

Understanding the Interconnectedness between Language Choices, Cultural Identity Construction and School Practices in the Life of a Latina Educator¹

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Abstract

This qualitative research looks at the effects that language choices and cultural practices have on identity development in the education of minority students in the United States. It examines the educational journey of Irma, a Latina educator. Through the analysis of interviews with the participant, this paper intends to show the effects of language ideologies on her cultural identity and literacy development. The interviews with this Latina educator exemplify how language, cultural identity, and loss change one's life. They also exemplify the constant struggle of many minority educators working with second language learners of English who have lost and later regained their heritage language and now understand the importance of defining and strengthening their inherent cultural identity. In re-establishing her personal and professional identity, Irma contributes to the process of breaking the vicious cycle of cultural deprivation and reproduction of the social structure that has put speakers of a language other than English at a disadvantage in life and in society. In adulthood, Irma continues to re-construct her cultural identity, re-define her bilingual position in society, and re-gain her sense of self.

Keywords: language choice, language ideology, language loss, cultural identity, Latino education.

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Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo se centra en los efectos que causan la elección del idioma y las prácticas culturales en el desarrollo de la identidad en la educación

¹ Received: August 28th, 2011 / Accepted: February 23rd, 2012

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de los estudiantes pertenecientes a las minorías en los Estados Unidos. Este artículo pretende mostrar los efectos de las ideologías lingüísticas sobre su identidad cultural y el desarrollo de sus habilidades lectoescritoras por medio del análisis de las entrevistas realizadas a una educadora latina, las cuales ejemplifican como la pérdida del idioma y la identidad cultural cambian la vida de una persona. Además, se evidencia la constante lucha de muchos educadores de grupos minoritarios de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera que han perdido su lengua materna y con el tiempo la han recuperado y ahora son conscientes de la importancia de definir y fortalecer su propia identidad cultural. La experiencia de esta educadora latina contribuye a romper el círculo vicioso de privación cultural y la propagación de la estructura social que ha puesto a los hablantes de una lengua distinta al inglés en una situación de desventaja en la vida y en la sociedad. En la edad adulta, Irma continúa reconstruyendo su identidad cultural y redefiniendo su rol en el entorno bilingüe al que pertenece con el propósito de recobrar su sentido de identidad.

Palabras claves: elección de un idioma, ideologías lingüísticas, pérdida del idioma, identidad cultural, educación latina

Resumo

Este estudo qualitativo centra-se nos efeitos que causam a escolha do idioma e as práticas culturais no desenvolvimento da identidade na educação dos estudantes pertencentes às minorias nos Estados Unidos. Este artigo pretende mostrar os efeitos das ideologias linguísticas sobre a sua identidade cultural e o desenvolvimento das suas habilidades de leitura-escritura por meio da análise das entrevistas realizadas a uma educadora latina, as quais exemplificam como a perda do idioma e a identidade cultural mudam a vida de uma pessoa. Além do mais, evidencia-se a constante luta de muitos educadores de grupos minoritários de estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira que perderam sua língua materna e com o tempo recuperaram e agora são conscientes da importância de definir e fortalecer a sua própria identidade cultural. A experiência desta educadora latina contribui a romper o círculo vicioso de privação cultural e a propagação da estrutura social que puseram aos falantes de uma língua distinta ao inglês em uma situação de desvantagem na vida e na sociedade. Na idade adulta, Irma continua reconstruindo a sua identidade cultural e redefinindo seu papel no entorno bilíngue ao que pertence com o propósito de recobrar seu sentido de identidade.

Palavras chaves: escolha de um idioma, ideologias linguísticas, perda do idioma, identidade cultural, educação latina

Understanding the interrelations of culture, language, and identity is important for all teachers but especially for teachers who work with diverse learners and students who are learning in a second language. A person's culture is an essential element of their identity. It contributes to their self-image and influences their group identity i.e. the groups to which they feel they inherently belong (Bakhtin, 1981). Culture reflects the totality of our being, our values, and our beliefs. It is the foundation of each specific ethnic group which inherits their specific values and beliefs from previous generations and will pass them on to subsequent ones. It not only encompasses the external aspects of a person's life, such as the food they eat, the clothing they wear, what they choose to celebrate and how they choose to do so, but it also influences the intangible aspects such as religious beliefs, the nature of language, as well as the shared values that shape the way a person thinks, behaves, and views the world (Monzo & Rueda, 2009; Nieto 2010).

Language is intrinsically related to culture. It performs the social function of communication of the group values, beliefs and customs, and fosters feelings of group identity (Bakhtin 1981). In other words, language is the medium through which groups preserve their innate cultures and keep their traditions alive. For this reason, it is important that people maintain their culture. Research shows that the loss of language means the loss of culture and identity (Baker, 2001), and in years past, Latino children in the United States have experienced the loss of their first language. Even today, they are continuing to lose their first language. In addition to weakening their inherited culture, moving away from their home languages also has significant implications for ELLs' cognitive development (Gonzalez, 2001).

According to García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008), in 2001-2002 seventy-seven percent of the English language learner population in the United States was Latino and forty-five percent of the Latino children attending school were English language learners. García et al. also explain that despite the research proving the positive effect of students using their primary language to learn English, instruction in a student's primary language is used less and less in American education. In the last twenty years, federal education policy has slowly moved away from considering students' first languages and cultures and has increasingly emphasized an English-Only policy for instruction (Crawford, 2008).

While proficiency in English is critical for successful participation in American society, proficiency in one's first language is a critical marker of one's identity and connection to one's cultural heritage

(Smolicz, et.al, 1998). Norton (2000) explained that our language is where our sense of self, “our subjectivity” (pp.9), is constructed. By omitting a student’s first language, schools covertly communicate to students that their first language is inappropriate or of no value. This message has a detrimental impact on their sense of identity and the link to their family, and their cultural community is broken (Monzó & Rueda, 2009). In the long run, denying the value of the native language deprives children of the linguistic and cultural heritage that will help them develop both a strong sense of identity and the cognitive basis for future learning (Sánchez, 1999).

This paper focuses on the effects that language choices and cultural practices have on identity development in the education of minority students in the United States. It examines the educational journey of Irma, a Latina educator. Through the analysis of interviews with the participant, this paper intends to show the effects of language ideologies on her cultural identity and literacy development. The ideas presented in the following section are central to understanding the relationships between language choices, school practices, and cultural identity construction.

Defining culture

Nieto (2010) defines culture as being multi-faceted. Nieto outlines seven key characteristics for culture. First, culture is dynamic and always changing. In reality, people select and reject particular elements of culture as they fit in their situational contexts. Nieto discusses the concept of *surface and deep structure* of culture using an example of youth culture. She explains that young people from different backgrounds may share the same taste in music, food, or clothes (surface structure of culture), but they may hold deep values from their own ethnic heritages (deep structure of culture). Second, culture is shared and identities and roles fluctuate throughout any given day. Cultural identification goes beyond race and ethnicity. People create their own identities based on differences and preferences such as skin color, time of arrival to the country, language use, sexual orientation, and family dynamics, etc. Third, authentic cultural knowledge is the product of the context in which it exists and cannot be separated from the daily lives of the individuals. Fourth, culture is contextualized by socio-economic factors as well as history and differential access to power. In reality, the dominant group determines what counts as culture and, by establishing itself as the “norm”, makes others automatically become the “culturally deprived and powerless group”. Over time those who have been named

as “culturally deprived” began to believe it. Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital is of importance in this discussion. He defines cultural capital as the acquired tastes, language, and values of the privileged social and cultural class. These are unconsciously learned and are not inherently better, but because they are considered to have more prestige by the dominant group they have higher status. This gives children of white American descent an advantage over minority children when entering the American educational system. Fifth, culture is socially constructed through daily interactions and the relationships between existing power structures and society. Nieto further explains that “cultures change as a result of the decision that we, cultural agents, make about our traditions, attitudes, behaviors and values” (2010, p. 143). Those decisions are shaped by the power relations among the participants in society. Sixth, culture is learned through our families and communities. Bilingual/bicultural education exemplifies the intent of communities and individuals to keep language and traditions alive through a curriculum that embraces the cultural background of the students, validates their languages, and fosters intercultural tolerance. Nevertheless, this has proven to be a very difficult task. Finally, culture is dialectical and beyond broad labels such as “good” or “bad”. Culture has been changed by historical and social conditions and necessities of the individuals. Moreover, cultural beings do not have to embrace all manifestations of a particular culture to be considered in Nieto’s terms “an authentic member of the culture” (2010, p. 144). In sum, cultures are conflicted and not without tensions. The following sections discuss the concepts of cultural and social capital and the idea that language is deeply rooted in culture and indivisible from identity.

Cultural and social capital

Schools systematically devalue the culture and the language of the students in the subordinate groups. The effect is magnified by the lack of social capital these groups have. Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986) defines *cultural capital* as the general cultural background, knowledge, and skills passed on from generation to generation including language practices and values. This term is intimately connected to the notion of social capital. Social capital is defined as social relationships individuals capitalize on to obtain their goals and solve problems. Working class students gain social capital from middle class peers and adults in institutional contexts rich in social & cultural capital (advanced placement classes, extracurricular activities, etc.). The “connections” or close relations between minority students and parents, school

personnel, and peers have played a key role in the socialization process that helps shape a pro-academic identity and facilitates adherence to the educational system's moral order and ideological foundation (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). It also inculcates competencies necessary for literacy development and school success. Minority students who are able to develop those types of relationships experience more educational success (Stanton Salazar, 2004).

In addition, language use and equal opportunities to access education determine the type of literacy skills that students develop in schools. Schools have a crucial role in mediating the development of literacy and identity of minority language speakers in that they have control over what they teach and how they teach it (including language choice). In other words, becoming literate entails knowing not only the processes but also the symbolic representations of the culture in which individuals are socialized. This creates a place of struggle for second language speakers who try to negotiate literacy skills across cultures.

Language and Cultural Identity

Language and identity are inseparably associated with each other. While language is the medium used by individuals to negotiate a sense of self in different contexts (Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000), identity construction is a social and cultural process which is accomplished through discursive practices. Therefore, the ability to use a specific language in a specific context influences the development of cultural identity (Trechter & Bucholtz, 2001) by creating a tension between the discourse of the dominant culture and the discourse of the subculture of second language speakers. In other words, the manner in which language, in this case English, is used determines to which social group individuals are allowed entrance. Those who speak English will be admitted to social groups with greater amounts of social and political power than those who do not (Fairclough, 2001). When the English language learner's (ELLs) first language is devalued and the language of the socially and politically dominant society is imposed on all of the students in schools, the ELL's identity is threatened, and inequitable social relationships between ELLs and native speakers of the dominant language are produced (Pierce, 1995). As Cummins (1996) notes, the unequal relation of power between dominant and minority languages can serve to constrain multiple identities that minority language speakers can negotiate at school and in society. Moreover, because their culture is devalued and their language is not supported through primary language instruction, many second-language-speakers who attend

American schools experience the pressure of a predominant English only ideology and lose their language and culture altogether (Norton, 2000). In sum, the imposition of the predominant English-Only ideology and the devaluation of the ELL's language and culture force second language speakers to lose their heritage language and native culture. As a consequence, they fail to develop both a strong sense of identity and the cognitive basis for future learning (Sánchez, 1999).

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) characterize language as “the most flexible and pervasive symbolic resource” (p. 369) that is at the center of the cultural reproduction of identity. The cultural identity associated with the politically, economically, and socially dominant Western European-American culture is seen as the norm and that to which other social groups in the United States should aspire (Martinez, 2006). Although it appears innocuous, the dominant Western European-American group possesses pervasive and covert power. For example, the English-Only ideology is seen as a norm in all public schools and institutions. Students are viewed as having adequate knowledge only if they know English. It is also understood that English is the language which should be used in all instructional situations. Moreover, in this time of accountability, the results of mandated, standardized assessments are only valued if they are administered in English. These practices not only send the message that other languages and cultures are not valued in schools, but they also limit English language learners' opportunities for school success (Crawford, 2008).

From a critical theory perspective, Watson-Gegeo, and Gegeo (1999) explain that language is central to cultural ways of thinking. They argue that “language is essential to identity, authenticity, cultural survival and people's learning and thinking processes” (p.25). This concept is manifested when English language learners in most American schools must recreate knowledge through a second language, thereby losing their personal cultural identity and their authentication of self. When the link between language, cultural identity, and ways of thinking limit access to knowledge, second-language-learners' opportunities for literacy development are diminished.

Language, access to knowledge and literacy practices

Critical educational theorists explain that the social construction of knowledge refers to the symbolic representation of the world that we create as we interact with others. This knowledge construction is influenced by our culture, the context, and the historical moment in which it happens (McLaren, 2003). Following Habermas' (2004)

definition of knowledge, we encounter three different forms: technical, practical, and emancipatory. Habermas refers to *technical knowledge* as the knowledge that can be quantified and measured. It is the knowledge of school used by educators to control students. Practical knowledge helps individuals to shape their daily actions in the world through the description and analysis of social situations. The third type of knowledge is the *emancipatory knowledge* that helps us understand how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege (Freire 1998; Habermas 2004). Language, culture, place, and time will influence how individuals construct different types of knowledge of the world based on their interactions with others and shaped by their cultures and languages (McLaren, 2003).

Students access each of Habermas' form of knowledge through the use of language and literacy skills. When students are denied their primary language and cultural identity at school, they are also denied access to knowledge. Moreover, these exclusionary practices diminish their opportunity for literacy development and their future education and personal success (Cummins, 2001).

Literacy in multilingual societies is a very complex concept (Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002). Schools are providers of literacy and have the power to determine what is considered the appropriate language and literacy practices. When opportunities to become literate are provided only to students of the majority language, students of the minority language are denied access to knowledge, the chance to become literate, and the chance of being successful in schools. In the United States, students are considered to be literate only when they are literate in English. In this context, the entrenched English language ideology puts second-language speakers of English at a disadvantage (Martinez, 2006).

Several researchers have discussed the concept of academic literacy. Scarcella (2003) defines literacy as the ability to develop advanced levels of proficiency in the four modes of language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Academic language not only allows students to explore complex concepts and ideas through advanced reading skills, but also to understand and use those words in spoken and written communication (p.10) in a more advanced manner. The need for academic language has direct implications for teaching and learning. In other words, to grow academically is to use language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) to explore complex concepts in various contexts, and then to communicate the resulting thoughts and ideas in an appropriate way. For that to be possible, the learner

must have a firm grasp on the language in which the content is written. An “English –Only” environment intrinsically puts English language learners at a greater disadvantage in their academic pursuits.

Gee (2002; 2008) argues that the focus of literacy studies should not be only on language or literacy, but on social practices. His position focuses on the social context in which the literacy event happens and where social and cultural practices intervene to shape the literacy experiences of the students. Students from diverse backgrounds need opportunities to negotiate the meaning-making process by participating in the different communities of practices to which they are exposed through their schooling. Gee (2002) further elaborates on the relationship between language, identity and discourses by explaining that in the context of institutions such as schools, literacy practices also define identity positions within the context of the school or classroom, such as a *high achieving student*, an *English learner*, or a *struggling reader*.

According to Gee (2008) individuals have more than one discourse. Students’ *primary discourse* refers to the cultural foundation of the language they speak in everyday life that gives them a sense of self. When this primary discourse of the students is not perceived to be of value in school, it affects the students’ sense of self and their identity development. As students interact with others in different social networks, their primary discourse changes. The discourses that students acquire within institutions like schools are called *secondary discourses*. For minority students who come to school speaking a language other than English, their primary discourse is usually changed into the institutionalized secondary discourse. When this change happens, disenfranchised students are not given the same opportunities to negotiate their identities (Cummins, 2001) and to access knowledge needed to achieve the educational success that more advantaged learners achieve.

Method

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The purpose of this study was to collect qualitative data on the effects of an English only language ideology imposed on the cultural identity and literacy development of one Hispanic woman. It describes the life struggles of Irma, a Latina educator who embarks on a journey to regain her lost language and her cultural identity. This study was guided by the following research questions aiming to understand the relationships between language choices, school practices, and cultural identity construction:

- 1) How did language ideologies affect the school, parents, and the participant's language choice?
- 2) How did language choice at school and home affect the participant's cultural identity development?
- 3) How did language choices affect the participant's access to knowledge and literacy development?
- 4) In what ways, if any, did the participant re-gain her language and cultural heritage?

For this study, a group of teachers who attended a program for paraprofessionals and later a teacher education program at a local university was selected as the non-probability sample group (Creswell, 2005). In a non-probability sampling the individuals are selected because they are available, convenient and represent some characteristic the researcher wants to investigate. In this study I wanted to look at how the language ideologies in school and society have shaped their identity development. Of the selected group, only three teachers responded to the invitation to participate in this study. From the three respondents, the life and educational experiences of only one participant made her a suitable candidate for the study.

The participant, Irma, is a native Spanish speaker with no academic preparation in Spanish. She came to the US from Mexico before she was old enough to attend school. She entered kindergarten as a monolingual Spanish speaker. She attended school during a period when Mexican children were punished for speaking Spanish at school. Her parents believed that speaking only English could benefit their daughter, so when she started school, although they possessed limited English skills, they only spoke English at home. Because she was stripped of her native language both at home and at school, the participant lost most of her ability to communicate effectively in Spanish. She began to struggle in school because of her newly situated identity which resulted from being immersed in multiple, unfamiliar discursive practices and being alienated from her primary discourse (Gee, 2008).

At her school there was no real support for English learners. Irma struggled academically throughout her schooling. By junior high she was advised by a counselor to drop out of school, and she did. She married and had children and worked in menial jobs in a packing plant. Working at the packing plant made her re-evaluate different aspects of her life. During this time she forced herself to relearn her native language and to finish her GED requirements with hopes to attend

college. Eventually, she became a bilingual teacher's aide. She went back to school and earned her BA degree through a support program for diverse paraprofessionals in the school district. Later, she entered a teacher education program that prepared dual language teachers. Irma studied Spanish at the university and is now able to read and write Spanish at a minimal level.

Based on the work of Rubin & Rubin (2004) and Willis (2004), three in-depth personal interviews were conducted for this study. In-depth interviewing allowed Irma to explore her perspectives on her language socialization process through her experiences at home and at school. Three one-and-a-half hour interviews were conducted during a semester time. Interview data was analyzed following the steps of interpretational analysis (Gall, Gall & Borg, 1999; Merriam; 1998). First, the database for each interview was created. Second, data was divided into meaningful chunks of information and was sorted into heuristic groupings that have something in common and reveal information relevant to the study. In this study, meaningful chunks of information included reference to schooling and cultural and linguistic assimilation, language use and experiences inside and outside the school, language loss and implications for literacy development, and Irma's journey to regain her cultural identity. Third, categories were constructed from the interview data. These categorical lenses were used to explain in what ways, if any, the English language ideology had affected and changed Irma's cultural identity and literacy development. The following tables show the categorical lenses used:

Table 1. English language ideology's effect on Irma's literacy development

School Practices	Home Practices	Cultural Assimilation	Linguistic assimilation	Implications for literacy development

Table 2. English language ideology's effect on Irma's identity development throughout her life' events

Events in Irma's life	Language Loss	Culture Loss	Intent to regain her cultural Identity
Elementary grades			
Upper grades			
Middle school			
High school			
Getting married			
Working at the packing plant			
Relearning Spanish and GED			
Becoming a paraprofessional			
Going to college			
Earning a BA			
Becoming a bilingual teacher			

Mutual trust between the researcher and the participant was not a concern due to our ongoing relationship though professional development and student teacher placement experiences that I had with this district, especially with Irma. This researcher-subject close relationship allowed for the data to be more honest and valid (Bryman, 1988). While this is a strength of qualitative research it is also a weakness in that it could lead the researcher into subjectivity (Merriam, 1998). In order to avoid subjectivity, I transcribed the interviews, and for reliability purposes, transcripts of the interviews were sent to the interviewee who was invited to correct, comment, or change the information if it was not accurate. Then, a research assistant and I read the data one more time to add or revise the themes with Irma's input. Each of us worked independently from each other. This procedure allowed for crosschecking the analyses and assured reliability of the findings. It also helped to clarify the findings as pieces of data were organized, coded, and grouped into categories. Through reflexivity and by the triangulation of the data, I tried to maintain objectivity. From

the analysis of the data several themes arose. First, I discuss the theme of English language choice by parents and imposed by school as a marker of assimilation. Second, Irma's cultural identity struggles are presented. Third, the theme of the dynamic between language, access to knowledge and literacy development is examined. Lastly, examples of her intent to regain her primary language as a conduit to regain her cultural identity are discussed.

This small qualitative research has several limitations. First, the size was too small. In order to make the results generalizable it would need to be done with a larger number of participants who are Latino educators. Second, as the data was analyzed, several questions arose that were not asked during either of the interviews. These questions would have helped clarify the interviewee's understanding of culture beyond the concepts of celebration, holidays and heroes. Lastly more questions about Irma's struggles in regaining her cultural identity should have been asked to better understand the cultural conflicts that occurred during Irma's identity struggle.

Findings

The research questions that guided this study aimed to understand the relationships between language choices, school practices, and cultural identity construction. The findings show the pervasive impact of language ideology on language choices of minority students. The results represent the effects of language ideology on the cultural identity development of a second-language speaker forced to assimilate because of the norms of the dominant English group (Cummins, 2001), the effects of school practices on the literacy development of the participant of the study, and her commitment to regain her language and cultural identity as an adult.

English Language Choice as a Marker of Linguistic and Cultural Assimilation

24 The language choices made by Irma's school and her parents during her school years have had consequences for Irma's language, literacy, and identity development.

Schools' Language Choice

Several examples of the negative effects of the English-Only movement arose from the data related to the discourse practices of

national language standardization which supported the exclusion of primary language use at school in favor of English instruction. Irma explained:

Instruction was all in English, and once I forgot that Spanish that I brought with me in Kindergarten, that it happened right away (barely audible), everything was English at school and at home (sad voice).

It is clear that Irma's school supported an English-Only policy, and the primary language and culture of minority students were not valued. Her comment exemplifies Monzó, Rueda, (2009) and Sánchez's (1999) positions on the effects of school denials of primary language services and demonstrates that the pervasive language ideology that fosters the reproduction of the social structure in public institutions such as schools has a devastating effect on students' second language and identity development. Moreover, the fact that Irma assimilated to the mainstream, losing her primary method of discourse, also supports Gee's (2008) discussion on devaluing and replacing primary language discourse with secondary discourses which are more widely accepted by the mainstream. Irma reported the challenge she faced during her elementary school years:

I started school only speaking Spanish, um- hmm, I spoke Spanish at home /, I was born and raised in south Texas where everyone speaks Spanish /, but in those times it was difficult in school \ (barely audible). I never received any support in Spanish. Everything was done in English \ (sad voice). I have a hard time in school, especially after second grade. I remember my first grade teacher, a Hispanic woman /, she punished us if we spoke Spanish with other Spanish-speaking girls. Spanish was considered bad in the school context those days= In my need for learning English I forgot Spanish and was never fully literate (participant lowers her head and looks at the floor for a few seconds).

As Baker (2001) explains, the English language ideology entrenched in the educational system contributed to Irma's language loss by devaluing her first language and establishing English as the marker of success. The loss of her native language forced her to assimilate into the mainstream and abandon most of her connections to her native culture and identity. Because language is one marker of cultural identity, stripping Irma of her native language created an identity struggle. The loss of her primary, native language had negative consequences for Irma's identity development.

As Monzó (2003) explains, the devaluing of the primary language of second language learners forced students like Irma to see their culture and language as inferior. For that reason, Irma acquired the language and culture preferred by the dominant group, and in doing so, she lost her native language and changed her cultural identity reflecting Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo's (1999) critical theory perspective. Irma's comments reflect this phenomenon.

I remember singing in French in 5th grade. I do not recall what we sang but I remembered been a big fuzzi to learn that song in French. I also remember that by 4th or 5th grade I have lost my Spanish / \ completely \ and I was in survival mode in English \ .

Nieto (2010) explains that in cases like Irma's, language is used as power. There is an unequal power distribution between English and minority languages or languages considered of low status (not the case of French) in the United States. It is not uncommon for native Spanish children to refuse to speak their primary language once they learn English. The low status of Spanish in the United States makes them feel embarrassed to speak it, and they prefer to speak only English (Fitts & Weisman, 2010).

The fact that Irma had lost her language by 4th grade and was struggling with English instruction shows that the English language ideology which permeates American schools has negative implications, not only at the emotional level, but at the academic level as well. This puts students like Irma at a greater risk for failure in school. It is clear that the subliminal messages that come from the media and the organization of school curriculum illustrate which language is valued in the American society. As Monzó and Rueda (2009) explain, the effects of language ideology on one's language practices at school are also reflected in the family's decision to privilege English over Spanish as the language to be spoken at home.

Parents' Language Choice

Irma's language and culture loss began when her first language and culture were not validated at her school. This was exacerbated by the pressure mainstream society exercises on minority parents to favor English as the marker of success. In this context, Irma's parents also succumbed to the English-Only ideology. The fact that Irma and her parents abandoned their language and cultural practices at home in favor of using English in a limited way and practicing the mainstream culture accelerated Irma's primary language loss. Irma's parents understood the value of English in American society and pushed their children to learn

the language that would give them better possibilities for success and less exposure to discrimination. What they did not understand is that they could have kept their language and traditions alive and in doing so would have developed better English skills and a stronger identity as a Mexican-American (Cummins, 2001).

My mother spoke little English but tried her best with me to keep up with the language. My father, on the other hand, spoke better English with an accent but he encouraged me to speak only English / (moving her head from left to right) = you know/. He was / determine / that their kids {(quite and slow) will learn English and be fully mainstream.} My parents wanted us to speak English so they can learn it better, so there was no Spanish music, there was no Spanish T.V...

Like many other minority parents, Irma's parents' goal that their children achieve the American dream made them sacrifice their language and culture in order to conform to the American societal norms. In doing so, they exchanged their heritage for becoming the Americans they envisioned but without the privileges that middle class Americans have. The lack of primary language literacy affected her development of English literacy and, in return, did not allow her to access the privileges of a middle class education and a position of power in society. Irma's parents' choice for English did not work as the springboard for social mobility it was envisioned.

Irma's parents' acceptance of the English-Only language policy at school and their selection of English as the language to be used at home seem to be the result of prior language discrimination experiences both in school and in society. As Irma explained:

My dad was a victim of racism. Growing up he resisted the culture and the language even, as I told you before he was very "Mexican" looking. ... (Irma covers her face with her hands for a second, takes a deep breath and then starts talking) I remember my father getting very upset when at a restaurant the waitress asked him what he wanted for lunch in Spanish /. My father very upset answered her that he did not spoke Spanish /, / that lingo / as he used to say and that he was an /American /.

Later in the interview she provides another example of her father language preference:

I remember when I was trying to get into the teaching credential program I was afraid of telling my dad that I was going to be a bilingual teacher.

I had talks with him and he said: "I am proud of you mija, but why don't you teach in English?"

It is clear from the last statement that even during Irma's adult life her father continues to demonstrate a belief that English carries a higher social status. This view of English as the language of power and success is shared by many minority parents. In Irma's case, parental denial of primary language happened because they did not perceive the consequences of total English assimilation. Minority parents push for English because, as Monzó (2003) and Nieto (2010) claim, it is the language of power and success.

In the following sections I discuss the other themes identifiable from the data.

Irma's Cultural Identity Struggle

Language loss and cultural Identity

The push for English prevented Irma from full participation in both American and Mexican cultures and has been a source of identity struggle throughout her adult life. Irma's experiences epitomize Norton (2000), Trechter, Bucholtz (2001), and Fairclough's (2001) ideas on how language use at home and at school shape the development of one's cultural identity. Irma's parents' language preference also affirms Monzó and Rueda's (2009) claim that the loss of language and cultural practices has detrimental effects on students' sense of identity and on their connections to their heritage and families:

There was no celebrating Spanish holidays, it was.... It was.. my family pushed away the Mexican side of us [with sadness]. It is sad but we did not keep our traditions alive. We did not listen to ranchera music or used zarapes or other traditional clothing. We never did even the traditional religious stuff. My sister María did. She married a Mexican guy and re-learned all the cooking, music and language traditions at a young age.

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Sanchez' (1999) concerns about the effects of devaluing the student's linguistic and cultural heritage on the development of a strong sense of self is clearly shown through Irma's limited access to mainstream education and to full participation in her own culture. After all the years of seeking her cultural identity, Irma feels deprived of the experiences of her native language and culture. Moreover, this dispossession prevents her from connecting with her traditions,

important family members in her childhood, and the bilingual students she teaches in her adult life.

Norton (1999) also claims that language doesn't express identity directly, but indirectly through the use of a specific language by members of a particular group as they interact socially. Irma expressed her identity as she tried to maintain her membership with the Spanish speaking community and her family by using the limited primary language she was able to maintain:

I could understand my mom speaking to me in Spanish but I answered to them in English and .. it was strange \ ... I remember that I could understand it but as the years went on I couldn't speak the language.... I forgot everything (firm voice and loud). I remember telling my grandma: "yo sé español. Caballo, casa" and that was it / . I couldn't hold a conversation, I couldn't \ . It was nothing and. I must have been in the fifth grade when I told my grandmother that.

As Bucholtz and Hall (2004) explain, language is the most flexible and pervasive symbolic resource for the cultural reproduction of identity. The language ideology of English has embedded its power throughout the educational system and has silently forced second-language speakers like Irma to adhere to the English norm and to change their cultural identity in the process (Fairclough, 2001; Norton, 2000). The preference of English in school and at home deprived Irma of her cultural identity as a Latina and forced her to develop a borderline mainstream identity that validates Buscholtz, Hall, and Norton's claims.

Irma as a multi-faceted cultural being

The operational definition of culture used in this study comes from Nieto's (2010) idea of culture as being multi-faceted. As I analyzed Irma's responses to the interview questions, several characteristics of culture were identified. First, Irma's culture is dynamic and has changed overtime. Her parents rejected her cultural aspects of being Mexican at an early age by not using the Spanish language at home or listening to traditional music or celebrating their heritage. As an adult, she also rejected certain aspects of culture like her language to fit her situational context, in this case in the context of marriage.

I married young too but I married a Mexican – American that spoke only English so we continue speaking English at home and our kids were raised monolingual English speakers.

It is important to disclose here that what Irma refers to in her culture is what Nieto calls surface structure of culture or experiences of food, clothing, language and music. From the analysis of the interviews, there are also manifestations of what Nieto calls deep structure of culture, the deep values from her own ethnic heritage.

The sa -- same teacher that helped me move to more advanced classes came and talked to my father in law about coming back to school pregnant because, = you know = at that time, it was -- it was new but they allowed girls that were expecting to go back to school and finish their academic year / , but I was not lucky enough \ , my father in law did not allowed me to go back to school \ . He said to the teacher that the wife needed to stay home and take care of her husband, house, and kids. He also said that I did not need school anymore. = So I raised my kids, three of them, took care of the house, my husband and worked in a packing plant for 18 years, yeah, {18 years (soft voice)} but I never gave up my dream of going back to school some day, yeah, someday \

This analysis reveals that even though Irma was linguistically assimilated she has not done so at the deeper level of culture. The respect she demonstrates for the father-in-law's decision about her role in life and her devotion to her family is a deep cultural aspect of most Mexican families (Valdés, 1999).

While Irma seems to only consider culture as experiences related to ethnicity or race, this analysis shows that she has had multiple cultural identifications throughout her life, many of them often conflicting with each other (Nieto, 2010). She has a Mexican –American cultural identity, but she also is a daughter and a wife. These multiple identities were not manifested equally. Her identities as a submissive wife and a respectful daughter were stronger than her Mexican-American cultural identity. During her early years she was not able to balance these identities in the same way that she tried later in life. As an adult, she also developed the identities of a student and a bilingual-teacher and embraced her Mexican-American identity by re-learning Spanish. As is evident from the above, an analysis that goes beyond racial and ethnic grouping captures the realities and complexities of the cultural identities of individuals like Irma.

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Another aspect of culture identifiable from the data is that it was created and socially constructed by Irma. Culture is complex and evolves because human beings apply changes to it through their daily experiences. Overtime Irma became an agent of change of her own cultural identity. Through daily decision-making and interactions with others, she developed Spanish as one marker of her cultural being.

I was working at the packing plant and my kids were in High school and my friend ... during the last four years at work has been re-teaching me Spanish. She also became a student, which in return helped her to gain access to an education that has been denied through schooling in her younger years.

So -- so we decided to go back to school and get our GED, [...]

I ...well ... it was -- it was much later than = you know -- that I should've got it(voice soft like regretting the time that had passed before this accomplishment) = you know... my – (shaking her head) my dad, he had told me that I could do it so he asked what's next.. because I haven't thought of what was next. I have been caught in {difficult to understand from audiotape} but I liked it ... so my dad said so what was next ! well . I guess college? But we had no idea.

Irma's cultural identity was always a place of struggle. From teachers who jumped to conclusions regarding her ability to go to college, to her parents' inability to understand her potential as a bicultural /bilingual individual, and her immediate family's limited views of her roles in life, this analysis reveals that Irma's identity could be considered hybrid. It implicates the access to power and privileges exhibited in the context in which students like Irma live and the social markers that differentiate them from others on a position of power or those belonging to the cultural norm as defined by mainstream society (Nieto, 2010).

Lack of Cultural and Social Capital

Research shows that learning builds on experience. This is not, however, a human endeavor accessible to all people. The differences students like Irma encounter in life are magnified by the opportunities experienced at school (Nieto, 2010). This is called cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) explained the concept of cultural capital as the values, behaviors, and cultural identities such as language and ethnicity. There were several examples from the collected data that reflect the lack of cultural capital Irma had. This lack put her at a greater disadvantage in educational life.

It was only on my own because, uhm...uhm [long pause] my parents were not very well, well read and my mother would always asked me "Why are you always reading?" [With emphasis] "go outside and play. I do not know what a book have". She was not down playing education she did not understand because she has not gone to school and my dad wanted us to get an education but he did not know how to help us. My family was very poor.

Students from less privileged backgrounds are placed at a greater disadvantage because their experiences and identities have not prepared them for academic success. Moreover, cultural capital cannot be separated from the concept of social capital. Social capital is defined as the relationships that enable individuals to have access to power and other forms of privileges that they would not have otherwise (Bourdieu, 1986). Irma's trajectory reveals the lack of support of both social and cultural capital. As a younger student, the lack of cultural capital was evident as the parents denied her of her language and cultural manifestations as well as the school system imposition of the English-Only ideology for instruction. She experienced the lack of social capital at home:

My father always told me: Go to college! Go to college! / but he never said why or how. He is very proud of me and every time he told us that.. I -- but he never told us how (like wondering with sadness) and at least for me, I drop out as a junior in high school but .. even so:: .. none of the counselors at the school ever told me that I needed to go to college. You would have thought that by the time you were a junior you would have thought about the SAT, when to take it and why. {I did not know any of that (slowing and softening; a very sad memory)}. I didn't \ . I know {they told me college wasn't for me soft barely audible}; that I should -- that I had aptitude for business, that I should be a secretary -- but -- the secretary proved them wrong but =um-hmm = anyway ... (with resentment).

And also at school:

I was placed in the non college track even though I always wanted to go to college but = um-hmm = you know... the counselors determine your life for you / (very upset) and I did not have anyone during 9th and 10th grade that would have guided me and prepare me to move to more challenging classes in order to attend college. But in 11th grade I had a teacher that saw something... Some potential in me = you know... like I was able to do better that I was doing and she worked with me and was able to move me to more advanced classes in Math and science but it was sad to realize that it was already too late to catch up, we, Mexicans are -- are always catching up but at the end we are always behind \ , it is sad but we need to learn how to make the best of it \ (acceptance of failure by the system).

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As an adult she also experienced lack of cultural capital:

yes! Our families accepted the challenge because, um-hmm, = you know, we were not quitting the job or our responsibilities at home,

we were going to study after long hours of work and we were determine to get our GED.

On the other hand, she found the support of people that contributed to her social capital and facilitated her professional success later in life.

A:::h... a teacher helped my friend ... {(slowly remember the steps she took) I just called the college and asked what do I need to do and they said to come} \ and I take a placement test first and I was:: -- I asked questions ... I am always asking questions / , =you know me (laughs), that's me and nowadays to help kids (very sad voice) they need to know all this information upfront because not everyone would wanted to ask questions to find out

Language choices and equal opportunities to access education through social and cultural capital enhance the type of literacy skills that students develop in schools. Schools have a crucial role in mediating the development of literacy and identity of minority language speakers in that they have control over what they teach and how they teach it (including language choice). In other words, becoming literate entails knowing not only the processes but also the symbolic representations of the culture in which individuals are socialized. This creates a place of struggle for second language speakers who do not have the necessary social and cultural capital, and who try to negotiate literacy skills across cultures.

The Dynamic between Language, Access to Knowledge and Literacy Development

In American schools, such as the ones Irma attended, knowledge was socially constructed and influenced by the English-Only mentality (McLaren, 2003). As an adult, the analysis of her personal and educational trajectory has allowed her to examine the forces of schooling that limited her options and control over her life. Moreover, the schools Irma attended were aligned with this pervasive language ideology and made decisions on what to instruct and in what language. Furthermore, the type of curriculum that English learners receive and the overt emphasis on assimilation puts second-language English speakers like Irma at a disadvantage in school and society. It not only deprives them from their cultural identity, but also has long lasting negative effects in their access to knowledge and literacy development. Irma struggled throughout her schooling in English until she dropped out of school in the tenth grade. While she was able to read in English, she was not able to do demanding academic content area work.

I always love inquiry and school since I was a little kid but I remember not being able to do the type of work I would like to do or that I knew I was able to do because I could not perform in English as I was expected to (signs of sadness in voice and body language and posture). I did o.k... I think... I did o.k. up to 6th grade / . But in Junior and in la high school it was different / . I was placed in remedial reading classes in Junior high even though I was in advanced classes in Math and was able to do science at grade level (sarcastic intonation) ... {(but la high school was difficult ...) quiet and slow – barely audible} {quickening (it was different)}... {(it was different from the beginning) softening} (Painful memories).

Irma's case supports Fairclough's (2001) claim that the knowledge imparted in school through English perpetuates the unjust power relations among groups in society leaving second-language learners of English like Irma behind their native English speaking counterparts. This language and cultural deprivation of minority-language speakers like Irma, starts early in their educational experiences and continues to affect them throughout their schooling. In Irma's case, she was placed in lower track classes with a less challenging curriculum and never developed adequate literacy skills in either English or her native language.

La high school was difficult. \ It was bad from the beginning. I was placed in the non-college track even though I always wanted to go to college but I did not have the level of English language and have not taken the more challenging classes needed to attend college.

Irma's educational and personal journey also exemplifies the previously discussed types of knowledge presented by Habermas (2004): technical, practical, and emancipatory. The knowledge imparted to Irma at school could be considered technical knowledge. It was used to control and shape her educational and personal future. For students like Irma, the lack of opportunities to access the type of knowledge that is valued in school makes academic success a more challenging endeavor: "I dropped out of school as a junior in high school. I remember that none of the counselors at the school ever told me that I needed to go to college."

Starting in her college years and through her adult experiences, Irma developed practical knowledge. This type of knowledge allowed her to change her personal and educational future through the analysis of her social situation: "I was determined to go back to school and

regain my language". As she continued with her education, and later as a professional, she achieved emancipatory knowledge through self-reflection. She became interested in the way her history and biography has expressed itself and how it has shaped her sense of self, her roles in life, and social expectations.

Research shows that students who become literate in their first language develop stronger literacy skills in their second (Cummins, 2001). Irma is conscious of how her lack of primary-language development has affected her literacy level in English which was one of the causes of dropping out of school in the tenth grade:

In my need for learning English I forgot Spanish and... was never fully literate in either language. I think I developed good conversational skills in English, and.. yes, I did develop good reading skills in English because I was an avid reader , I think...I think more than for the classes that I was placed in at school [...]

Weeeell, only if I have had the opportunity of taking more Spanish classes, it

would have help me develop the academic Spanish that I now need for my teaching situation. It was really hard. I see how hard it is for these poor kids learning English because I have re-learned Spanish as an adult and I did not have the academic language needed for the demands of the college work in Spanish or\... even in English.

Schools have a crucial role in mediating the development of literacy, and the identity of minority-language speakers in that they have control over what they teach and how they teach it, including language choice. Even though schools in the United States serve high numbers of students whose language is other than English, literacy in English is the only type of literacy that is valued. In this context, Irma developed an identity that was neither fully American, nor fully Mexican. This borderline identity has prevented her from full participation in American society and has had implications in her literacy development. As Martinez (2006) explains, language use marked by the failure to recognize the importance of primary-language development at home and at school, and unequal opportunities to access education created a place of struggle for second-language speakers such as Irma who tried unsuccessfully to negotiate literacy skills across both languages and cultures.

Re-gaining Language as the Conduit to Regaining her Cultural Identity

Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1999) have explained the role of language in cultural identity development and the cultural survival of the group. When individuals lose their heritage language and can no longer identify with their native cultural groups, they struggle to understand their heritage and their membership in the culture with which they identify. Irma has expressed her constant struggle for affirmation of her cultural identity during her adult life. In the interviews there are examples of her efforts to re-gain the language as a mark of regaining her cultural identity which was lost through home and school experiences. Irma explains her own struggles in regaining her language as a marker of her lost cultural identity:

Yes, (proud of the accomplishment) I did graduate. I was working at the packing plant and my kids were in High school and my friend ... during the last four years at work has been re-teaching me Spanish. I was determined to regain my language at all costs / and my friend was helping me with that. It was hard \ and I still struggle with the language but I am very proud of what I have accomplished with my Spanish.

The process of regaining her language and culture later in life has not been easy for Irma. Her limited language skills gained through prior schooling were a challenge and have put her at a disadvantage as a student and as a bilingual professional. Irma explains her experiences and her concerns:

It was...it was as if I have never learned Spanish before and I could understand it only if they speak slowly. Academic language was very tough for me...yeah.. the books that I had to read were very difficult and... and oh my goodness! I had my dictionary with me and the words were difficult and still are for me and ... and even though I was a good reader it took me a lot to read the books that were assigned to the class and ..[pause] these were interesting books to read but the demand of the language was too high and I just did not have the skills [soften the voice as she speaks in decrescendo] It was very frustrating because I have never read in Spanish before NEVER!. I think that I am doing the children a disservice because I cannot deliver well a meaningful curriculum that targets both academic language and content in Spanish...

As seen in the statements above, teaching bilingually is also a constant struggle for affirmation of her cultural identity. When referring to her bilingual teaching position, she remembers her father's request for her to teach only in English, and expresses her determination to

help students maintain their own cultural identity through her teaching in two languages.

I had talks with him and he said: “I am proud of you mija, but ...why don’t you teach in English? And I said to him: “Because it is important daddy, because of what we lost. We lost our Heritage, our..our language and I want to be sure that no other child does that”. Because it feels...[pause] because until this day I feel that lost, when my students ask me : “Señora Villa have you been there or have you done that” [with sadness] I do not share a lot of their experiences. They ask me about those [with emphasis and almost yelling the word out] CULTURAL experiences [voice decrescendo]. I wasn’t aware about multiculturalism and issues of other cultures until I took a college class that put me in contact with my own culture and other cultures struggles in American society

Irma’s examples of her school years and adult, professional life is testimony of the power relations in school and society manifested through discursive practices (McLaren, 2003). To understand her struggles, it is important to consider Gee’s (2008) distinction between primary discourses, acquired by the students in their interactions from birth, and secondary discourses, acquired within institutions such as school. For minority students who come to school speaking a language other than English, their “primary discourse” could make alignments with other institutionalized “secondary discourses” and incorporate their practices into their socialization process if their languages and cultures are valued. This has not happened in Irma’s personal and educational histories. As a result of her assimilation to English, she was not comfortable teaching bilingually due to her lack of academic vocabulary and literacy skills in Spanish which were needed to teach a demanding curriculum in an upper grade dual language setting.

As a teacher, Irma is trying to enhance students’ possibilities for success by valuing their language and culture. By teaching bilingually she is empowering her students and providing equal access to a meaningful education. She wants to give her students the opportunities that her teachers and the system did not give her in the past. In sum, Irma’s personal and educational journey from disconnectedness through a gradual process of connection and belonging to her roots has given her a renewed sense of self that she is determined to nurture and continue to develop for her personal fulfillment and the benefit of her students.

Conclusion

Irma represents a large group of Spanish speakers in this country who have lost, or nearly lost, their first language. Often, these students have struggled through school because the classes were taught exclusively in English. Furthermore, she also represents adult Spanish speakers who wish to teach bilingually, but in order to do so, they need to work on their conversational and academic Spanish, and often on their academic English as well. Irma's school and home experiences have created repercussions in her academic development. The lack of access to a challenging curriculum imposed by the tracking system placed her at a disadvantage in comparison with her native English-speaking peers. Moreover, the lack of support at school and at home and the failure to recognize the value of her primary language gave her limited skills in both languages. While she has consciously tried to develop her primary language and regain her cultural traditions, the intent has been limited in scope and has not provided her with the necessary skills to do academic work in Spanish at the college level or to teach a demanding curriculum in an upper grade dual language setting.

Irma's struggles, however, went beyond her limited experiences with literacy in both Spanish and English, as language is culture made manifest. For her, school was the context in which discourse practices collided, and her dual identities were not supported. The situational identity at school differed from her situational identity at home, and because her heritage values and beliefs were devalued and not supported by either her family or the social institutions, they were weakened to the point of nonexistence. While Irma had her sister as a role model who married early and chose to regain her language and culture at that time, Irma's home situational context limited her from achieving that and forced her to limit her own children from the possibility to become bilingual and bicultural. These contradictions created an unfit sense of self, and developed a borderline identity that prevented Irma, and students like her, from full participation in American society.

Throughout the interviews, Irma was able to clearly identify the events and the feelings that she experienced growing up as a borderline speaker of both languages. The memories were still lucid and painful for her as seen by the discursive marks in her speech. A closer look at this interview reveals patterns of speech that showed her feelings as she reflects on her personal and professional trajectories. Every recollection of language loss, cultural deprivation, and identity affirmation struggle ends with a falling intonation, an emphasis on her statement or sadness in her voice or expression. These marks of speech also show how deep the English language ideology has affected her identity development and how difficult it has been to regain a sense of cultural self as an adult.

The interviews with this Latina educator exemplify how language, cultural identity, and loss changes one's life. They also exemplify the constant struggle of many minority educators working with second language learners of English who have lost and later regained their heritage language and now understand the importance of defining and strengthening their inherent cultural identity. In re-establishing her personal and professional identity, Irma contributes to the process of breaking the vicious cycle of cultural deprivation and reproduction of the social structure that has put speakers of a language other than English at a disadvantage in life and in society. In adulthood, Irma continues to re-construct her cultural identity, re-define her bilingual position in society, and re-gain her sense of self.

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Appendix A. Transcription code

Adapted from Gumperz and Berenz, 1993; Schiffrin, 1994.

.	one second pause
...	3-5 seconds pause
[]	overlap between two speakers
/	rising intonation
\	falling intonation
::	lengthened segments
italics	first degree of emphasis
bold	second degree of emphasis
ALL CAPS	shouting
()	comment by researcher
{()}	characteristic of talk
{ }	best guess of barely audible speech
=	latching
?	question
##	number line

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