fairly positive about Luperon. During this interview, Maria said she thought Luperon was the kind of school most appropriate for immigrant teens, because they use both English and Spanish to teach. She said that other high schools, where classes are taught only in English, are “harmful” because the students in them feel isolated. When questioned specifically about the teachers, Maria said that the teachers might “seem imposing” but that they “try to support and encourage students.” She also praised the support she received from administrators and fellow students at Luperon; she mentioned that most students at Luperon work hard to “get ahead.”

The second interview, in particular, highlighted the extent to which Maria used the opportunity narrative as a key cultural artifact to invoke the figured world of school success and to organize her own behavior. She was keenly aware of the sacrifices she and her family had made to be in the United States; she lamented the absence of friends and family, and she chafed a bit under the heavy familial responsibilities in her new home. However, determined to make the sacrifice pay off, Maria adopted a rigid work ethic in school. She figured out what counted as a “good student” in her new school and she resolutely committed herself to enacting it.

4.7. *Interview with administrator, November 15, 2006*

On this date, I met with a Luperon administrator to review the progress of some of the students in the study. According to his records, Maria had attended summer school in summer 2006 and proved to be “the best student” there. In fall 2006 Maria was failing her English reading class with a 55, passing her English writing class with a 90, and passing her math class with a 70. As the administrator related the grades, he was surprised to see the discrepancy in her English grades and said he “needed to look into it.” He described Maria as “a silent, organized young lady” who is a “monster when it comes to discipline.” He said she may sit for hours with one easy problem, but she will work on it until she resolves it. “Two plus two may take her 2 h, but she gets to four,” he said. He felt certain that this persistence would ultimately ensure Maria’s graduation from Luperon.

The interview with the administrator highlighted the extent to which Maria’s sheer determination and her willingness to enact school-based literacy practices seemed to make the critical difference between her success and failure at school. As in previous semesters, during this semester

Maria teetered on the brink of failure, in terms of grades, in her English reading and her math classes. Yet she had established a reputation as a disciplined, persistent student.

5. Discussion

At the outset of our study, I thought I could predict Maria's educational trajectory. Given her age, her difficulties with English, the SIFE label, and her considerable familial responsibilities, it seemed probable that Maria would be acquired by a deficit model of school failure and would not complete high school. However, I did not anticipate the extent to which the local, school-based model of success would provide critical resources that would positively influence Maria's educational trajectory. Key among these resources were: the high status of Spanish as a medium of instruction and of student oral and written response; the valuation of a particular, school-based literacy and its link to the narrative of the "good student;" the institutionally supported opportunity narrative; and access to concerned administrators and caring teachers.

The most important elements of this local model of success were the high status the school granted to Spanish language and literacy and the link between certain task-based, low skill literacy practices and the notion of the "good student." Because the school valued Spanish, students like Maria could seek elucidation and could participate in Spanish in their content area classes (and occasionally in their English classes too). Further, the teachers in the school maintained a model of "the good student" that was enacted by diligent attention to fairly narrow, school-based literacy tasks. Thus, certain kinds of bilingual, school-based literacies became a vehicle through which local models of identity were taken up (or not). By diligently mastering these specific bilingual literacy practices, even when she eschewed oral English classroom participation, Maria was able to signal that she was a "good student." Many of her school literacy tasks did not require comprehension so much as persistence and diligence, and Maria excelled at these. She continued performing the role of the good student even when her educational trajectory was challenged by failing grades and negative interactions with certain teachers. The local model of success at this bilingual high school created space for particular bilingual literacy practices, which in turn afforded particular identity productions.

Another important element in this local model of success was the opportunity narrative an important cultural artifact that served to positively reinforce decisions like those made by Maria. First, many teachers and administrators (who were themselves immigrants) highly valued the obvious effort and "hard work" expended by students like Maria, and they rewarded it in their classrooms. Second, Maria used the opportunity narrative to focus her own academic efforts and deflect any discouragement. Further, Maria's educational trajectory was influenced by her access to teachers and administrators. Maria's access to an administrator who agreed to remove her from classrooms in which she felt labeled as failing was critical; after that change, she radically improved her grades in her English and history classes. (Here I am using grades as one measure of school success, a measure that influences the student's chances of graduation.) Maria spurned teachers who did not have high opinions of her abilities, and she aggressively sought teachers who, in her opinion, knew how best to teach her. She cultivated the identity of the good student in classes that were easier for her; in classes that were harder, like math and English, her persistence was generally respected. Over time, her grades improved, she progressed through the grade levels at a regular pace, and she was judged by several of her teachers to be "a good student" according to the local model of school success. In short, through bilingual literacies, the opportunity narrative, and particular relationships between students, teachers, and administrators, this particular bilingual high school constructed a local model of school success, which in turn presented possibilities for

students like Maria to position themselves in ways that would “thicken” her good student identity over time.

As [Wortham \(2006\)](#) suggests, students’ educational trajectories have consequences for their opportunities to learn English language and literacy as well as other important curricular materials. At the simplest level, given the way the English curriculum is scaffolded at this high school, the fact that Maria progressed through early levels of English while a few of her peers got stuck in the early levels of English meant she advanced past the classes that used drill and repetition more frequently to classes that relied on language experience or other language acquisition models. Further, since at this school the advanced content area courses are taught in English, the fact that Maria progressed through the early levels of math, history, and science classes meant she was hearing more English than her peers who stalled in the early levels. As Maria increasingly positioned herself and came to be positioned – and recognized – as a “good student,” her opportunities to learn English increased as well. She advanced through the English curriculum; she achieved higher content levels, which used more spoken English and often were forced to rely on English texts, for lack of a translation. As Wortham has argued, Maria’s social positioning and opportunities to learn mutually shaped one another; in this case, her social positioning influenced her opportunities to acquire English.

However, I do not wish to overstate these opportunities. As noted in the data section, we were concerned about the extent to which Maria comprehended the literacy tasks she faced. Often, we noted that the literacy tasks required of her at the school seemed to require more diligence than comprehension; this seemed true in English as well as Spanish. As [Rymes and Pash \(2001\)](#) demonstrate, at times students’ efforts to project identities as “good students” interfere with their opportunities to learn new material. They found that “academic achievement can actually be compromised by social competence” and “the second language learner often is adept at ‘passing’ as knowing, but that he achieves this identity-preserving expertise at the expense of an understanding of classroom lessons” (p. 278, 276). Indeed, Maria’s efforts to project the image of the “good student” kept her very busy; she rarely took the time to ask for clarification from the teacher, perhaps out of fear that it would reveal her lack of understanding. Thus, while her performance of the local model of success offered her certain opportunities (for example, to read, write, hear, and speak more English), it also placed certain limits on her opportunities to learn. This consequence highlights the limited reach of the school’s local model of success. While the school could largely determine who would pass classes and be promoted to future grade levels, the imposition of external measures like Regents exams (which one must pass to earn a diploma) provided new, high stakes definitions of success and failure that reached well beyond the school.

6. Implications and conclusions

Given contemporary understandings of identity as relational and fluid, emerging scholarship is working to identify how particular identities become stabilized in quotidian events. Recent work discusses the centrality of symbolic and material artifacts to those processes (see, e.g., [Bartlett, 2007](#); [Holland et al., 1998](#); [Leander, 2002](#)); other scholars stress the importance of attending to sociohistorical categories formed over long time periods as well as categories produced locally, in social interaction, over shorter periods ([Wortham, 2006](#)). In this article, I have emphasized the importance of examining social positioning through engagement with cultural artifacts across space and time. Given the complexity of this strand of work, many studies focus exclusively on one classroom, or even attend exclusively to a single classroom interaction. As this study shows, though students may be negatively positioned in certain classroom contexts, they can leverage their emerging identifications in other classroom contexts to influence their overall educational

trajectories. Further, by examining social identification in schooling over time, we can detect often unpredictable shifts in educational trajectories contingent upon particular cultural artifacts and social interactions even as we document the stabilization of identities.

In addition, this study suggests the importance of attending to not only to the curriculum, as Wortham has done, but also to institutional discourses and peer cultures, which provide critical resources in the process of *bricolage* that is social identification. To understand this process requires fieldwork beyond individual classrooms and, ideally, beyond the school. In addition, I argue that, methodologically, it requires interviews with participants in order to understand their developing subjectivities.

One implication of this study for educators of bilingual youth is the recognition that the incorporation and promotion of bilingual instruction and literacies, an institutionally-, peer-, and family-supported opportunity narrative, and supportive relationships between students, teachers, and administrators might be critical to the success of students like Maria, who could otherwise easily slip into a deficit model and school failure. The study suggests the importance, for bilingual immigrant youth, of a local, school-based model of success that values students' first languages as a resource.

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