

Passing for English Fluent: Latino Immigrant Children Masking Language Proficiency

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This article describes passing for English fluent among Latino immigrant children. A two-year ethnography of eight Latino immigrant families was conducted in which fifth-grade children were followed in home, school, and community contexts. This article presents passing as a consequence of U.S. race relations. Their reasons for presenting themselves as English fluent suggest a sophisticated awareness of the power and status of English in this country and a clear link between language and identity. [bilingualism, English language learners, Latino students, identity]

In the United States, English holds greater power and status than minority languages, particularly Spanish. This becomes evident to immigrant families almost immediately upon arrival to the United States (Valdés 1996). Many Spanish-dominant children and adults often experience discrimination or prejudice because of their language and ethnicity (Evans 1996). Nondominant children are conscious of being “different” and feel pressure to “fit in” (Olsen 1997).

In this article we examine how some students cope with the stigma associated with lack of English proficiency in our society. Specifically, we examine the passing attempts of a small sample of Latino immigrant children. “Passing” here refers to the use of strategies to appear more competent in English than was actually the case. Our findings suggest that passing for English fluent may be both a strategy of self-preservation and a form of resistance.

We draw on various theoretical frameworks to understand why students attempt to pass, how this practice reflects existing race relations, and how passing relates to children’s developing identities and agency. We begin with Goffman’s (1959) theory of passing that reveals the human need to see oneself and be seen in socially positive terms. We also draw on critical race theory (Solórzano 1998) to point out that passing for English fluent is yet another form of passing for white. Finally, we examine identity and agency from a Bakhtinian-sociohistoric perspective (Holland et al. 1998). From this perspective, children’s passing strategies may both reflect and support identity development and agency. This framework allows for the dynamic and complex reality of both social and individual worlds that so often lead to “improvisations” (Holland et al. 1998). We present Latino children as creative and resourceful human beings who actively mediate their own psychological functions and their English-speaking world.

Passing and the Presentation of Self

In his seminal work, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," Goffman (1959) posits that individuals develop "fronts" to present themselves through a desired identity. Goffman developed an analogy between everyday social interactions and the theater and argued that interactions are composed of actors, a stage, and an audience. Individuals construct a front and backstage identity. The front is that which the actor presents to a particular audience to influence the perceptions the audience forms of the actor. This front can be sincere or cynical. That is, the actor may actually believe that the front she is putting on is an authentic identity, or the actor may be aware of her deception and may even gain satisfaction from her ability to dupe the audience. However, there is movement along this cynical and sincere continuum so that a person who is aware of his deception may eventually begin to believe that the identity he is presenting is authentic and/or may actually develop the attitudes and beliefs associated with the particular identity he is assuming. Given this, an important concern is to what extent the children who display passing strategies are aware of their duplicity and whether there is any evidence to suggest that they may begin to believe themselves to be more fluent than they actually are.

Goffman (1959) contends that most people select fronts that are considered socially acceptable and often the front represents aspects of an ideal identity, what the actor aspires to becoming. Furthermore, fronts selected often coincide with people's aspiration for social mobility. Goffman refers to "passing" and "management" activities as the means by which fronts are maintained. According to Goffman, individuals attempting to pass as having a particular identity manage the contexts around them and construct elaborate scenes that provide support to the front identity. One problem is that maintaining the front may take up so much energy that there is little opportunity to make the task one's own. A student who wishes to pass as fluent in English may be so busy pretending to understand that she may not draw on comprehension strategies or ask for assistance to maintain the appearance of fluency.

A Critical Race Perspective on Passing for English Fluent: Language as Proxy for Race

Goffman's work points to the need to be perceived in socially acceptable ways and posits passing as evidence of agency. Critical race theory (CRT) helps us understand passing as a social practice that indexes a desired or more legitimate identity in the context of U.S. race relations. CRT developed from critiques of critical theory for neglecting the role of race in the field of law (Crenshaw et al. 1996). Critical theory posits that major institutions in our society favor those already in power through multiple formal and informal processes. CRT posits that race is a pervasive category and must be foregrounded in any theoretical and practice-based account of inequalities (Crenshaw et al. 1996).

Adopting a CRT perspective, Solórzano and his colleagues (Solórzano 1998; Yosso et al. 2004) argue that the educational experiences of nondominant groups must be examined in a way that highlights the role of race and racism and their intersections with other forms of domination. Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) complements and supplements CRT by addressing race and racism in the contexts of immigration, language, phenotype, and other issues salient among Latinas/os and Chicanas/os in the United States (Valdes 1998).

From a CRT and a LatCrit perspective, passing for English fluent is a direct consequence of the unequal relations of power that Latino children experience vis-à-vis their white counterparts. Latino marginalization is directly related to race and racism, to the notion that whites are in some way genetically and culturally superior to other groups in general and to Latinos in particular. Racism occurs at both institutional and individual levels, and Latino students' language-related experiences are a direct consequence of both.

Above, we discussed Goffman's (1959) theory that individuals often put on fronts that support socially acceptable or "ideal" roles. How, then, can Latino students preserve a sense of dignity as Spanish speakers in an English-speaking world? That is, how can they present themselves as competent, intelligent, resourceful, and valuable when so many interactions they engage in with the outside world render them incapable, limited, underprepared victims of cultural deprivation? From a CRT and a LatCrit perspective, these labels, often attached to language, are used to hide what Villenas (2001) has termed "benevolent racisms," racial prejudice or discrimination veiled under notions of "helping" nondominant groups to improve their social situations. While hidden under the guise of "helping," formal and informal policies and practices that support notions of the superior nature of English vis-à-vis certain minority languages, such as Spanish, are deeply rooted in racial prejudices. It is interesting to note that while condemning people for their race is no longer legally acceptable or socially acceptable in increasing contexts, the same does not apply to language. Many people still feel comfortable voicing their beliefs that Latinos in the United States need to leave Spanish and other cultural traditions behind and that they need to assimilate to U.S. "norms" as quickly as possible. A CRT and LatCrit perspective helps us see that language has now become the new acceptable category that maintains the old order of distinguishing people by race.

In an argument critiquing the intent and impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark case that ruled for school desegregation, Gutiérrez and Jaramillo (2006) have revealed the similarities between the Jim Crow era with its separate but equal laws and our current educational system that applies the "sameness as fairness rule" without regard for language fluency, income, and other factors that impact racial minorities, such as English-only policies and No Child Left Behind. The result, they argue, is a new social order in which language has become a proxy for race. Gutiérrez and Jaramillo (2006) point out that the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was not a "moral imperative" to eliminate the practice of categorizing people based on race. Rather, the ruling sought to eliminate segregation in schools to rectify the problem of unequal education between white students and black students.

Indeed, the Jim Crow era of separate but equal laws saw the most significant era of passing for white. Blacks who successfully passed for white gained white privileges, such as better housing, better schools, and better jobs with higher wages. However, they also had to interact primarily with other whites, and many had to forgo interacting with family members to conceal their identity (Haizlip 1995). Although sometimes believed to be a historical phenomenon of the black community, passing for white has occurred among multiple racial and ethnic groups (Kroeger 2003) and continues even today (Broyard 2007). This profoundly troubling practice is a testament to the lack of equal opportunity and continual repression and marginalization of nondominant groups.

Passing for white has sometimes taken the form of “acting white.” This generally involves adopting practices that are sometimes associated with the dominant group and/or engaging in white social groups. In educational contexts students of color are often said to be “acting white” if they engage in the types of practices typically rewarded in schools (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Among Latinos and other language minority groups, passing for white is often couched in terms of language loss and identity conflicts (Fillmore 2000; Olsen 1997). The most infamous case of this is that of Richard Rodriguez (1982), who was immersed in English for the sake of procuring academic success and social mobility. However, the cost of his “success” was primary language loss, loss of parent–child communication, and personal and cultural alienation. In a case study of an immigrant first grader from Costa Rica, Rymes and Pash (2001) found that the student passed as competent in English and in classroom routines at the expense of learning. The student’s passing was motivated by his desire to fit in with the other students, to appear “normal” to them based on *their* cultural assumptions. In this country this need to fit in is more than just being able to get along with others. It is a need to preserve a sense of dignity amid a social context that supports the illusion of a meritocracy and suggests that Latinos and other nondominant groups are deficient. Passing for English fluent is then highly tied to notions of identity, how we define who we are to preserve our sense of dignity, and agency, how we consciously take action on our own behalf to present this identity. Understanding identity and agency theoretically allows us to better understand what passing means to the students we studied and how it may impact them in the long run.

Identity and Agency in Passing

Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998) have developed a theory of identity and agency rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and Bakhtin (1981). They critique notions of the self as either purely natural or purely cultural and argue that both these positions essentialize the self, rendering it static and unified. Studies of personhood, they argue, must take into account both cultural forms and individual “improvisations.” This intertwining of the social with the individual is the central basis of both Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s theories.

Vygotsky (1978, 1987) has argued that learning and development occur through tool-mediated activity and that this process is highly impacted by social, cultural, and historical factors (Wertsch 1991). Novices learn as they participate in cultural activity alongside a more competent other. Mediation occurs first as social practice (interpersonal) and later as individual practice (intrapersonal). This “internalization” involves a qualitative transformation with respect to both the use of the cultural tool and the activity itself and thus is never a direct replica of that witnessed. Worth noting is that intrapersonal mediation (inner speech) is still a process that involves the interaction between the individual and the social. While the expert is no longer needed to complete the task, her words and other cultural tools and those that have been used prior are embedded in the activity itself. This emphasis on historical development is crucial to notions of identities as changing and multiple. Vygotsky did not deal with identity specifically. Nor does his work tease out issues of power and privilege inherent in the relationship between the novice and the expert or broader social categories that impinge upon the social context.

Bakhtin (1981) dealt specifically with identity. He saw the self as produced through words and languages, and he examined the role of ideology and discourse in authoring the world and the self. For Bakhtin, languages are inherently social perspectives on the world. Through words, we can produce particular views and meanings, what he has called "authoring the world." Bakhtin considered authoring the world to be a dialogic process involving a continual and conflictual dialogue between the "I" and the world, or the stimuli to which one is exposed. As he puts it, words are always half someone else's, they are picked up from the mouths of others, populated with *their* intentions and purposes. Only when they are appropriated, populated with one's own intentions, do they make up one's Voice. Drawing on Vygotsky's (Wertsch 1991) emphasis on development, we could add that one's Voice never becomes the "I," as even our own intentions and purposes reflect the heteroglossia to which we have been exposed and from which dialogism occurs. Heteroglossia, the simultaneity of different languages and their associated values, guarantees that the process of authoring is a complex act of choosing from multiple, sometimes conflicting and even contradictory perspectives. Inherent in this argument is the relative power of particular languages, the extent to which one has access to specific languages, and the particular discourses and values associated. According to Bakhtin (1981), "authoring the self," or developing identities, involves understanding ourselves from the perspective of others, what he calls reaching "outsiderness." However, when examining the identity development of people of color, in this case Latino students, understanding themselves through the perspectives of others often involves seeing themselves through the perspectives of those in power, English speakers, and so on. In addition, the space of authoring, Bakhtin's version of the zone of proximal development, is infused with racialized perspectives that position Latinos as racially inferior and culturally deprived. The zone of proximal development or the space of authoring is highly impacted by the positional identities of specific actors and the relative power and status of the social roles each plays within the broader society.

The role of context is particularly important in these theories. Identities are produced in the process of participation in cultural activity. Activity, like language, is socially and historically developed and carries with it particular functions, perspectives, discourses, and values. Activities are organized within particular social worlds or communities that share a common language, beliefs, values, and practices. It is a social world within which cultural tools are produced and organized. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) notion that children's play involves creating make-believe worlds that represent real social contexts and offer opportunities for cultural production, Holland and colleagues (1998) refer to these socially and historically developed cultural contexts as "figured worlds." Since people often engage in multiple figured worlds in which identities are produced in practice, the self is plural, and particular selves may often contradict or even conflict with each other.

Figured worlds as an analytical tool highlight the differing social relations and positionality of their members that reflect the unequal social relations of the broader society. Indeed gender, race, class, and other isms are often depicted in figured worlds in ways that reflect and perpetuate existing power inequities. People are ascribed the characteristics of the particular roles they perform, and these are always relational and positional to other roles. Identities produced in figured worlds are embedded with relational notions of power, privilege, and status. Latino immigrant children in the

figured worlds of schools are generally positioned in relation to dominant-group children, the English fluent, and so forth.

However, an important aspect of figured worlds is the creative and agentic component. While some identities are often unconsciously reproduced, learned through daily practice, others are clearly figured. That is, in the conscious practice of figuring the world and through the expert use of cultural tools, people may become aware of their positioning and remediate, create other ways in which to be positioned. From this perspective, then, agency is the conscious mediation of cultural tools to effect both exterior and interior functions. Agency is the capacity to effect a desired outcome by mediating the world through the mediation of one's own "higher psychological functions," including emotions, beliefs, and values. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, agency involves developing "internally persuasive speech" to mediate the struggle between multiple and sometimes opposing languages so that a somewhat more stable Voice, or authorial stance, may be produced, what Vygotsky (1978) describes as the qualitative transformation that occurs as mental processes move from the social to the individual plane.

From this perspective, passing for English fluent can be thought of as children acting agentic, drawing on their more or less expert understandings of what it means to be competent within the figured worlds in which they engage and utilizing specific cultural tools to resist being positioned as an English learner, with the relational subordinate identities that this role is ascribed. However, Bakhtin's (1981) work illuminates the complexity involved in developing one's Voice. Latino immigrant students are constantly bombarded with multiple and conflicting discourses from the media, school, home, and community contexts with respect to their race, language, and cultural practices as well as the role of education and English in the potential for social mobility. Developing an authorial stance that is critical is likely to take time and experience within any figured world and is impacted by the positionality of their particular role. The path to a critical consciousness is likely to follow initial use of others' words, "ventriloquating" (Bakhtin 1981) popular discourses about equal opportunity and English learning as the vehicle for social mobility. How agency is actualized and what improvisations result are what we consider in the findings section of this essay.

Agency among nondominant groups has often been studied as resistance. For example, Kelley (1993) discusses the seemingly spontaneous, unorganized, sometimes collective activity of southern blacks in response to discriminatory practices as resistance. He posits that silence and accommodation were often purposeful strategies intended to deceive and that this deception created a sense that power relations were to some extent being offset. These "everyday" acts are the cultural tools used to resist developing identities as subordinate and oppressed.

Scott (1990) proposes that oppressed groups create a "hidden transcript," a dissident political culture manifested in the groups' daily cultural practices, including talk, dress, and songs. Reminiscent of Goffman's (1959) work, Scott posits that these cultural practices are sometimes performed on stage in front of those in power but in a disguised form. He contends that these hidden transcripts and everyday acts of resistance form the infrapolitics of the oppressed, which may ultimately lead to broader movements of social change.

An important caution in drawing on resistance theories is that although resistance efforts reveal actors as agentic, they also tend to present acts of resistance as futile acts

that ultimately reproduce power inequities. However, there is evidence that resistance is a complex practice. In a recent study (Urrieta 2005), Chicana and Chicano teachers described "playing the game" as being deceptively silent about the injustices they experienced while keeping broader goals of social change in sight. Here, going along with dominant practices was part of a strategic and long-term resistance effort. Agency was used for cultural transformation.

Method

The data are drawn from an ethnography examining the cultural practices and ideologies brought home from school by Latino immigrant children and their cultural productions. The two-year study involved research with eight fifth-grade children and their families.

The Community and the School

The study took place in an urban, predominantly Latino immigrant community that we call La Fuente. All parents were immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. However, many of the children were U.S. born. Spanish was the primary language of the home, but all but the youngest of children brought English into the homes, and some were beginning to use more English than Spanish. All of the families lived in crowded conditions by U.S. standards.

The public elementary school served over 1,700 students. The student enrollment was 99 percent Latino, all English learners. One hundred percent of the student population received free or reduced-price lunch. Prior to the English-only policy that passed in California, La Fuente Elementary had one of the strongest bilingual programs in the district. One fifth-grade class was targeted for the study. Eight children from this class were followed into their homes, and their families (including siblings) became the primary participants for the larger study.

Sources of Data and Collection

Participant-Observation. Lilia D. Monzó¹ visited the elementary school at least two times per week during the first year of her study. Her interactions included observing classes, playing and talking with children at recess, eating with children at lunch, and talking with teachers in the hallways or the cafeteria. The bulk of school observations and interactions took place in one fifth-grade class. Lilia usually engaged with students rather than the teacher during classroom visits, sitting and talking with students informally and helping them with class work.

Although the class was conducted in English only, Lilia spoke almost exclusively in Spanish to all of the children in school and at home. This was a conscious effort on Lilia's part to show children her value for Spanish and Latino cultures. This was very useful in developing rapport with students, particularly with those who struggled most with the English-only curriculum. Eight children from this fifth-grade class were selected to be part of the family study. At school, the Lilia spent most of her time the first year observing and talking to these eight focal children. The second year of the study, the children spread to various middle

schools in the surrounding area, and, thus, school observations were minimal. Field notes from school observations were written in the classroom and contextualized after leaving the site.

Lilia visited the eight children at home throughout the two years and participated in routine family tasks including making dinner, playing, reading, homework, and community outings. Community outings with families included the public library, the nearby university, various markets, stores in the neighborhood as well as malls located farther away, social services, immigration, the hospital, various clinics, and multiple local restaurants and fast food stores. Lilia often volunteered to assist families with transportation and language brokering and provided families with instrumental knowledge about schools. She also accompanied some of the families to school functions, including back to school nights, parent-teacher conferences, and appointments with teachers and counselors at the local elementary school (the first year) but also at the various middle schools (the second year of the study) and high schools (for older siblings). Lilia made over two hundred visits with the eight families, each lasting an average of three hours. Field notes from home visits were written up after leaving the site.

Interviews. Although the larger study included interviews with children, parents, and school personnel, for this essay, we draw exclusively on interviews and informal conversations with the children. At least one formal interview was conducted with each of the eight focal children and their older siblings, separately. In addition, numerous informal conversations took place with the children. Topics discussed that are salient for this article include children's perceptions and comprehension of the English-only curriculum, their perceptions of language status and power, and their concerns regarding their levels of English proficiency. Once "passing" had been observed multiple times and significant rapport had been built, some children were specifically asked whether they sought to "pass" as English fluent, why they did so, and what strategies they utilized for this purpose. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Authors' Subjectivity

Our own subjectivities are ever present in this article. Lilia is a Latina interested in the identity development of Latino youth. She was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States at the age of four. She was raised in Miami until the age of 14, when her family moved to Los Angeles. She benefited from the advantages to which Cuban immigrants are privy in Miami, including the social value for bilingualism and ethnic pride. Her family is of working-class background, with limited schooling and English skills, factors that parallel the experiences of the Mexican and Central American communities she studies. Her own experiences with discrimination, alienation, and identity conflicts have led her to see Latino identities as cultural productions, highly shaped by their experiences as subordinate members of society.

Robert Rueda is a second-generation Latino who is interested in the social and cultural aspects of learning and motivation and how these play out in different learning contexts. He has focused on reading and literacy in young children because they represent the intersection of a variety of important dimensions of this area, including the social, cultural, and political aspects. Robert was born and raised in the

Los Angeles area and grew up in a large working-class family in a largely Mexican American community. His experiences navigating higher education in the course of receiving advanced degrees and as a "minority" faculty member in large research universities have led to his interest in issues of discrimination and identity.

Analysis

Analysis for home and school data was conducted separately. Home data, including outings, were analyzed through a multiple-case approach. Each family was treated as a separate case. School data included data on practices of the formal and informal curriculum of the class and school. School data pertaining specifically to the focal children were added to their family case files. A grounded approach to data analysis was used for each data set. Data were analyzed on an ongoing basis so as to inform collection. For example, passing became evident early on in the study and led to increased attention to children's interactions in English-only contexts and language choice. Interview questions were designed to address this "finding." Numerous themes were constructed and aggregated within each case to understand multiple identities and social context. Across-case comparisons were then made. This essay draws on codes on children's language ideologies, the role of context, access to curriculum, and help-seeking behaviors.

Strategies for Passing

It became clear early on that children did not always understand instructions, readings, or lesson content but that they often pretended to understand. This occurred in the classroom, on outings where interactions took place in English, and, at the beginning of the study, even in their homes when reading with Lilia. Students' comments indicate that passing was a conscious decision made to protect themselves from feelings of shame:

A veces no la entiendo [a la maestra], pero sí, me hago que yo la entiendo. Digo, "Oh, yeah, ya lo entiendo, está fácil, esta fácil!" (laughs) pero no. (Sometimes I don't understand her [the teacher], but yes, I pretend that I understand her. I say, "Oh yeah, now I understand! It's easy! It's easy!" (laughs) but I don't.)

Es que aveces una palabra que viene siendo bien dura para mí, para otros no. Ellos lo leen rápido y en voz alta y yo no. Yo lo leo despacito y allí me quedo y la maestra me dice la palabra. Da vergüenza. Unos dicen, "¡No oigo! ¡No lee bien! ¡Apurate! ¿Qué dice?" Así. Por eso no me gusta leer. (It's that sometimes a word that is very hard for me, for others it isn't. They read it fast in a loud voice and I don't. I read it slowly and there I stay and the teacher tells me the word. It's embarrassing. Some say, "I can hear! She doesn't read correctly! Hurry up! What did she say?" Like that. That's why I don't like to read.)

Affirmative Response without Elaboration

When uncertain about a question, students often chose to risk providing an affirmative response rather than ask for clarification. In one example, Lilia had gone to the public library with Marco. At the checkout line, the attendant told Marco that he had an overdue book. Marco responded, "No, I brought it back." The attendant gave Marco a slip of paper with a phone number and told him to look for the book at home

and that if he thought he had returned it that he should call the number he had given him. Lilia, who had been next to Marco during the exchange, noted Marco's blank look. Lilia waited a few seconds to see if Marco would ask for clarification. He did not. When the attendant continued with the checkout procedure, Lilia asked Marco quietly, "¿Entendiste lo que dijo?" [Did you understand what he said?]. He looked at her, smiled, and shook his head. Lilia repeated the attendant's instructions in Spanish, and Marco nodded. When the attendant repeated his instructions, Marco responded in English that he would do that.

In the classroom this was evident in the so often asked, "Do you understand?" for which students readily responded with an affirmative response. This strategy was observed frequently among children who had difficulty following instructions and/or content. This was evident to Lilia as she helped students one-on-one, translating into Spanish, often moments after witnessing them falsely indicate to the teacher that they had understood.

Completing Assignments Como Sea (Any Which Way)

Some students often did not understand their independent work assignments. In some cases it was a misreading or perhaps not knowing the material, but in other cases they did not know what the task required as their responses were totally off the mark with respect even to the main broad topic. When Lilia was not certain of the assignment because she had not been there when it had been explained or was not familiar with the story it was based on, she suggested to students that they ask the teacher for assistance. Rarely did students follow up on her suggestion. Instead, they would remain thinking and ignore her suggestion, which often resulted in her going to ask the teacher and returning to explain it to them. However, some students would come right out and say, "No, está bien. Así lo dejo" [No, that's ok. I'll leave it like this]. Six of the eight students told Lilia that they sometimes just wrote "anything" on assignments when they did not know what to do rather than ask the teacher or a peer for assistance.

Deflecting Reasons for Poor Performance from English Fluency

Elizabeth, who was especially having difficulty with understanding academic content because of limited English vocabulary and some difficulty with reading fluency in both English and Spanish, was particularly adept at avoiding doing her work. She often got up from her seat or turned in her chair to talk to other students, played with pencils and markers, looked around the room, stared into space, rummaged through her desk, and played with her many bracelets.

Elizabeth was very quiet. The teacher rarely noticed her behavior. On one occasion, Lilia observed that for a period of two and a half hours during which time the students were to be writing an essay about a friend using a Venn diagram, Elizabeth had not even written her name on the paper. Twice during that time, Lilia attempted to help her by making suggestions of what she might include in Spanish and then translating the sentences into English. However, Elizabeth would leave her desk and walk elsewhere in the room.

At one point Lilia leaned close to Elizabeth and quietly told her without reprimand but with concern, "Elizabeth, hace dos horas que te estoy mirando y escribiendo lo

que estas haciendo, y no has escrito nada. ¿Por qué?" [Elizabeth, I've been watching you for two hours and writing down what you are doing, and you have not written anything. Why?]. Elizabeth smiled and laughed it off, promising, "Ya, ahora sí voy a empezar" [Ok, now I *am* going to start]. But again she became distracted. When the teacher said, "Those of you who have not finished will have to do it after school," Elizabeth quickly began writing. She mumbled to herself, "Es que yo no entiendo" [It's that I don't understand].

At the beginning of the study, Lilia often asked the children if they understood the teacher who spoke to them only in English. From her observations she believed that they often did not understand. Lilia had expected that even the most conversationally fluent of the students would have some difficulty with vocabulary in reading and social studies since this was for many students their first year in an English-only class. However, none of the students said this was true. Instead, they were emphatic that they had absolutely no problem understanding in English both the teacher and the texts. They stated that they understood, nodded their heads, and scrunched their faces in such a way as to indicate that the question was absurd.

Disrupting Student Reading-Aloud Practices

During reading aloud, students consistently disrupted the reading, frustrating the teacher and ending the activity as shown below:

A student reads aloud, and others are supposed to be following along.

A student yells out, "I can't hear her!"

Another student yells out, "What did she say?"

The teacher says, "Speak up in your reading."

The student reads another few words.

Another child yells out, "I still can't hear her."

Another child yells to the one who yelled, "Shut up!"

The student continues reading through the commotion.

This continues with every subsequent reader until the teacher becomes exasperated and stops the activity.

Students who had some difficulty with reading in English often mumbled when asked to read aloud. They would begin reading one or two words and then read under their breath so that neither their peers nor the teacher could hear them. This often set off the previous disruption and added to it. A few students told Lilia that they mumbled on purpose when it was their turn to read because they did not want their peers to detect their mistakes and/or they wanted to add to the group disruption already occurring that would eventually end their reading-aloud practice.

Avoiding Eye Contact with the Teacher

When the teacher asked questions in a whole-group setting, the less-English-fluent students were often seen sinking down in their chairs, averting their eyes from the teacher, or pretending to be engaged with another task. This strategy was also used to avoid having to read aloud. One student described it this way:

S A veces (Sometimes) I pick up the book like this [raises a pretend book in front of her face and laughs]. I don't like to read.

L ¿Para que no te vea la maestra? (So the teacher doesn't see you?)
S Yeah [laughs].

This also occurred with the more-English-fluent students. As with the other strategies for passing, it was difficult to determine whether students were passing as English fluent or passing as competent in the subject matter since the subject matter was all in English and almost no scaffolding occurred using the primary language. However, it was fairly obvious that those who had the greatest trouble with following instruction often had difficulty understanding content.

"Messing Up" on Purpose during Reading Aloud

Reading-aloud practices were common in this classroom, which used the Open Court reading program. The teacher called on students to read aloud, and they would read until the next child was called on. Round-robin is considered an inappropriate reading strategy because children tend to preread the selection that they believe they will have to read aloud, missing out on reading along silently while other children read aloud, which is crucial to comprehension (Flippo 1999). Popcorn reading is a similar approach in which children are chosen to read in no apparent order so that they cannot anticipate when their turn to read will be. Popcorn reading was the approach used most often in this class. Reading aloud in English for English learners is inappropriate because it puts children on display when their reading fluency levels and pronunciation may be very different.

Another disturbing part of these reading-aloud practices was that the cue to stop reading was when they "messed up" by reading a word incorrectly. One child told Lilia that she often messed up on purpose to keep her readings to a minimum. This was one of the less fluent English readers. Although one might think that this strategy for passing runs counter to the goal of protecting themselves from feeling humiliated, it does not. When this child read aloud and messed up on purpose, she read a few short words quickly and could pretend to have just misread a word because she was not reading carefully. However, if this student had attempted to read, she would have read the material slowly and struggled with numerous words. In this process her reading fluency and decoding skills would have been evident to the class.

The Power of English

All of the children expressed a value for bilingualism. They said they needed to maintain their Spanish to communicate with their parents and family members when visiting their countries of origin. Two children also believed speaking Spanish would help with employment. The children also understood the need for English in this country. Their comments suggest a keen awareness of the role English plays in social and economic mobility and daily functioning:

L ¿Cuándo seas de la edad mía, vas a hablar más inglés o más español? (When you are my age, will you be speaking more English or more Spanish?)
S Más inglés. (More English.)
L ¿Sí, por qué? (Why do you think that?)
S I know some people that they forget Spanish so I'm scared about that. That just because my parents maybe talk a little bit in English and Valeria [younger sister] pronto va a hablar

English también y Lucía [older sister] también ya habla inglés (soon will speak English also and Lucía also already speaks English) and I'm scared that I will forget Spanish.

L ¿Qué pasaría si se te olvida? Cómo te sentirías? (What would happen if you forget Spanish? How would you feel?)

S Bad because that's the first thing I learned. My dad and my mom are always telling me it's good to be bilingüe (bilingual). My dad always says, "I want you guys to never forget in Spanish, that's our, nuestra tradition." And when I go to Mexico what am I going to say, I'm not going to know nothing of Spanish. Why should I go then? Entonces siempre practico el español en mi casa. Pero desde que salí de fourth grade ya no escribo en español. (So I always practice Spanish at home. But since I left fourth grade I don't write in Spanish.) That's the problem that osea, nosotros empezamos en español y acabamos todo con inglés. (We start in Spanish but we finish everything with English.) And I always say I want to go to vacation to always practice the Spanish and the English. I could have two months in Mexico and two months here.

However, numerous comments suggest that as early as fifth grade, children were developing a sophisticated awareness of the power and status of English vis-à-vis Spanish. Many comments made by students reveal the interconnection among language, race, class, and identity. For example, "difference" was a theme that came across in conversations with all of the focal children and their older siblings. To them being different was a result of not being American (although some were born in the United States), not being white, and/or not speaking English fluently. They also saw these differences as linked to a sense of belonging or "fitting in." One student put it this way: "It's like if you move to Portugal and there they speak uh, the language of Portugal, then you want to speak that language because you want to belong there. You don't want to be different."

What is interesting about this need to fit in is that these students attended schools where almost all students were Latino English learners. In a similar vein, another student made a link between language and citizenship. He said that his mother could not be considered American because she did not speak English. This has serious implications for the identity development of non-English speakers. Although this child may not fully understand yet that citizenship is not merely a place of residence attached to the right to vote but a symbol of full participation as a person, it is likely that as he gets older he will develop this understanding and with it the sense that if you are not "American" in this country, you are an outsider, someone at the margins. Then, he may wonder where he *does* belong since he has lived here since he was two years old.

Children also seemed to construct a link between language proficiency and intelligence or knowledge. For example, one fifth-grade student expressed her feelings regarding the sudden switch in language of instruction after the passing of Proposition 227 like this: "It's like everything we learned before is in the trash." Previously placed in the transitional bilingual program for grades K-3 in which much of her instruction was in Spanish, she was placed in fourth grade in the newly designed English-immersion program without any transitional support. In this new program instruction, informal conversation with teachers, books, and materials were all in English only. Students were even discouraged from speaking in Spanish among themselves during recess and lunch. This sudden switch to a program in which students' home language was no longer acceptable for academic or social purposes diminished the value of Spanish and everything students had learned previously in Spanish.

Not surprisingly, this same student remarked that she felt afraid when speaking in English in public and showed Lilia her shaking hands as they held a very informal conversation in English while driving back from an outing. She said she was afraid that people would laugh at her. She also commented on her loss of confidence in her literacy skills: "Last year I was one of the top, not the best but one of the better ones in reading and writing, but now I think I am very low."

The Roles Available to Latino Immigrant Children

The children were observed in a variety of contexts within the community, including schools, public libraries, fast food restaurants, clinics, and other public service agencies. An interesting finding was that although the community was predominantly Spanish speaking, most establishments almost always greeted their customers in English. A number of service agencies did not employ someone who could help their customers in Spanish, and a number of those that did have workers who spoke Spanish did not offer to find someone to translate for them. Below we document the language roles available to the children in a variety of contexts.

White-Collar Contexts

By white-collar contexts we are referring to contexts where services are of a professional nature, such as contexts in medical offices, dental offices, and hospitals. Lilia accompanied families to medical contexts seven times. In each instance the doctors that the children were examined by did not speak Spanish and appeared to be white or Asian. Latinos fluent in Spanish were found in these offices in the roles of nurses or administrative assistants. Although many of them did speak Spanish, they did not automatically begin speaking Spanish to the parents or children. Rather, it was after they saw signs of parents struggling to communicate that they switched from English to Spanish for specific questions. Often they would continue to speak to the children in English for quick comments such as "The doctor will be in soon." Consider the following excerpt from the field notes:

Sra. Perez and I picked up the girls from school and walked to the clinic. The girls each had a cold and a fever. The receptionist/nurse spoke Spanish and directed almost all her questions to the mother. Then the doctor called Julie into his office. We all went inside. He did not speak Spanish. He asked Julie some questions and she responded in English. I wondered why no one was asked to translate so the doctor could speak to the mother. He said that she had a swollen throat and that she had a high fever. Julie was translating. She said "Son las amígdalas. Que tengo fiebre." (It's the tonsils. That I have a fever.) When he had finished examining Julie he examined her younger sister, Valeria. Again he talked in English and Julie told the mother what he had said. He said that it was her tonsils. I waited to see if Julie would rectify that the doctor had only commented on Valeria's tonsils and not her own but since she did not, I clarified. I told them that for Julie I had only heard him say a swollen throat. Sra. Perez asked Julie accusingly, "¿Son las amígdalas o no? ¿Cómo se dice?" (Is it the tonsils or not? How do you say that?) Julie said, "Yo no se." (I don't know.)

We see that everyone involved in the context assumes Julie will be the translator. This is a common role for Julie, as it is for many of the children. The role of translator is a complex and difficult one, especially during face-to-face interactions (Orellana 2001). The role of translator can be very positive as it provides a certain amount of power to

the children, who will learn to see themselves capable of contributing to family functioning. However, the role of translator can also lead to feelings of shame when the expectation of fluency is not realistic.

American Franchises and Government Offices

Here we refer to the numerous chains of stores that seem to dominate the market in most U.S. communities. La Fuente was no exception to this as its major commercial avenues were lined with fast food and other chains such as McDonald's, Thrifty, and so on. We also include here government offices such as the post office. These were establishments that typically do not require workers to have education beyond perhaps a high school diploma. The families visited these establishments in La Fuente frequently. Workers at these establishments likely lived within or near the community. Many of them likely spoke Spanish. However, the workers within these contexts were fluent in English and addressed clients initially in English, "How can I help you?" Parents were familiar with these English queries and responded in Spanish. The interaction would then proceed in Spanish. When children took over the interaction they conducted it in English even though it was evident that the worker could conduct the interaction in Spanish. Children had figured out that English was the language used in public spaces, even when the context was such that everyone was Spanish fluent.

Although many of the workers in these blue-collar establishments were Spanish speakers, the children may not have been identifying themselves with them. During one visit to a mall in the Los Angeles downtown, not far from La Fuente, the child with whom Lilia was having lunch identified the cleaning staff as Latino. She did not seem to identify with the other staff with which she had contact in the process of ordering the food who also may have been Latino, perhaps because of their initial address in English. Consider her comments below:

All people that you see here working. [looks around] Um cleaning the restrooms, picking up trash, who do you see them? Africans Americans or Latinos. Who do you see cleaning the houses? The same people. Who do you see in the vegetable places, doing, putting seeds and all that stuff, cosechando? Who do you see? Africans Americans and Latinos. Los Americans you don't see them anywhere. You see them in the office or you see them resting. Why? Cause they already have money.

Academic Contexts

Academic contexts are especially important in shaping the lives of children. The children were observed regularly in academic contexts, including in schools (primarily year one of the study), at home doing homework, at the nearby university, and at various public libraries, which were visited a total of eight times.

In schools, Spanish was heard often among students (especially in elementary school) informally in class and out of class. There were also bilingual classes offered in the K-2 grades. However, it was evident that the school's major agenda was to make sure that students became English fluent as quickly as possible. Consider the classroom language contexts presented below.

The fifth-grade class had been composed of students in each of the three language programs available at the time, English immersion with no primary language

assistance, English immersion with limited primary language use for clarification purposes only, and the transitional bilingual program for those students whose parents had signed waivers (see Monzó 2005). This mix of language programs in the same class made teaching an almost impossible task, particularly as the school had adopted Open Court, a scripted reading program in English that was developed primarily for whole-group instruction. When asked about the language of instruction for the differently placed students in the class, the teacher said that the principal had told her to just use English with all the students. Indeed, only two observations took place in which Spanish was used to scaffold, and both occasions were during one-on-one assistance. Observations revealed that many of the children were having tremendous difficulty with understanding texts and story plots in the Open Court reader. Within these language contexts, students cannot display their strengths and Spanish use signifies remedial needs. Needing assistance in English is associated with lower abilities or skills across domains.

Similar roles were available to students when visiting public libraries. Even though the libraries were in La Fuente and other nearby highly Latino immigrant communities, they did not have a Spanish-speaking librarian to assist Spanish speakers. Lilia witnessed children struggling to fill out forms for library cards and check out books and noted that they did not ask for assistance from librarians regarding source material for school assignments, opting instead to not complete the assignments. Given this, students were not able to take on roles as confident or “good” students. According to students, a “good” student was one who spoke English well, got good grades, and was able to accomplish assignments without too much difficulty. This was not the case for these students since they could not access the assistance they needed.

The university offers young visitors the role of potential future students. However, students immediately noted that university contexts were almost entirely English only. Two students commented on issues of class, race, and language with reference to the university they visited with Lilia:

Walking back to the car, Lucía said, “lo que no veo aquí son casi ningún Latino o alomejor no se miran. Como usted (Lilia) no parece Latina. No se por qué pero no parece.” (What I don’t see here are almost any Latinos or perhaps you don’t see them. Like you [Lilia] don’t look Latina. I don’t know why but you don’t look it.) Then Julie, her younger sister, agreed to both these statements.

Sra. Gómez commented, “Elizabeth llegó contandome de que en la universidad todos estaban hablando en sus teléfonos celulares y que todos hablaban puro inglés.” (Elizabeth arrived telling me that at the university everyone was talking on their cell phones and that everyone spoke only English.)

In addition, Lilia noted that students in an attempt to fit in at the university setting seemed to switch to English with Lilia more than they normally did in other contexts where they interacted with Lilia more in Spanish.

Discussion

Our findings show that the “press” to learn English is real and powerful and that students are acutely aware of their language limitations and attach non-English proficiency to a variety of negative characteristics such as low intelligence. Furthermore, students seem to be aware that English holds greater power and status in our society

than Spanish and see themselves as “different” from the mainstream. In addition, students’ comments highlight the intersectionality of race, class, and language. Passing is thus revealed to be more than an attempt to appear fluent in English; it is an attempt to be accepted as a full member of a society.

Even within this highly Latino immigrant community, children had few roles to play that fostered a sense of pride in their language and culture. Roles that provided them with a sense of power and achievement were those in which they successfully utilized English, such as when they successfully translated. However, given that Spanish in public venues was used only when necessary for comprehension, and often not even then, Spanish was relegated to a second-class status used only in familial contexts or for remedial purposes.

Students’ comments on language issues, race and class, and belonging reveal a sense of self produced through the multiple Voices (Bakhtin 1981) of parents, peers, and official sources such as professionals in white-collar contexts and policy-based practices in schools. These Voices tended to reflect both positive and negative discourses on Spanish maintenance, on bilingualism, and ultimately, on Latino ethnicity and culture. If identity must, as Bakhtin (1981) posits, be evidenced through the eyes of others, then clearly these multiple discourses are the sources from which children produce identities. The development of Voice (Bakhtin 1981) among students is evidenced in process, with ventriloquation of their parents’ comments on language and with greater critical awareness utilizing others’ words in ways that reflect their own concerns, as with the student who questions why she only sees Latinos and blacks in service jobs.

Passing is shown to be a way of “answering” (Bakhtin 1981) the discourses and ideologies to which the world exposes students. In the figured world of English fluent the roles range from English learners to native English speakers. Positional roles also exist within figured worlds and are often the same ones that exist in the broader society (Holland et al. 1998). Race, income level, and immigration status are often related to language fluency and thus impact the relative power and status and resulting access to cultural forms within this figured world.

Positionality is an important aspect of the zone of proximal development or the “space of authoring.” In the context of schooling, for example, we can understand how these children’s development through mediation by a more competent other is affected by a sense of fear of possible ridicule from peers, teachers’ orders to use English only, and the tremendous pressure that children must feel to learn English quickly to be viewed in a more positive light. In addition, children’s development in both English language and literacy and academic content is highly dependent on access to particular mediational tools, determined often by teachers, principals, and educational policies, such as English-only and mandated reading programs that primarily affect nondominant-group students in urban schools. Learning a second language for academic purposes takes approximately seven years (Cummins 1996). However, this was not explained to children who were developing low academic self-concepts. Parents also were unaware of the process of second language learning, which sometimes resulted in unrealistic expectations. That Latino immigrant students are made to develop deficit notions of self due to policies that ignore educational theory has much to do with their social position in society.

An important point is that students did not passively accept the social positions they were cast into as English learners. Instead, they were proactive and strategic in

their attempts to deal with their language issues by devising strategies that would allow them to pass for a more valued social position, that of fluent in English. The examples of passing and management strategies show students as quick-thinking, resourceful problem solvers. Passing, then, can be understood as an agentic strategy for mediating the ways in which they were viewed by others and how they viewed themselves. Passing strategies reveal a certain expertise with the cultural tools utilized, including the use of speech, gestures, facial expressions, looking busy, and so on.

Passing can be seen as a form of both individual and collective resistance. It may appear that passing only serves to eventually reproduce inequalities by keeping Latino youth from receiving the English and academic benefits they need. Indeed, none of the strategies observed seemed academically advantageous, and some were socially and academically stigmatizing (disrupting reading-aloud activities) and may have led to differential outcomes such as negative teacher evaluations. A serious concern is that engaging in passing and management may diminish students' ability to keep up with the academic content (Goffman 1959). This concern is consistent with recent work on cognitive load theory (Paas et al. 2003) that argues that having to allocate cognitive resources to the task of appearing competent adds a source of extraneous cognitive load that does not directly contribute to learning and which could be expected to lead to negative achievement outcomes over time.

However, preserving a sense of personal dignity by avoiding ridicule and a sense of shame may be very important to a student's socioemotional development and may support school persistence. It may be that by figuring the world of English fluency and taking on the roles of English fluent by passing, children are learning about identities associated with English fluency and perhaps developing hoped-for "possible selves" (Osyerman et al. 2006). Possible selves refer to an individual's self-relevant expectations for the future. These possible selves include what a person hopes to become, expects to become, and fears that he or she might become. Hoped-for possible selves provide the individual with futures to dream or fantasize about. When positive possible selves are viewed as attainable and when specific scripts, plans, and behavioral control strategies are attached to them, they become expected selves and have the potential to organize and energize one's actions (Osyerman et al. 2006).

From this perspective, passing may not necessarily be the self-defeating act that some resistance efforts are depicted as. It may be that passing allows students to maintain a sense of dignity while silently waiting for their English skills to strengthen. This is especially true if children perhaps are simultaneously utilizing other, more invisible, means by which to make sense of instructions and curriculum. Research on this is particularly warranted.

Implications

This work has important theoretical, policy, and teaching implications. Theoretically, this work focuses our attention to a possible reorienting of resistance research, which is often couched in terms of constructing resistance strategies and their obvious consequences. However, research on resistance should also address long-term consequences and whether resistance efforts that seem to reproduce inequalities are accompanied by compensating activities. In addition, this work suggests that research

on language cannot be isolated from the broader construct of race, class, and possibly other social categories that differentially allocate power in our society.

This work also points to the need to reconsider current English-only policies. Not only are they unsound for both English and academic development, but they reinforce power differences in our society and relegate non-English speakers to second-class citizens. In doing so, they promote among English learners the production of identities embedded with deficiency perspectives and inaccurate academic self-concepts. We have considered some positive results to passing strategies. They are, nonetheless, a response to social discourses and discrimination practices toward Latinos in the United States. Policies that reinforce cultural deficiency perspectives must be reversed.

Teachers and other school personnel, although held to specific education policies including English only, must find ways to create pride in cultural and linguistic differences. Curriculum in our society needs to include theoretical and practical understandings of diversity and marginalization beginning at the elementary grades. Clearly these children are aware of power issues in our society. Ignoring these in our curriculum and presenting a unified, romanticized view of society is a way of maintaining the status quo. A clear understanding among English learners of the process of language development is also needed. Teachers need to be aware of and be able to recognize passing strategies among their students. Furthermore, instruction must consider avenues for children to seek assistance in less obvious ways. For example, partnering students with different English-fluency levels and allowing them to discuss instruction and content in both languages can support students' language needs. In addition, a more personal relationship between students and teachers is required so that students will feel comfortable in sharing their language needs.

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Notes

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1. The authors are identified in text the first time by full names and subsequently by first names only. Although this strays from convention, the authors felt this was important to honor the relationships that were built with participants through the mutual sharing of sociocultural experience as ethnic and linguistic minorities in the U.S. It is the authors' hope that to some extent this approach minimizes the unequal power relations in text between researchers and participants.

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