High school students of Mexican background in the Midwest: Cultural differences as a constraint to effective literacy instruction

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This article focuses on school literacy factors drawn from a 5-year ethnographic study of the literacy practices of students of Mexican background across home, school, and community settings. Research on students of Mexican background in the Midwest United States is of special concern because of the high school drop-out rate and growth of population among these students, and the lack of information shared among school personnel about teaching language-minority students. The dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-old Mexican Americans in the United States is about 36% (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). However, as a subgroup, agricultural migrant students drop out of school at an even higher rate, said to be as high as 90% (National Program for Secondary Credit Exchange and Accrual, 1994). The Mexican-American population in the Midwest is steadily increasing, yet the drop-out rate remains high (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994). Henke, Choy, and Geis (1996) indicate that the Midwest has the lowest levels of professional development for teachers working with limited English-proficient students. The focus of this study on literacy practices is meant to inform theoretical discussions about school failure and success of students of Mexican background.

Moll and González (1994) observe that the Mexican-American community is influenced by “funds of knowledge,” a term originally used by Vélez-Ibáñez (1988) to describe how family members reflect certain skills and networks to accomplish different tasks. Students of Mexican background demonstrate varying perceptions of literacy that reflect unique skills, networks, and purposes. Some guiding questions for the 5-year study included: (a) What are the literacy practices of students of Mexican background across home–school–community settings? and (b) How do values and beliefs held by students of Mexican background, their families, and educational personnel influence literacy behavior? This article focuses on the school-related findings.

Method

Context and Entree

The seed for this study grew during my 4 years of teaching for the Summer

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Migrant Program in the Midwest, where I noticed that literacy practices that could have resulted in effective instruction and learning were not understood nor shared among students, teachers, and parents. My teaching experiences provided a foothold for me to become familiar with the Willow Grove community. Before I asked them to be in the study, the participants had already known me through my presence at educational, social, and community functions such as fiestas (Cinco de Mayo, 16 de Septiembre), baptisms, quinceñeras, birthday parties, migrant school open-houses, graduation parties, soccer matches, and friendly informal home visits. During previous conversations, students claimed they did poorly in school because of problematic teachers and their rules, and parents redirected blame to their children. Later, teachers revealed that both students and parents were at fault for poor school efforts. I began with the hope of dissolving some of the misunderstandings I had encountered during my teaching in Willow Grove.

Being a bilingual in Spanish and English was of considerable benefit because I could communicate effectively with the participants without the need for translations or interpreters. Being Mexican American allowed me to understand some of the cultural factors involved in interacting with the participants. For example, I knew how to behave during home visits, and this involved simple things like how to eat with a tortilla instead of a utensil. I knew how to participate in social functions such as a quinceñera. I presented myself in a friendly manner because I wanted parents and students to relax in my presence.

Access to the school site necessitated a more formal approach. Initially, I worried that my interest in Mexican-American students would stir up concern in a school district where students of Mexican background had a disproportionate dropout rate compared with whites. My fears were unsubstantiated. Upon hearing of my desire to do the study, the principal afforded me complete access to the school site. Everyone cooperated in a positive manner, and teachers welcomed me into their classrooms. Students at the school grew familiar with my presence in the hallways and classrooms. Overall, I felt very fortunate in gaining access to home and school data-collection sites.

**Setting**

Pseudonyms are used to describe all participants and locales. Willow Grove is a midwestern rural town of approximately 1,200 people. According to 1996 city council records, about 800 persons of Mexican background live in Willow Grove during the peak agricultural season. The long-established nursery industry creates a strong demand for seasonal agricultural labor. Many of the Mexican families who work in the nurseries originally migrated from rural Mexico, and several Mexican families have lived in the community for over 30 years. Their children attend school in the Willow School District.

According to the 1996 School Report Card, the Willow School District employs 56 teachers, all of whom are white. The Willow School District serves a little over 1000 students, and Willow High School enrolls about 300 of those students. Approximately 82% of the high school students are white and 18% are of Mexican background. About one-sixth of the 50 students of Mexican background enrolled
at Willow High School were limited English proficient (LEP). When asked for a
historical perspective on the enrollment of students of Mexican background, the
school counselor reported:

The kids get up about high school age, and we see an awful huge dropout rate.
Up until just the past few years, we may have one or two graduate, and that's a
lot compared to where they start. Usually, we have a pretty good population in
the grade school, and then by the time they get up here, it has dwindled quite a
bit. So, historically we don't have a lot of graduates. They just sort of drop out.
(Counselor interview, 3-27-96)

Participants

Initial participants included 25 high school students of Mexican background.
Ten focal students, an equal number of males and females, were selected from the
25 students. Focal students were all sophomores between the ages of 15 and 17.
The criteria used to select focal students included grade level, language, family
origin, ethnicity, and residence. All focal students and parents were of Mexican
ethnicity. Focal students shared a varying knowledge of Spanish, with Spanish-
speaking proficiency obtained from the principal, counselor, and my informal ob-
servations. I categorized the focal students as either Mexican-American
(English-proficient) students or Mexicano (Spanish-dominant) students. Recent
immigrants from Mexico generally self-identified themselves as Mexicanos, and
more settled students identified themselves as Mexican American. I use the term
Mexican background to describe both Mexicano and Mexican-American stu-
dents. No other Latino participants were involved in the study besides those
sharing a Mexican ethnicity.

Although 6 of the 10 focal students were classified as being English profi-
cient, 5 were fluent English/Spanish bilinguals (Maria Elena, Rodrigo, Myrna,
Jose, and Sylvia). One English-proficient student (Cindy) could not speak fluent
Spanish but was enrolled in a Spanish class. Cindy had grown up in an English-
only environment despite her parents being bilingual because her parents be-
lieved that she would be disadvantaged if she was taught Spanish in the home.
The other nine focal students grew up in Spanish-speaking home environments
and were all fluent in Spanish.

Five of the 10 focal students had prior education in Mexico (Maria Elena,
Pablo, Amanda, Miguel, and Alfredo). Five students only attended school in the
United States (Rodrigo, Cindy, Myrna, Jose, and Sylvia). Of the 5 focal students
who had prior education in Mexico, 4 were recently arrived Mexicanos (Pablo,
Amanda, Miguel, and Alfredo) who began their second-language learning be-
tween the ages of 11 and 15. Maria Elena was the only focal student who had
received both Spanish-language instruction in Mexico and English-language in-
struction in the U.S. during the elementary grade level.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collected for the study included interviews, observations, shadow ac-
tivities with four focal students, collection of literacy artifacts, and the use of key informants. Each focal student participated in four 45-minute, semistructured, open-ended interviews, resulting in a total of about 30 hours of interview data. Participants were given the option of interviewing in either Spanish or English. I audio-recorded and transcribed all of the interviews.

The initial interviews were more structured than the latter ones. Initial interviews followed a protocol of questions, while subsequent interviews were open ended. For example, the initial students’ interview elicited general background and literacy information. The second interview focused on classroom literacy practices. During the third interview, I focused on literacy artifacts found during a locker inventory that catalogued textbooks and other literacy items used for school. The fourth interview focused on their individual literacy perceptions and practices. Informants reviewed my findings during informal meetings to brainstorm and check for triangulation in the data. Twenty hours of interview data were collected from secondary participants, such as school personnel and parents, who helped to interpret information from focal students.

After the initial interview, I conducted observations in the classroom. During an initial background survey and interview, students self-identified classes where literacy activities, such as reading and writing, were most frequent. The students identified Practical English, English, Spanish, and Science classes (in that order) as classes with the most literacy activities. I observed 45 classroom sessions at Willow High School for a total of about 35 hours of classroom observations, which I recorded through fieldnotes and audiotape. In addition, I shadowed four students (Jose, Maria Elena, Pablo, and Amanda) unobtrusively during the course of a school day.

I collected student achievement data that described grades and test scores. I also collected school data that described dropout rates, graduation rates, and report card statistics. On one occasion, I examined a collection of old high school yearbooks. I collected and reviewed the town newspaper. I also reviewed historical records in the local library, and reviewed reading materials in the school library. I collected artifacts that were examples of the literacy practices under study, such as writing samples, student journal entries, and notes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing during data collection. I followed an iterative process that triangulated initial findings from across the different types of data. The students’ literacy performance and participation were documented by triangulating data from personal descriptions, my observations, artifact collection, and interviews with secondary participants. Throughout the preliminary and final data analysis the “constant-comparative method” was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I began the data analysis by transcribing the audiotaped interviews and typing the field notes. Next, I organized the data into portfolios for the community perspective, the school perspective, and for each of the ten focal students. I then
proceeded to code the data set. A useful step in the analysis process was memoing classroom observations and interviews. The memo writing task involved writing a brief narrative account of the particular observation or interview. The memo narratives allowed me to reflect on incidents and behavior that occurred in a particular data entry. I also implemented the unitizing task of the constant-comparative method to help me formulate my analysis codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Two sets of codes were developed to distinguish between the interview and observational data. The general coding framework used to analyze the observational data combined two general coding schemes by Lofland (1971) and Lytle and Schultz (1991) to create a set of umbrella codes. These codes were useful for guiding micro to macro levels of observation. The initial codes that were developed for observation data were modified when used with interview data.

After the initial coding and memoing, a case study was developed for each of the focal students. The next stage of data analysis entailed organizing coded/memoed data into particular themes. The themes served to focus on the “literacy” elements of the data through common and contradictory examples. Although the students’ participation in literacy activities was categorized into particular themes, it was the focal students themselves who provided another perspective for understanding the data. Thus, data were analyzed through coding and memoing, thematic organizing, and then triangulated through individual case studies to which the focal students responded.

**Literacy Practices in the School**

Positive aspects of school literacy practices were overshadowed by negative aspects. “Positive” literacy practices allowed students to meaningfully engage academic content through productive reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks. “Negative” literacy practices were incomprehensible reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks that lacked academic content and sometimes resulted in discipline problems for the students. Positive and negative literacy practices tended to be determined by how the students were tracked. The few students of Mexican background who managed to take higher track classes generally engaged in more productive activities. With the exception of science class, literacy activities in lower tracks were somewhat less engaging. Mexicano students were constantly judged by their ability to communicate in oral English. Even Mexican-American students with high class rankings, who had already become English proficient, still encountered negative perceptions by teachers who problematized their commitment and their family’s commitment to attain a positive educational experience. Many students of Mexican background were in lower educational tracks that did not foreshadow upward social mobility.

**English Instruction**

For 4 of the 10 focal students (Maria Elena, Cindy, Jose, and Sylvia), academically productive literacy activities occurred in English Literature with Mrs.
Reynolds who maintained high standards for her students. Yet, most students of Mexican background were not in English Literature with Mrs. Reynolds. The majority were placed in Practical English. Mrs. Reynolds revealed that students who took English Literature had to be already fluent in English. School personnel might have negatively stereotyped Mexican-American students’ ability to participate in a higher track English class since they were mostly enrolled in Practical English.

"Practical" English. Expectations in Practical English were not high for Ms. Rowell who did not even assign students homework because she claimed she would not get it back. Ms. Rowell described her instruction:

It’s a lower level form of the regular English classes. What we do is just take things a little bit slower. We explain things a little more in-depth. Basically, I figure most of my kids are going to need help on their homework, so I don’t give them homework. (Ms. Rowell interview 2-28-96)

Practical English remained impractical because it failed to account for the functional literacy experiences of the students. Literacy practices that extended into the community sphere focused on the mediation between Spanish and English for basic communication. Social practices familiar to White culture were also familiar to families of Mexican background, such as going to the public library, buying groceries at the local market, or reading the town newspaper. At the end of the work day, Mexican families, friends, and relatives sat at the kitchen table and discussed the items that required translation. Other translation tasks involved a more active process that required the translator to accompany the Spanish-dominant adult to a particular locale. Six of the 10 focal students, 4 Mexican Americans (Maria Elena, Jose, Myrna, Rodrigo) and 2 Mexicanos (Pablo and Alfredo), engaged in varying literacy translation experiences. These tasks included paying bills, interpreting correspondence, and periodically accompanying a parent for translation purposes. Two of the 4 focal students (Cindy and Sylvia) who did not engage in translation literacy tasks had English-speaking parents who did not require English translation help. Translation as a literacy activity was unique to the Mexican community but unfortunately remained outside the scope of “Practical” English.

Because the majority of the LEP students were in her classes, I asked Ms. Rowell about her ESL teaching background. She indicated that she had not had any ESL training and that this was a difficulty for her. She said, “I know very little Spanish,” and “I wasn’t hired as an ESL teacher” (Ms. Rowell interview 2-28-96). Ms. Rowell believed her role as an English teacher precluded her ESL responsibilities. She felt that if she provided students with Spanish reading materials, they would not be learning English. Although Ms. Rowell was well intentioned in her responsibility to teach English to LEP students, her practice reflected much of the conventional wisdom that was a barrier for more effective instruction.

English Literature. A few of the Mexican-American students enrolled in English Literature with Mrs. Reynolds and made considerable literacy gains as
demonstrated in their standardized test scores and growing fondness for reading. Mrs. Reynolds motivated students to do a lot of popular fiction reading and writing. She was less successful with the use of canonical literature because it was far removed from the background experiences of the Mexican-American students and their second-language abilities for dealing with advanced literature. However, Mrs. Reynolds’s implementation of popular fiction, particularly the horror genre, succeeded because it capitalized on student interest.

Although a few of the Mexican-American students scored above the school average on the state assessment for writing and mathematics, the Mexicano students did not show any improvement in their English knowledge despite 2½ to 5 years of school. The school was somewhat effective in educating students who were already capable of understanding English, but was not effective in educating Mexicano students, who were viewed primarily in terms of their lack of English. Ironically, the school relied on the parents and students of Mexican background to translate school documents from English to Spanish, despite the legal obligation to provide understandable communication in the native language of the home.

For the Mexicanos, literacy practice at school emphasized the translation of English instruction. The Mexicanos were provided with two bilingual aides, Mr. Cox and Mrs. Lopez, who took different translating approaches. Mrs. Lopez more effectively mediated between Spanish and English through the simulated Sheltered English Approach she facilitated with Mr. Michaels in Science. At times, the Spanish-dominant Mexicanos were segregated into a side room for translation purposes.

Spanish as a Foreign Language

Spanish was not viewed as a resource for English learning, nor did the school view bilingualism as a global asset. Although many of the focal students demonstrated their Spanish proficiency in Spanish class, many of them thought there was a rule that forbade Spanish to be spoken outside of class. However, I could not find this rule in any official document. The rule reflected the conventional wisdom that devalued Spanish. Pablo claimed that the vocational education teacher had told him and others of this rule the year before, saying that Mexican students could not speak Spanish in the hallways. The teacher had conveyed this information during the students’ lunch hour. When I asked Pablo what he thought of this Spanish rule, he said “¡Que es racismo [this is racism]!” (Pablo Gomez interview, 2-28-96). Maria Elena also recalled: “They said that we shouldn’t have to speak Spanish if we knew English.” (Maria Elena interview, 2-28-96). Except for Spanish class, teachers shared the conventional wisdom that emphasized English and devalued Spanish as an effective medium for instruction.

It is interesting to note that Spanish class was designated as a higher track class; however, students enrolled in Spanish for different reasons. Typically, White students took Spanish to fulfill the university admission requirements for foreign language. Students of Mexican background simply wanted to be with friends
because Spanish class was where most of the Mexican students were concentrated. Ironically, the White students enrolled in Spanish relied on students of Mexican background as informal tutors to complete assignments.

Si está la bolita de Mexicanos y una de gíeros, se vienen mejor a la de Mexicanos que a la de gíeros. Quieren aprender español y se les hacen más fácil juntarse con nosotros para que se les peguen las palabras en español. Practican con nosotros mismos en español.

If there is a bunch of Mexicans and one of Whites, they would rather come over to the Mexicans than to the Whites. They want to learn Spanish and it seems easier for them to get together with us so that the words will stick to them in Spanish. They practice with us in Spanish. (Pablo Gomez interview, 2-28-96)

Unfortunately, the linguistic exchange between Spanish-speaking students of Mexican background and white students was not reciprocated. Students of Mexican background did not engage white students to learn English in informal social settings. Overall, the awkward status of Spanish at Willow Grove presented a serious barrier for more dynamic interpretations of literacy.

Sheltered English Science

Despite the restrictive informal language policy, Mexicano focal students engaged in cooperative activities that allowed them to participate meaningfully in science instruction. Without knowing it, Mr. Michaels implemented components of a Sheltered English Approach in his Science class (Sullivan, 1992). He used large, colorful displays and manipulative exercises or experiments that reinforced daily instruction. Mr. Michaels regularly wrote his lecture notes across the three large chalkboards in the classroom. Students knew to take out their notebooks and copy any notes on the board. Mr. Michaels usually lectured during note-taking sessions. Miguel described the routine writing activities in the science class this way:

El tiene las notas apuntadas y las copiamos. Ya después él está explicando, a como uno está escribiendo las notas. Ya después, se lleva casi toda la hora explicando pues así. Al último, ya nomás nos dice cuál es la tarea y nos ponemos hacerla.

He has the notes written, and we copy them. Then afterwards he explains while we are copying the notes. Then that takes up almost the whole hour explaining like that. At the end, he just tells us what the homework is and we do it. (Miguel Ramirez interview, 3-27-96)

Mr. Michaels communicated with the students through a systematic routine. He kept students on task. For example, he wrote the day’s assignment and other pertinent information on a reserved corner of the chalkboard, which served as a graphic aide. Students often referred to this information to stay on task.

Mr. Michaels also provided Mrs. Lopez, the language aide, with any tests or worksheets that needed to be translated for the students. Each student had a translated copy of the tests and worksheets. The students did not write on the translated copies; instead they wrote on the English version of the test or
worksheet, using the translated copies as a guide. Mrs. Lopez kept the translated tests and worksheets on file for later use. This practice allowed Spanish-speaking students to keep up with their white counterparts because it usually took Ms. Lopez 2 or 3 days to translate orally a test to students. Most important, Mr. Michaels never reproached the Mexicano students. He did not embarrass or call any unnecessary attention to them nor create a situation where they felt compelled to respond verbally or disrupt the class to save face. The integration of the Mexicano students in the mainstream classroom (while accommodating their linguistic needs) was instrumental in their meaningful participation in effective school literacy practices.

Peripheral Literacy Practices

Students of Mexican background demonstrated literacy practices outside the classroom. Cindy authored and illustrated a children’s book that she shared with her peers in Future Homemakers of America. Myrna voluntarily participated in yearbook journalism during her study hall period. Sylvia had a sincere passion for writing personal poetry. She mentioned how she sometimes woke up in the middle of the night and wrote poetry. She could recite her favorite poems from memory although she failed English. During school, many students exchanged notes with each other as informal communication. Amanda Meza believed that the school was doing a poor job of teaching English, yet she recognized the importance of learning English through social contexts. For example, Amanda used clear and specific English when she ordered food at McDonald’s. Her friends passed notes to her written in English, and although she responded in Spanish, she felt as if she was learning English in this way. These literacy practices went unnoticed by teachers, yet illustrated authentic student interests that were potentially valuable literacy activities.

Cultural Differences Affecting Literacy

A Mexican-American student’s cultural affiliation was negotiated in terms of peers, language preferences, and social activities. Venturing out of defined Mexican spheres into predominantly white spheres of social contact potentially entailed being rejected by the Mexican-American community or being ridiculed by socially affluent white students. For the Mexicano males, learning English also meant breaking out of the intimate social circle shared by other Spanish-dominant Mexicanos. Some Mexicanos specifically chose to remain in a Spanish-speaking circle of friends and rely on others to translate. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) similarly observe the “burden of acting White” for African-American students who become estranged from their African-American peers because they emulated White social conventions to succeed in high school.

On one occasion, Alfredo avoided reading aloud in English by claiming he had eaten some mango with milk and that this would not allow him to read. Alfredo’s excuse combined humor with a Mexican folk belief that the consumption of milk
with fruit can result in an infirmity, usually related to an upset stomach or an empacho and, in more severe cases, a heart attack (West, 1988). The context of the joke was only understood by the Mexicano students, who readily laughed. Mr. Cox, despite his fluent university Spanish, was unfamiliar with these nuances of Mexican culture and was purposefully left out of the joke.

The Mexicano male students' penchant for misbehavior reflects McDermott's (1985) observations of how pariah behavior affords neglected students a form of peer status. The Mexicano students misbehaved in school when their efforts were not recognized nor rewarded. Similar to Graham's (1985) finding that Mexican-American students wanted to enter the job market rather than stay in school, many of the Mexicano males were questioning whether they should even finish school. Willis's (1981) anthropological observations similarly documented working class male students in Britain who viewed the world of work as a unique male role whereas education was belittled. The Mexicano males shared working class values modeled by fathers, brothers, uncles, and other males in the community. Pablo's younger brother, Juan, mentioned that he needed to go to school only to learn enough English to be employed. Literacy for working class Mexicano males had a different function, one more situated in the practical aspects of being ready to go to work and dealing with day-to-day life.

School personnel's lack of professional expertise in the area of second-language instruction aggravated the situation. Another constraint was the Mexican norm for teacher respect that allowed the school system to continue problematic practices without fear of criticism from the parents. School personnel's misguided conventional wisdom was an obstacle for learning English. For example, teachers needed to be more conscious of wait time for second-language students. During many of my classroom observations, students of Mexican background, although thinking seriously about questions and even coming up with correct responses, were not acknowledged by teachers who did not wait for them to answer. All too often the students' perspectives on life, labor, and literacy were silenced.

Implications

One of the most important things that all participants can do to improve the effective advancement of literacy and learning for students of Mexican background is to move toward cultivating a more positive view of linguistic and cultural diversity. The cooptation of minority populations within mainstream educational interests, such as evidenced by the nonreciprocally Spanish-language learning by whites, remains an instructional problem (Cummins, 1986)

What were deemed common sense approaches for educating second-language students did not work. The teachers at Willow High School needed to communicate and coordinate instruction for second-language students so that input was comprehensible. The science teacher needed to formalize his knowledge of the Sheltered English Approach and disseminate this method of instruction to the rest of the faculty. Students of Mexican background must be integrated in meaningful activities in school instead of activities at the periphery of what is
validated in the school and community. The influence of popular culture, specifically contemporary music and television, on the literacy and learning of students of Mexican background may have allowed school personnel to provide students with more high-interest reading material and instruction. The recognition of authentic literacy interests among Mexicano/Mexican-American populations could inform instruction in other topics through a funds of knowledge approach (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988). The validation of cultural knowledge is critical as the demographic trends indicate that the population of students of Mexican background are expected to continue to grow.

Some researchers have focused on subtractive bilingualism among elementary age students (Fillmore, 1991), but research regarding primary-language loss among secondary students is scant. The constant emphasis on English in the school limited a more dynamic role for Spanish. Richard Rodriguez (1982) is a popular advocate of English-only instruction for students of Mexican background. The language loss Rodriguez selectively underwent is similar to what continues to occur in Willow Grove, as Ms. Mendoza notes:

Es bien curioso. Cuando los niños crecen aquí, ya no quieren hablar español. Solo quieren hablar inglés. De repente deciden que van hablar una solo idioma. Los papás no les ayudan aprender que el español es bonito. Que también vale la pena aprenderlo. Muchas señoras han platicado de ese problema. Que sus niños no quieren interpretar, que no quieren ayudar. Que les dicen, “Acompañame, para (saber) que dice el doctor?” Y el niño dice, “Yo entiendo, pero no te puedo decir en español.” Y se sienten así como muy frustrados, “Ay, como es posible?”

It is very curious. When the children grow up here, they do not want to speak Spanish. They only want to speak English. Quickly, they decide to speak only one language. The parents do not help them learn that Spanish is beautiful. That it is worth their while to learn it. Many mothers have told me of this problem. That their children do not want to interpret for them, they do not want to help. They will say, “Come with me, (so that I know) what the doctor is saying?” And the child will say, “I understand, but I cannot say it in Spanish.” And they feel very frustrated, “Oh, how is this possible?” (Señora Mendoza interview, 4-16-96)

Several Mexican-American students’ knowledge of Spanish was purposely stymied. However, Rodriguez’s example, which has appeased political conservatives who align themselves with English-only instruction, is problematic because of the negative psychological consequences related to estrangement from parents and second-language limitations due to insufficient first-language development (Cummins, 1981; Fillmore, 1991).

It may be important to consider the level of second-language literacy achieved by students of Mexican background in a rural agricultural setting. Does it remain at a functional level? Or, is there a possibility that second-language literacy can allow other avenues of higher education to open up, and in effect open up other career opportunities besides those that await them in the field, factories, and meatpacking plants? The segregated contexts of instruction at the school reflected the segregated class differences between whites and families of Mexican background in Willow Grove. However, the integration of students of Mexican
background is critical for their effective participation in the school setting. Students should not be stigmatized for the cultural and linguistic differences they bring to school.

A potentially informative research direction could be investigating technology for second-language instruction of language-minority populations in schools that are constrained by a lack of key personnel. The advent of technology in education could allow geographically isolated school personnel to access resources previously unavailable. On the other hand, at Willow High School, there existed differences in computer usage and access between white students and those of Mexican background. Mexicanos students were placed in low-track classes where computers were not used. Technology as a resource for learning or a marker for marginalization merits further investigation.

The use of bilingual aides for ESL instruction needs to be carefully considered by school administrators. Although school personnel met the letter of the law by providing LEP students with bilingual aides, they failed to meet the spirit of the law by not ensuring that students acquire English or understanding that learning through Spanish was appropriate for students. They also did not provide ESL instruction. State and federal educational agencies must monitor rural school districts and how they implement ESL and bilingual education policy so that it is in accordance with state and federal mandates.

Future research should investigate immigrants' point of origin as this has implications for understanding the cultural beliefs and practices unique to a particular region in Mexico, such as a comparison of gendered literacy practices between Mexico and the United States. Foley's (1990) research foreshadows the negative educational outcomes for Mexican-American females who encountered the least amount of upward social mobility as a result of their subordinated gender status. Additional research should explore cultural practices in the home of origin of Mexican immigrant communities as a way of understanding their evolution in the United States.

An investigation in Mexico could also help delineate cultural differences that Ogbu (1992) associates with school failure and success. An examination of these differences needs to account more fully for the colonial influences of Spain, France, and the United States, as well as the system of internalized-colonization Mexicanos and Mexican Americans impose on themselves (Hernández-Guttiérez, 1994). For persons of Mexican descent to internalize, or accept, a dominant/subordinate structure as "normal" creates an internalized system of failure that results in low self-esteem and lack of motivation to transcend the traditional colonial structure. Freire (1990, 1994) specified that the effective understanding of a traditionally subordinated groups' identity within an oppressive social framework was instrumental for the development of an emancipatory literacy practice. The information presented in this ethnography addresses the first component in the critical literacy framework advocated by Freire: learning who you are, and what your place is within the world.

Students of Mexican background revealed the potential to engage literacy instruction based on the literacy abilities they demonstrated outside of the school
curriculum. School personnel and even the Mexicano and Mexican-American families have been acting without the formal recognition of how certain practices and beliefs become constructed. Instead, they were complicit participants in the historical subordination of a marginalized student population. Additional research should explore the potential of critical/emancipatory pedagogy as a sequential component of anthropological research.

References


