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Melissa Holmes
Kansas State University


Cristina Fanning
Kansas State University

Amanda Morales
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, amanda.morales@unl.edu

Pedro Espinoza
Kansas State University

Socorro Herrera
Kansas State University

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Contextualizing the Path to Academic Success

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students Gaining Voice and Agency in Higher Education

Melissa Holmes, Cristina Fanning, Amanda Morales,
Pedro Espinoza, and Socorro Herrera

Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, USA

Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the
instrument of domination and liberation.

(Angela Carter, 1997, p. 43)

For decades, we as a nation have struggled to answer age-old questions regarding the purpose and practice of educating linguistic minorities in the United States. As evidenced in seminal reports such as *The Unfinished Education* (1971) and *The Excluded Student* (1972) published by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCOCR), the educational plight of immigrant populations and their lack of access to full, meaningful participation in schools is long-standing.

The extensive and torrid history of education as a means for colonization of culturally and linguistically diverse peoples in the United States can be traced back to the 1700s (Crawford, 2004; Spring, 2005). Linguistic and cultural domination, initiated by the British, had an impact on every indigenous and immigrant population in the New World. Africans, Chinese, American Indians, Latinas/os, and even Germans have undergone purposeful “deculturalization” at various points in our history (Spring, 2005, p. 183). According to Spring (2005), the imposition of the English language was used as a tool for “cultural transformation” (p. 124) in efforts to prevent cultural pluralism.

A push to *Americanize* the non-White and non-English speaker through schooling flourished in the 1800s and continued to affect immigrant populations throughout the 1900s (Crawford, 2004). For example, German immigrants were said to be “aliens” who neither spoke nor thought “American” (Crawford, 2004, p. 90); therefore, legislative mandates for English-only instruction were passed, doing away with all foreign language instruction. Though in this case the Supreme Court ruling *Meyer vs. Nebraska* (1923) overturned these laws, the passing and later retracting of oppressive policies continues to be a recurrent theme in U.S. educational history.

In theory, today educational discrimination founded on race, class, and linguistic difference does not exist, as a result of judicial rulings such as *Mendez vs. Westminster* (1946); *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974), and *Plyler vs. Doe* (1982). However, it is argued that educational policies and practices continue to marginalize immigrant and linguistic minority students at every level (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Macedo, 2006; USCOCR, 1971, 1972). This is despite the fact that between 1995-1996 and 2005-2006, the K-12 English learner population increased by 57.2% while over the same period the total student enrollment increased by only 3.7% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2007). Currently, foreign-born students constitute 45% of English learners in K-12 classrooms (Lachat, 2004). According to the Pew Research Center, the U.S. educational system can expect a significant increase in immigrant students in the years to come. Pew researchers Passel and Cohn (2008) claim that “nearly one in five Americans (19%) will be an immigrant in 2050, compared with one in eight (12%) in 2005” (p. i).

It is clear from the literature that this rapid increase in number of English learners, the majority (77%) of whom are Spanish speakers (Kindler, 2002), presents many challenges to traditional policy and practice in education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Holmes Group, 1995; Howard, 2010). Baugh (2009) establishes the term “linguistic stereotype threat” to describe the educational risks and challenges experienced by students who lack fluency in Standard English as the dominant language. In addition to the blatant denial of access, as in the *Lau vs. Nichols* case, more subtle forms of linguistic stereotype threats exist at the interpersonal level. As Baugh (2009) states, “When teachers, parents, and others who are involved in children’s

education harbor false linguistic stereotypes, they may—often inadvertently—overlook or devalue the intellectual potential of students” (p. 280). This misperception of linguistic minorities often leads to poor curriculum, ineffective ESOL programming, biased testing, and ability tracking at the K-12 level.

The damaging effects of such factors are seen at the college level as well. As stated by Castellanos and Gloria (2007), “Out of 100 Latina/o elementary students, only 21 will go to college, 8 will earn a graduate degree, and less than .2% will earn a doctoral degree” (p. 380). Despite the dramatic increases in Latino/a populations over the past several decades, from 1976-77 through 2007-08, the percentage of bachelor’s degrees conferred to Latinas/os only increased from 2.0% to 7.9% (with percentage of total students enrolled increasing from 3.5% to 11.4%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). This discrepancy between enrollment and graduation highlights the challenges related to retaining the Latina/o students that are recruited into higher education.

In light of these grim statistics, many argue that schools are failing English learner students, not English learners failing schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Romo, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). As a result of anti-immigrant, hegemonic social discourse and the resulting lack of acceptance of English learners on predominantly White college campuses, scholars (see, e.g., Da Silva Iddings, 2005; Macedo, 2006) contend that linguistic minority students often carry with them substantial feelings of self-doubt and isolation throughout their educational careers. This lack of integration due to a negative campus climate serves as a significant threat to their resiliency at the college level (Gay, Dingu, & Jackson, 2003; Herrera, 1995; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Osagueara, 2008; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). Although many studies consider the impact of schooling on culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and students from poverty, few focus specifically on perceptions of language as an indicator for risk in immigrant student education (Baugh, 2009). The researchers of this study seek to address this gap in the literature using language as the interpretive lens for understanding Spanish-speaking immigrants’ educational experience in college.

Purpose of the Study

This ethnographic case study documents the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) first-generation immigrant students as they developed their sense of voice and personal agency at a predominantly White, Midwestern university. The study is framed within the larger context of an ongoing, longitudinal study on the BESITOS (Bilingual/Bicultural Education Students Interacting To Obtain Success) model of recruitment and retention (Herrera & Morales, 2005; Herrera, Morales, Holmes, & Terry, 2011-2012), which was developed in 1999 to address the multifaceted assets and needs of Latina/o learners in higher education. The model takes into account literature on CLD student recruitment and retention (e.g., Ceja, 2001, 2004; Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004), second language acquisition (e.g., Cummins, 1991; Krashen, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997), and ecologies of care and respect (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Nieto, 2004).

The BESITOS scholarship program is funded by the Office of English Language Acquisition and implements the BESITOS model within the College of Education. The overarching goal of the BESITOS scholarship program is to increase the number of teachers, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, who are prepared to effectively address the needs of CLD students and families. Efforts to meet the program's overarching goal have been guided by a strong commitment to first understand and respect the identities of the students who participate in the program. Faculty and staff look beyond the parameters often set by universities of what it means to care and provide a safe environment for students who are learning to navigate a place that is foreign and often unwelcoming to students who are perceived to have "gaps" in academic background, rather than assets that must be used to accelerate learning. Students' identities, perceived self, culture, language, and cross-cultural experiences are viewed as central to their participation in the program.

One of the structural components of the program identified most frequently by participants as instrumental to their retention is an identity/advocacy seminar. Opportunities to learn from professionals in the field through readings and guest speakers raise questions of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. The seminar readings and assignments are catalysts for difficult conversations that provide

space for participants to reveal their “hidden” self: experiences of the past and present that often reflect inequalities in schools, in their own communities, and in the larger society.

Since 1999, 191 individuals have gained access to higher education through funding made possible through one of five Title VII/III grants. The first semester after acceptance into the BESITOS scholarship program is essentially a trial semester in which the participant and program staff members determine if the program is the right fit for the student. Students, for example, might decide that teaching is not the career they would like to pursue. The majority, however, continues with their studies to become future teachers, and 74% are retained within the program (excluding those who must drop for extenuating medical/family circumstances). Although each student’s path to and through the university is different, this study sought to identify commonalities among the experiences of one subgroup of English learner participants. Specifically, the researchers sought to document the lived experiences of native Spanish-speaking, immigrant Latina/o college students as they made sense of, and continued to forge, their linguistic identities.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the work of Thomas and Collier (1997) and their conceptualization of the prism model, Herrera and Murry (e.g., Herrera, 2010; Herrera & Murry, 2005; Herrera, Murry, & Cabral, 2007) use *CLD student biography* to refer to the totality of a student’s identity. This biography includes four interrelated dimensions—sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic—and is situated within the sociopolitical context of U.S. schools, K–16. Herrera and Murry extend upon the notion of multiple factors simultaneously contributing to the development of CLD students and emphasize the challenges and processes related to each biographical dimension.

The four dimensions of the CLD student biography can be summarized briefly as follows:

- *Sociocultural Dimension*: Relates to students’ ways of life in and out of school and those things that bring them laughter and love. This dimension encompasses affective influences (e.g.,

motivation, anxiety, self-esteem) as well as social interactive phenomena (e.g., bias, prejudice, discrimination).

- *Linguistic Dimension*: Involves the processes that students use for comprehension, communication, and expression in both their native language (L1) and second/target language (L2).
- *Cognitive Dimension*: Relates to the culturally influenced ways students know, think, and apply their learning.
- *Academic Dimension*: Encompasses students' past and current access to a high-quality education, their engagement in classroom learning, and their hope for both academic achievement and life success.

Method

Data Collection

The researchers collected data in the form of surveys, semi-structured interviews, and student artifacts. Individuals who at any point in their educational careers had been involved in a scholarship program that utilized the BESITOS model were surveyed about their K-16 educational experiences in the United States. Contact with 106 students was made utilizing email and an online social networking system. A total of 58 students responded to the electronic survey, yielding a response rate of 54.7%. Twenty-nine respondents (50%) met the study criteria of being native Spanish speakers who immigrated to the United States. Of these 29 participants, 90% were first-generation college students. Countries of origin represented by these participants included El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico. The average age upon arrival to the United States was 15.

From those survey respondents who met the study criteria, the researchers selected a purposive sample (Teddlie & Yu, 2008) of six participants for semi-structured interviews. Care was taken to select individuals who represented within-group diversity related to funding period, recency of immigration, age at time of study, and region of home community within the state. An additional interviewee who met the study criteria was selected based on the alignment between her response to a seminar assignment and the focus of the study. Together,

six females and one male participated in the interviews. Six of the participants emigrated from Mexico; one emigrated from Puerto Rico. One interviewee is a current undergraduate student; six of the interviewees obtained bachelor's degrees in education between the years 2003 and 2008. Three of these individuals have since earned advanced degrees, and one is taking coursework toward an advanced degree. Each of the interviewees was interviewed once for an average of 20 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to refer to all students, including the seven interviewees: Esmeralda, Francisco, Mariana, Paola, Patricia, Teresa, and Victoria.

The researchers also collected student artifacts, such as reflective essays and written responses to open-ended questions on assignments generated within the structured curriculum of the identity/advocacy seminar offered each spring and fall semester. The researchers included the artifacts to give voice to the larger population of Spanish-speaking immigrant learners with whom they have interacted over the course of the program (1999–present).

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted two rounds of analyses. They initiated analysis by first coding each piece of data according to the four dimensions (sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic) of the CLD student biography framework (e.g., Herrera & Murry, 2005). Second, the researchers employed a form of qualitative construction of categories driven by existing research in Latino/a education (e.g., recruitment and retention, second language acquisition, etc.) and the meanings derived from the student voices in the study (Merriam, 1998). This allowed for direct interpretation of the data, which Creswell describes as a “process of pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways” (1998, p. 154). This process led to the establishment of patterns (Creswell, 1998) and enabled the researchers to identify emergent themes and subthemes. Triangulation of the data as well as peer debriefing (which included discussions and consensus in establishing the final themes and subthemes) among all five researchers bolstered the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) rejection and alienation, (b) compartmentalization of language, (c) bilingualism as a blessing, and (d) the establishment of student's sense of agency. These themes worked together to capture students' linguistic journey into and through college.

Rejection and Alienation

Feelings of rejection and alienation based on one's language have historical roots in this country. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the most salient and present themes that emerged from the participants' voices was that of rejection and alienation in the educational environment. Students experienced these feelings at different points in their educational careers. For some, the feelings originated during their K-12 education and continued through their university experience. Others did not experience these feelings in a linguistic sense until college. Some participants continued to report issues of rejection and alienation as bilingual Latinas/os even into their professional careers.

Participants indicated that the hegemonic practices of educational institutions attempted to separate them as linguistic minority students and deny their equitable access to appropriate educational materials, information, and teaching. The following remark exemplifies this separation at the university level:

No nos dejaron tomar clases de la universidad [cuando entramos en el colegio] solamente clases de ESL para que nos ayudaran a aprender el segundo idioma un poco mas. Eso lo vi yo un poco negativo de que sólo porque hablábamos español nos apartaron un poquito. Claro que las maestras nos trataban bien, pero uno sentía ese rechazo, esa forma de aislamiento—clases en otro edificio, actividades en otro lugar.

(Victoria, interview)

[They did not let us take university classes (upon entering college). Our classes were more like ESL classes to help us learn the second language a little bit more. I saw that a little bit negative because just because we spoke Spanish they separated us a little

bit. Of course the teacher treated us well, but we felt that rejection, that form of isolation—classes in a different building, activities in a different place.]

This participant's voice highlights the negative consequences of approaches that attempt to address the needs of students whose first language is not English by removing the learners from the general educational setting through pullout programs or special programs designed to teach English or remediate reading and writing skills. Students' descriptions of these types of programs provided a collage of the often subtle, yet powerful messages sent regarding the native language and its place within institutional settings (see Kanno & Grosik, this volume; Shapiro, this volume).

Participants began to internalize the messages, both hidden and overt, about their native language. For example, Patricia shared:

High school was just like I rejected my language cuz it's how they [teachers] made me feel when I was in high school ... all of my teachers were like, "That's [Spanish is] negative. That's making you not to learn the language [English]. Plus you're not learning the subject." ... Until today I still feel like my language has been rejected.

(Interview)

Participants relayed similar experiences at the university. For example, they shared instances when professors chided them in the hallway for speaking Spanish. Participants even revealed rejection of the native language when use of the language was the intent of the communicative environment, as in a modern language methods course. Susana, herself a bilingual learner, explained the injustice that she witnessed and described her response:

Last Tuesday, in one of my classes, we had to do a microteach in Spanish. All the students have to give a positive feedback and a suggestion to improve our teaching skills One of the Latino students [a fellow BESITOS student] received a note stating that she spoke too much Spanish during her microteach. I could not understand that suggestion because during the teaching, we are supposed to speak the target language. At that moment I felt attacked just because we speak Spanish and we are different. The rest of the students did not receive the same type of feedback. It was time to take action about this matter.

I decided to talk to the instructor of the class and made her aware of some of the comments. I asked her if she could talk to the class and ask the students to be tactful in their comments. Immediately she realized that she needed to address this issue with the class next week because we will present another microteach. A year ago, I could have thought of not even getting involved because I am very close to graduation and I will not see these people anymore. I needed to do this for my friend and all the Latino students at [Midwestern University]. I needed to do it for my children who will be attending college in the near future. They need to learn to advocate for others and themselves. I needed to do it for those students that I will teach one day. They will need an advocate and a person who they can trust in this world. It was not an easy decision but I am happy that I addressed this issue. I know this is just the beginning of my journey but it feels good to do the right thing.

(Student artifact)

Through her comments, Susana illuminates the reality that linguistic discrimination, though often subtle, is deeply entrenched at the university. Although fluent use of Spanish in this context should have been celebrated, the peer comments and instructor's apparent unawareness of the issue reflect the notion of tolerance for only "acceptable levels" of native language use. Although not directly affected by the incident, Susana recognized the need to take action on behalf of others, knowing that without such efforts future generations of bilingual learners will continue to experience the same kinds of rejection and alienation.

For many of the participants, the non-acceptance of their native language in school was a certainty and, as preservice and inservice educators, they anticipated their students' inevitable experiences with similar rejection. In her interview, Paola provided the following interpretation when reflecting on her students' understanding of potential negative repercussions associated with native language use: "They don't know any better. Until they go through that experience of that shock—that first shock of where you are told, 'You are not welcome, your language is not welcomed here.'" Many interviewees described the feelings of rejection and alienation that resulted from such initial moments of shock; they relayed the unpredictable responses of school personnel to their inability to fully participate in the English language. These circumstances led participants to begin to see their

native language as a *carga*, or burden, that must be carried as they navigated the educational system in search of academic achievement.

Even participants who today are highly accomplished professionals continue to carry the weight of this burden. Paola described her feelings of rejection and alienation in the following way:

You know there are certain occasions when you are in your professional setting, you know, politics and certain meetings or people that you encounter—and you know that this is not the place [to use Spanish] because of the politics surrounding the context [You know because of] a lot of the nonverbal clues. You can sense it. When you walk in, um, you sense the air. It gets very thick.... Sometimes within conversation there are some clues given, um, that, um, the culture is not welcome. The tense—that sometimes it's not very friendly.

Paola's experiences spoke of the importance of developing the ability to detect clues given through nonverbal communication regarding when one's use of native language, as an embodiment of culture, is unacceptable.

The participants described their native language and culture as central to their identity; therefore, when their language was rejected, they *themselves* felt rejected. Paola's words provide a window into this phenomenon:

I always knew that language was part of my culture, and that that was very, very important because that made up my identity as a person. So when I came from Puerto Rico at the age of 12, even though I was made fun of for speaking Spanish and I was made very uncomfortable, it was still a requirement from my family not to lose a sense of where I came from.... So not speaking my language meant that I was almost denying where I came from or who I was. Wherever I step, whatever I do, my language—my culture—is part of me.

Because language is tied to every other dimension of one's biography, the view or message of educators and society that the native language is inconsequential often results in only a fragmented, partial understanding of students, both cognitively and academically. Mariana reflected on the education system's rush to "mainstream," noting the

resulting lack of information that educators had about the strengths she possessed in the native language, a language that she recognized had won her awards in the past. She stated:

At school, I was in everything in Mexico. I mean, I was sent to un concurso de recitaciones [recitation contest] and it was in first grade and I would sit with third graders. And, I mean, I was so bright and here nobody knew, and I don't think the elementary school ever found out how bright I was because they were trying to mainstream.

Evidence of teachers' lack of preparation and knowledge related to language and the hidden academic potential it carried left many English learners in the periphery, with their academic potential untapped.

Participants related similar instances in which their cognitive and academic abilities seemed to be overlooked or doubted at the university. They shared examples of how college peers seemed to doubt their abilities to fully participate in the curriculum. One student, for example, described an instance in which her comments about ways a group project might be improved were not acted on by the rest of the group until the instructor reiterated the same points. Esmeralda relayed how even her university-appointed advisor seemed to have lower expectations for her:

I was having a hard semester so I was complaining about how hard and time consuming my math class and I told that to my [university-appointed] advisor and he said the same thing my [high school] counselor has said to me before. "Why don't you do Spanish it would be easier for you." I felt stupid once again but I didn't quit because I was going to demonstrate him and myself that I was capable of doing math and so I stick with math until now. I just don't understand why both of them thought that math was too hard for [me] maybe just because my English is not the best so they thought they were giving me a favor by recommending what they thought it was easier for me, but little do they know me.

(Student artifact)

Many other participants related to this idea of being shocked by the way they were initially perceived by peers or faculty and the subsequent feeling that they then must prove wrong the low expectations others held for them.

Compartmentalization of Language

The second theme that emerged from participants' voices was what resulted in educational settings where use of the native language was unacceptable. Participants who were successful in navigating the alienation, isolation, and other consequences recognized that one way to survive the situation was through the compartmentalization of their language. Realizing that at times the use of the native language was allowed and at other times was punished, participants quickly reacted by trying to separate the linguistic halves of themselves.

Navigating the contradictory dynamics of language use in schools, participants recognized that their native language was not perceived as an "asset" in the educational setting; rather, it became a commodity that was "useful" in some circumstances, yet should be hidden in others. Paola described the situation in the following way:

I don't think it was ever—You know, when you think of the word "asset," you think of something that is celebrated—something that somebody looks at as, uh, something that is big and awesome. I don't think it was ever looked at as an asset. I think it was *used*, the word is *used*, K-12. When there was another Hispanic kid that came in with no English I was *used* as a student to be that translator, to be the person that helped out the teacher I don't ever think my teacher ever celebrated my language or my culture or where I came from. It was more of here is how we celebrate what you bring because we *need* you.

(Original emphasis)

Such commonly experienced scenarios often led to participants becoming social actors, assigned to perform roles (e.g., language broker) based on the sociopolitical dynamics of acceptable time, place, and purpose for native language use.

Participants' compartmentalization of language was often the response or reaction to understanding that benefits could be gained from "playing the game." For many participants, use of the native language was suppressed for survival purposes, on the one hand, or used to ground and maintain a sense of self, on the other. To illustrate, the compartmentalization of the native language manifested responses of survival among participants that related to "fitting in" and "coping"

after they had internalized that their native language did not have a place in the U.S. classroom. Mariana stated in her interview:

You know, because I wanted to fit in, I learned to speak English without an accent, and I think that by listening to that, it was like a coping mechanism—like “I can speak English like you can so therefore I might be as smart as you are.”

The need to not have an “accent” and “be as smart as” made it necessary for Mariana to present a public persona in the classroom that would lead others to see her as monolingual, and therefore worthy of success.

At times participants felt that their relationships with others were threatened if they insisted on speaking the native language in the presence of monolingual English speakers. This notion of “offending” those around them significantly limited participants’ use of the native language. They continually monitored for how “appropriate” it would be to use the native language in specific situations. Teresa, who works with CLD families in her position, described the pressure to speak English in the workplace by saying:

Not that I thought that it [speaking Spanish] was not appropriate. It was just more like not causing any problems for people who didn’t understand it. I was using Spanish for, to do my work ... But, yes, there were times where I felt ... it was best not to use Spanish so the people around me wouldn’t feel offended. Not that I was offending them, but they felt that way.

(Interview)

The struggle to determine where and when to use the native language, and for what purposes, caused for some participants an acute sense of shame associated with native language use. They felt the need to assimilate: to talk, act, and think like those around them. One participant stated:

Growing up and while working on my Bachelor’s, I did not feel like I could be myself around other people because if I was, then I would not fit in with the rest of the group. I had to learn to assimilate and act like the majority of the group. There was a point in my life when I was even ashamed [of] speaking Spanish.

(Saul, survey)

Participant voices vividly documented the rollercoaster ride that many of these individuals experienced in coming to terms with how their culture, language, and thus identity fit within the educational setting. At the same time, however, they remained cognizant of the importance of using the native language to ground their sense of self and maintain connections to their family and cultural heritage. They recognized that despite the challenges they faced across the educational landscape, they needed to remain connected to the language for their own sense of belonging. Speaking passionately about what her native language meant to her, Mariana shared:

My native language was my family, and it was who I was. It was my, it was my whole being. My person, the way we communicated, how we communicated, love in our family, tradition.

(interview)

Another participant recognized that speaking her native language reflected to others the pride that she continues to feel in her culture:

The purpose of using my native language is because I am proud of knowing both languages and that I'm able to communicate in these languages.... I am proud of my roots and speaking two languages.

(Maria, student artifact)

Bilingualism as a Blessing

The third theme that emerged from participants' collective voice was the notion of seeing bilingualism, with all the challenges that come with being a second language learner, as a blessing. The words of Maria, a preservice teacher, exemplify this theme:

Being bilingual has influenced me in many ways, because I have the blessing of speaking two languages. I have been granted the opportunity to learn a new language and know Spanish[;] this has influence[d] me in being able to help others that need my assistance. Being bilingual is going to open many doors for me in the future when I become a professional. It makes me proud to be bilingual because I know I can use it to help others.

(Student artifact)

Ana, an older student who is both a wife and a mother, similarly recognized and wrote about the benefits of knowing two languages, using “privilege” to express the gratitude she felt in being able to communicate with others around the globe as she continues to develop personally and professionally.

It is a privilege to speak and understand more than one language. I call this a privilege because I can communicate with people from other countries (not just Americans) and I can learn about their cultures, values, education, way of life, styles, etc.

Being bilingual has helped [me] to live in this country, I have been able to work and do what I like in another context, giving me the opportunity to grow and be a professional.

(Student artifact)

Subthemes reflected in participants’ voices related to the benefits of the native language for self and for others. One participant described the benefits of being bilingual to his overall learning process. Explaining his use of Spanish and English, Francisco said:

I use both languages, actually, to learn new stuff. I always try to, if I learn a new word in either language, I always look up that word in the equivalent language. It is a great resource because you can make connection—historical connections, linguistic connections.

(Interview)

Many participants similarly commented on their use of cognates as a tool for learning. This strategy has shown potential for bilingual learners, especially in the areas of second language reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Goldenberg, 2008).

At other times participants shared how their bilingualism is a gift that they can use to help others. For example, Teresa talked about how her own language learning experiences have given her the ability to empathize with others’ struggles and encourage them along the way:

I’m glad that I went through that because now I can understand how people feel and why they hesitate to do things sometimes. Cuz I felt like that many times. And every time I had to speak to people

or to students, I tell them, “You have no idea how many times I entered into a class, the first day of class, and I felt like just going back to home (laughs) and not coming back.” Because when I saw the syllabus, honestly it was scary to me—I’m not going to be able to accomplish everything, especially when I saw those big words. I understood the words; it was just intimidating for me. And I just felt like going back and not coming back. But, uh, I tried, I stayed, and I was able to finish. And now that experience, uh, gives me the confidence to encourage people to do it. Cuz I know they’re gonna be able to accomplish it. But they can see that I believe in them, and therefore they go ahead and they try.

(Interview)

Patricia spoke about how she knew that her ability to speak two languages would enable her to better help future students, their parents, and other school faculty. This desire to help children kept her moving forward to achieve her educational goals:

When I first started, I applied for elementary teacher, and then they took us one semester ... to elementary schools. And I would just have so many kids frustrating [sic] because they don’t know what the teacher was saying. And I always wanted to be a teacher, and then there were days I said, “I hate it. I don’t want to be a teacher.” But that whole semester when we went to the schools, and I see those kids just crying and saying, “I don’t understand the teacher, I just want to go home,” when they just got here from different countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico. It was just, that just broke my heart. And I just, I don’t want the kids to suffer like they are. So, um, [it’s] just wonderful that I know an extra language. I wouldn’t say that I know all of them, but that just gives me a step more than other teachers to be able to communicate with them.

(Interview)

Pointing to the need to help end the cycle of linguistic silencing and suffering, participants such as this young woman continue to find strength to battle the waves of linguistic intolerance to pave the way for the academic success of Latina/o immigrant bilingual learners.

Establishing Sense of Agency

The fourth and final theme that emerged from participants' voices was the development of students' sense of personal and collective agency as Latino/a English learners. For example, participants often times turned painful linguistic challenges into a source of personal motivation as they pushed forward to prove wrong those who doubted their academic abilities. Patricia explained her situation at the university in this way:

Many times they [educators] were like I'm not in the right place.... So those are days [that] make me feel like, yes, I'm not smart enough. This is not where I'm supposed to be. College is not for me. I'm not capable of following the career.... But then those same people make me push myself harder, like prove to them that I was capable of doing, and better than what they were doing.

(Interview)

For Patricia, the struggle to learn the English language and succeed in college classes pushed her to continue when she desperately wanted to quit. She refused to let others silence her or destroy her dreams of becoming a teacher. She went on to say:

I finally accept who I am and I'm proud of who I am. And even though I have my accent real sharp, I wouldn't change it. And I don't care what other people say. That's who I am, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

(Interview)

For many participants, their ability to see their native language as a *regalo* (gift) was strengthened by, if not indelibly tied to their participation in the BESITOS program and the opportunities it provided for emotional connectedness and for reflection upon issues of language use, status, hybridity, and discrimination as well as other aspects of their identity. Acceptance into the program during her second year of college represented a turning point for Paola, who felt as though she was "a reject and a failure coming to college" in her first year at the university:

It wasn't until it [Spanish] was appreciated by the BESITOS program that I felt it was an asset. Because writing papers, giving

presentations, it never was. It just got in the way.... So, not until I got to BESITOS is when my self-esteem started being built—a building block, one block at a time. From my teachers ... from everybody.... It was like being with family, ... They were building our self-esteem as we went along—"Don't be afraid." You know, "You are who you are, and you have to be proud." And it was the building our self-esteem while they were building our academic level. The two went hand in hand. It wasn't that now you have to take a class ... [Interviewer: It wasn't remediation.] Right. It was both at the same. It wasn't leaving one separate from the other.... Somebody got to, tapped into my talent in college ... and you exploded that talent into something that I could attain.... And so [now] I am supposed to be doing something bigger, because I've always been told that. You have to be an advocate, and you have to fight, and you have to do this, and, you know, you have to help. And that was instilled in me.

Paola experienced healing in the acceptance that she found within the program among people who accepted her and her native language. Today, she is a Director of English Language Arts for a nationally recognized foundation where she utilizes her agency to direct CLD youth on their college-bound educational journeys.

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings suggest that in order to support Latina/o, immigrant English learners' academic achievement in education at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, support cannot be one-dimensional (Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001; Holmes Group, 1995). Efforts must target all four dimensions of the student's biography—sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic. This study allowed the researchers to explore intersections of the linguistic dimension with each of the other three dimensions.

As exemplified in the first theme, *rejection and alienation*, students' sociocultural dimension is intimately tied to their native language. Perceptions of (non)-acceptance within the educational community by peers and educators both influence the degree to which students view themselves as capable learners (as evidenced in the cognitive dimension) and color the way they interpret and respond to future interactions related to their use of the native language and the dominant

English language. English learners who experience rejection and alienation due to their primary language in their formative years are at significant risk of academic struggles (Baugh, 2009).

Students quickly become savvy about which contexts allow and value use of their native language and which do not. The second theme of *compartmentalization* reveals the outward splintering of students' identities. Though their biographies remain constant, they selectively choose which aspects of their identity they will share with others and in which situations and circumstances. One of the most detrimental consequences of such compartmentalization of self is the failure of educators and the students to draw on the full range of sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic assets available for use in the learning process. What students in higher education often need, then, are opportunities to see their native language being respected, valued, and encouraged in the educational arena by those with whom they interact on a daily basis (e.g., instructors, peers) in addition to those who provide students with support services (e.g., recruitment personnel; financial aid, enrollment, and advising staff).

Students who have decided for themselves how their language fits into their personal identity spoke to the third theme of *bilingualism as a blessing*. These students emerged from their struggles with linguistic discrimination and disenfranchisement with a stronger sense of who they are, finally unashamed to share their voice. Students' statements further illustrate how some used their dual language abilities as a tool to leverage their success in various contexts.

The notion of student voice is alluded to in many of the selected excerpts throughout this chapter. More specifically, as Latino/a English learners within the BESITOS program, students related an increased *sense of agency* as they progressed through college. This fourth theme was indicated by students' increased understanding of not only their personal experiences as immigrant, English learners in school but also of their ability as learners and future educators to challenge language discrimination and marginalization they see in educational settings.

Given the country's historic struggles to effectively educate linguistic minorities, educators at all levels must actively seek new approaches for responding to the unique needs of immigrant students learning English as an additional language. Students entering higher education need to see the value they place on their native language and culture reflected in the atmosphere and expectations of the

campus learning environment. Until English learners are accepted as full members of the academic community, colleges and universities will continue to overlook the wealth of linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, and academic assets that CLD students bring.

The BESITOS model is designed to increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The success of BESITOS program participants over the last decade is due, in large part, to the ability of faculty and staff to recognize the relevance of situating the students' academic success within their individual biographies. Program staff members strive to create conditions for participants' exploration and affirmation of identity. As linguistic minority students establish their voice and develop their sense of agency, they demonstrate ever-greater persistence in navigating the university's systems to achieve their academic aspirations.

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