Navigating Early College: Literacy Experiences and Identity Negotiations of Latina/o Students

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This research provides insight into the adjustments of urban-schooled Latina/o students as they enter higher education. This year-and-a-half-long qualitative case study focuses on connections between identity negotiations and the academic literacies of five Latina/o college students at a predominately White university. Specifically, I draw on sociocultural definitions of literacy along with literature that focuses on "identity as position" as a means of discussing the ways in which Latina/os are positioned by the discourses embedded in the academic literacies of the university. In seeming contradiction, the students in this study adopted critical perspectives as well as deficit perspectives as they navigated a variety of academic literacies, which, in turn, led to a variety of positionings. These perspectives, positionings, and subsequent identity negotiations provide the basis for implications in secondary and postsecondary education, as well as in literacy research, meant to assist Latina/os in their adjustment to higher education.

I spent the last four years of my public school teaching career working with a predominately Latina/o population in an urban high school, and was fortunate to loop with them as their English and AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) teacher for the majority of their high school careers. My desire to learn what happened as they left high school and entered college became the fuel for a year–and-a-half-long research study into their early college literacy experiences. During the 2006-2007 school year, I studied five of my former Latina/o students as they graduated and enrolled in college. All of my participants were in the top 10% of their graduating class and decided to attend a prestigious state university in their hometown. In addition to being earnest, diligent students, they all participated in high school-to-college transition initiatives and were willing to talk openly with me about their successes and struggles with the navigation of the academic literacies of the university. Throughout the school year, they remained positive about their academic futures even when struggling with their courses. At the same time, they openly discussed challenges related to issues of culture and identity when talking about academics. For example, in a focus group during spring break, one of the participants, Manuel, explained, "Well, if you think about being Mexican origin or Hispanic or whatever you want to call it, there are always people telling us we can't make it. But I wanted to show that we can. That was an identity I wanted to adopt. Well, I can make it, because I am Hispanic."

In addition to the above, I also chose to focus on these students because statistically, the chance of them receiving a degree from a four-year college was unlikely (Oseguera, Locks & Vega, 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Studies indicate that Latina/o students complete four-year college degrees at rates far below their White

peers (e.g., Kirst, 2004). Only 46% of Latina/o students who enroll in college attain a bachelor's degree, and only 10% in the 24-64 year-old age range graduate from four-year institutions (Oseguera, et al., 2009). Statistics tell part of the story, but equally important to understanding the early college literacy negotiations of Latina/os are the lessons to be learned from stories these students tell about their experiences (González, 2002; Solórzano, 1998; Villalpando, 2003).

Background and Need

There are numerous studies that look at connections among identities and literacies, particularly with students. For example, Leander (2002) focused on the stabilization of identities through the production and configuration of identity artifacts. Broughton and Fairbanks (2003) studied connections between middle school girls' literacy practices and identity negotiations, finding that schools did little to focus on the links between the two. Jimènez (2000), in his year-long study of four bilingual classrooms, found that students' literacy knowledge and their construction of biliterate identities had noticeable influence on one another. Schultz (1999) reinforced connections between identity and literacy with her study of urban adolescent females' transition from high school to university. Her work demonstrated the ways in which the girls' identity enactments simultaneously positioned them in and against school. Her conclusions were not unlike those of other literacy researchers—it is imperative that schools (and literacy research) pay attention to the myriad shifting identities students bring with them to school (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Moje, 2004; Schultz, 1999). Scholars such as Bronwyn Williams (2006) highlight similar connections among literacies and identities in students' academic literacies at the university, while others have studied the contexts of academic literacy, in particular college writing, highlighting issues of power and discourse in the ways

universities teach students to compose and organize text (Bartholomae, 2003; Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998).

At the same time, the scholarship involving Latina/o students and university contexts highlights the difficulties in adjustment for Latina/os to the culture of the university and offers insights into possibilities for assistance. Meta-analyses of the educational pipeline demonstrate the countless opportunities for exit for Latina/o college students in the current system (Oseguera, et al., 2009; Solórzano, et al., 2005), while more intimate case studies indicate that Latina/os often find the university to be a hostile and alienating environment (González, 2002; Solórzano, 1998; Villalpando, 2003).

In this study, I draw on scholarship that argues for an inclusion of identity in the study of students' literacy development and scholarship that argues for more detailed case studies of Latina/o student experience in university contexts in the hopes of offering implications that might impact the experiences of Latina/o students as they learn the academic literacies associated with the university.

In the field of literacy there are few case studies that look specifically at Latina/os, literacy, and early college, although there is a burgeoning body of work in a variety of fields that focuses on Latina/os in higher education. This qualitative case study, focused on five Latina/o first-generation college students, attempts to fill that gap. Because successful navigation of early college is connected to a navigation of multiple academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), it is imperative to highlight the early college literacy experiences of Latina/o students.

In addition, the inextricable connections between literacy experiences and identity constructions (Gee, 2000-2001; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004; Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009) offer valuable insight for educators and researchers concerned with the preparation of Latina/o urban-schooled students and the retention of these

students once they enter the university. As such, this study focused on the following questions: In what ways did participants demonstrate newly acquired academic literacies as they navigated early college experiences? How did these literacies impact their personal identity negotiations?

Conceptual Framework
Sociocultural Views of Literacy

This study draws upon sociocultural theories of literacy (Heath, 1983; Wells, 1999, 2001; Wertsch, 1991), coupled with an additional critical stance, in order to emphasize issues of power embedded in the contexts of literacy learning and identity development (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer & Morris, 2008). Access and the ability to navigate the cultural codes of a community ultimately determine an individual's place or power within it. Sociocultural theories do not situate literacy within the individual person, making it simply about reading and writing skills; instead, they situate literacy in society so as to emphasize connections between the inter-workings of literacy and power (Gee, 1996). Many use the term *literacies* rather than *literacy*, and often, this broader view of literacies encompasses much more than listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Based on this literature, this study defines literacies as socially situated, and often contested, ways of knowing, valuing, and being in the world (Gee, 2000-2001; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003). This study attempts to highlight issues of power associated with students' learning of multiple new literacies as they enter college. Literacy learning does not occur in a vacuum, but in the complex contexts embedded in the many facets of university life. Students learn multiple literacies, both academic and personal, as they strive to find success at the university.

Academic Literacies

Academic literacies are more than an

ability to read and write college-level texts; the definition includes multiple approaches to knowledge. Zamel and Spack (1998) argue, "College classrooms have become sites where different languages and cultures intersect, including the various discourses of students, teachers, and researchers. In our experience, the result of this interaction, even when (perhaps because) it involves struggle and conflict, is most often intellectual growth, for these different languages and cultures build on and give shape to one another" (p. ix).

Academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), are a type of literacy practice, defined by Brandt and Clinton (2002) as "socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe to those doings" (p. 342). For students to survive or be deemed successful at the university level, they must learn the ins and outs of the university and the multiple discourses that encompass the cultural world of the university—discourses that change from class to class and group to group (Bartholomae, 2003; Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Rose, 1998). Arguably, the navigation of these discourses at the university level can lead to a (re)negotiation of various identities, including, but not limited to, the identities associated with being a student. However, it is important to recognize that often these discourses are also mainstream, White, and culturally alienating for many students as they enter the university (Solórzano, et al., 2005; Urrieta, 2007).

Literacies and Identities

Scholars point to clear connections between studies of literacy and studies of identity (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004). Moje and her colleagues (2009) recently called for an increased theorizing of identity and literacy and the ways in which "the two breathe life into each other" (p. 416). In the field of literacy, it is commonly acknowledged that viewing "literacy practices as social

has led many theorists to recognize that people's identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416). In this study, I draw on the metaphor of "identity as position" as a means of including discourses, narratives, and the power imbedded in these sorts of literacy practices (Moje, et al., 2009). Identities are multiple, fluid, and contingent, based in part on how individuals see themselves as well as how others view the individual; they are continuously being constructed and reconstructed (Gee, 2000-2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Individuals enact particular identities based on their interactions with the literacies of a particular community.

However, at the same time students are positioning themselves, they are also being positioned in particular ways by the discourses they are exposed to at the university. These manifest themselves in conversations, academic assignments, and the university culture, to name a few. Individually answering to the ways they are positioned is not a choice for students because all identity work happens in collectivity, and literacies are profoundly sociocultural; however, the form that response takes is not predetermined. This is where identity work finds agency—in the individual's ability to author himself/herself (Holland, et al., 1998). This give and take contributes to the continuous (re)negotiation of identities; identity enactments are constantly being shaped by the practices of literacy.

Thus, identity matters to a study of literacies because students' literacies shape their identities and their identities shape their literacies (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). The academic literacies students learn and/or use in college are going to shape their identities as students and more importantly, as college-going students. At the same time, these new identities may contradict former identities (e.g., those of student, family member, or friend), which may in turn cause conflict or cause identities to be reevaluated or renegotiated. The ways in which students

utilize the literacies of the university position them in particular ways. For example, students might be considered "good" or a "bad" students, "successful" or "struggling," based on their perceived ability to navigate the academic literacies they are exposed to in the university context.

Method

Case Study Research

In this study, I used qualitative research methods (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005), and specifically case study research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Case study is best suited for phenomena that cannot be separated from the context—specific, contextualized, and not able to be understood without the inclusion of rich description. In addition, case studies are meant to resonate with the reader's experience, and it is acknowledged that each reader will bring his/her own knowledge and generalizations to the reading of the case (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

I believe the data in this study offer an "answer" to Stake's (1995) question: What can be learned from the single case? The participants in this study articulated powerful connections between literacies and identities in their early college lives. Such portraits are imperative to individualizing literacy research (Rubenstein-Avila, 2003). In addition, their relationships, forged through multiple interactions as friends and focus group participants, added depth and breadth to the individual cases, subsequently offering connections across cases. Case studies offer researchers a means of detailing participant journeys, highlighting their unique stories while making beneficial connections for educators. Therefore, while using case study for my own research, I also argue its usefulness as a powerful research framework for analyzing connections between literacies and identities.

Participants

Participants for this study included

five (three female, two male) urban-schooled youth who personally identified as Latina/o and enrolled in a four-year college after graduating high school. Four of these students are bilingual and two are biracial. All participants were freshmen and attending school full time. Prior to attending State University (all school and participant names are pseudonyms), they attended Roland High School, a statistically "typical" low-performing urban high school: 79% eligible for free and reduced lunch, 63% Latina/o, 34% African American, and 2% White, with 23% of the student body designated Limited English Proficient. The school did not perform well on state-mandated tests and there was a high turnover of both teachers and administrators. They were my students when I taught high school, and were willing to participate in the study and meet regularly to talk about their early college experiences. In addition, these students also participated in detracking and college-readiness programs in secondary school provided to assist them as they transitioned to the university. For instance, they participated in AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), a well-known detracking initiative popular in many school districts nationwide.

Context: State University

State University (SU) is a large university in the Southwest. It is a highly ranked public university and competition for admission to a freshman class is intense and largely impossible for students who rank outside of the top 10%. The number of enrolled students at SU at the start of the 2006/2007 school year was 49,697. According to the university's online *Statistical Handbook*, 56.6% of the students were identified as White, .5% as American Indian, 14.4% Asian American, 8.9% Foreign, .7% Unknown, 3.9% African American, and 15% "Hispanic."

Data Collection and Data Sources

I spent a year and a half with these participants, both informally and formally. We were in contact at least once a week and often daily. As part of my formal research protocol, I conducted case study research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), facilitating five focus groups (2-3 hours in length and spread out over the course of two semesters), five impromptu individual interviews with each participant, and detailed individual life history interviews for each student (2-3 hours each in length). Artifacts were collected and included written classroom work, syllabi from all classes, emails, text messages, and access to MySpace and Facebook accounts. Students all used cameras to take photographs of important landmarks and experiences in lieu of keeping journals. A separate interview was conducted with each participant in which he/she described all of the photographs chosen for the photo journal. All focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed in their entirety. Student interactions with professors and teaching assistants were studied through comments on student work, occasional classroom observations, and professor interviews. Additionally, I kept a research journal throughout the process (Merriam & Associates, 2002). All of these data informed my analysis. For this study, I have chosen to focus on recurrent themes I recognized in all types of data, but to use focus group data to illustrate them. The focus group data allow all of the participants' voices to be heard, and thus, makes the most sense for presenting themes.

Data Analysis

Using constant comparative analysis, I examined both individual and focus group interviews throughout the process, allowing categories to emerge from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1984). Initial codes included categories like "typical difficulties," one I used to label comments about trouble getting out of bed to get to class and knowing how to manage their free time. I also initially used the code "lack of diversity" to indicate instances where participants noted SU was a predominately White university.

After summarizing thoughts across interviews, artifacts, and observations, I conducted member-checking, asking each participant to review my summaries (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). For this paper, I was particularly interested in conversations where students used the language they were learning in school, and in the ways they chose to critique their new environment. Initial categories centered in these two areas: "using new academic language" and "critiques of SU." At times these categories overlapped and excerpts were given multiple categorical labels. For instance, often when being critical of SU, participants were simultaneously referencing a lack of diversity. Once I had found all notable examples, I extracted a few examples that seemed indicative of conversations we regularly had about their experiences. I offered these examples to participants in a second member-checking interview, allowing them to clarify, elaborate, and/or choose new examples to study. I then attempted to complicate my understandings gleaned from the constant comparative method—fleshing out details through more complicated analyses using Fairclough's levels of discourse (Fairclough, 1995). When applicable, I analyzed portions of data on local, institutional, and societal levels (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2004).

Fairclough's model is three-tiered on multiple levels: there is always description, interpretation, and explanation of discourse and social practices at three domains of analysis—the local, institutional, and societal (Rogers, 2004). These domains do not exist separately, but are constantly in conversation with the others (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2004). I considered participants' experiences on campus to be emblematic of the local level of discourse, and I specifically looked for evidence of institutional and societal discourses in the transcripts I analyzed. These analyses ultimately provided a means for looking

at power and knowledge in the literacies students chose to use in order to articulate their identity negotiations. As a White female researcher working with young Latina/os, a critical level of analysis is mandatory for creating an ethical study that does not ignore power/knowledge relationships at work in the lives of my participants and in our relationships (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997).

Findings and Discussion

Data suggest that even early in their first semester, students began to appropriate academic terminology as a means of articulating their thoughts on a variety of topics. They were learning to navigate a variety of academic literacies at the university, and this apprehension of new literacies impacted their identity developments. In addition, data suggest two seemingly contradictory findings with regard to students' identity (re)negotiations: 1) participants developed critical perspectives based on the ways they were positioned by interactions with classmates, professors, and early college literacies. However, they also 2) appeared to internalize some of the very deficit perspectives (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Ronda & Valencia, 1994) they were attempting to argue against. I argue that these two findings are particularly important when considering implications for Latina/os enrolled at the university. Evidence of these findings, which appear throughout focus group and interview transcripts, are highlighted in the following samples.

Positioned by "Others": Critical and Deficit Perspectives

Excerpts from a focus group highlight the findings outlined above. The first provides an example of students developing critical perspectives; it shows them speaking from the voice of a collective "other" when articulating institutional discourses of race and discrimination. When I asked about the major issues affecting Latinos at the university, participants responded:

Manuel: "We're viewed as not making it because of our race."

Monique: "Discrimination."

Manuel: "Oh well you'll drop out by the end of the semester."

These students realized that deficit perspectives, situated in institutional discourses, exist about Latina/os, negatively position them, and subsequently shape their university experiences. But, rather than allow these discourses of failure, underpinned by deficit thinking, to simply position them, these participants acted with agency by making the discourses visible. Manuel's comment, "You'll drop out by the end of the semester," exemplifies how these students used their developing critical perspectives to work against the discourses that set Latina/os up for attrition rather than matriculation.

In our focus groups, we also discussed participant responses to the negative statements and incidents to which they were exposed. The conversation excerpted below highlights the language participants were learning to help give their ideas credence and structure. This excerpt also shows that issues at the university were discussed in terms of the new academic literacies they were apprehending, including terminology from content area courses (Bartholomae, 2003; Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998). At the same time, this conversation highlights participants' ongoing development of critical perspectives in relation to their new experiences at the university (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2003):

Monique: "It makes you work harder."

Manuel: "What it does to me is it makes me want to prove them wrong. Prove to them that I can make it. I can really make it like they can. You know, it's a way of me being pushed along."

Idalia: "Well, supposedly in our sociology class, we're learning that it's basically society that puts all these things on you. This creates self-consciousness.

Then you think you can't do it because of what other people, because of what society says."

Manuel: "You're influenced basically."

Monique: "Yeah, we're brainwashed."

Aurelo: "Not only that but…"

Idalia: "It becomes a part of you supposedly. Like Tom's Theory or whatever…"

Looking at this conversation as a local level of discourse, participants mentioned a need to prove people wrong. The group's assumption was that others have presuppositions about what they are capable of achieving because of their race and class. Data suggest that participants perceived these assumptions as deeply engrained in the academic literacies of the university; however, they chose to use the university's discourse to explain their own thoughts. They specifically borrowed the language from the university (academic literacies), to talk about the societal level of discourse they regularly encountered. Idalia clearly articulated what she believed to be a societal discourse when she said, "what society says" (Fairclough, 1995). Not surprisingly, repeated exposure to societal discourses— racialized and classed— caused them to reinterpret success and failure as brainwashing. Literacy learning is not free from issues of power. Identity formations occur in collectivity; students learn who they are by participating in a community (Holland, et al., 1998). Literacy experiences positioned participants in particular ways. In response, students began to position themselves in a variety of ways based on their personal and collective interpretations of their literacy experiences. While attempting to position themselves differently from others' perceptions, they inadvertently began to internalize some of the deficit perspectives they were trying to resist.

A third excerpt from this transcript reinforces the finding that students were developing critical perspectives, in particular a healthy suspicion of others' motives and actions, but simultaneously shows that students often articulated the

same deficit perspectives they argued against. Monique, one of two biracial members of the group, noted a personal experience: "I noticed last week, I went with my TA for math, and there was a Hispanic girl beside me. It was me, a Hispanic girl, and another Asian girl. And the TA didn't really talk to the Hispanic girl. He talked mainly to me and the Asian girl and he ignored the Hispanic girl. But, I didn't really think much of it until I got out…Was he not paying attention to her because she didn't ask questions? Or was it because he didn't think she would understand it because she doesn't really know that much English? She knows more Spanish and when she talks you can hear her accent really bad. Maybe he didn't really talk to her because of that?"

As they developed increasingly critical perspectives, once seemingly innocuous incidents were no longer thought of as neutral. Monique's comments demonstrated how these Latina/o participants critically reflected upon the interactions they had with professors and peers. Not only did these students speculate about possible reasons for the actions of others, they importantly speculated about how others' perceptions position students, which in turn, assists in shaping their student identities.

The previous excerpt also suggests that participants unwittingly adopted some of the dominant discourses they seemed to be attempting to resist. For instance, Monique, in her discussion of what might be a racist practice, appeared to be perpetuating a deficit perspective that placed more value on her biracial, Latina identity and less value on the identity of the girl, whom she repeatedly referred to as Hispanic. Indeed, she borrowed a racialized, colonial term to discuss her interpretations of a possible racist act. While the term *Hispanic* remains widely used in popular discourse, especially in the Southwestern U.S., it is connected to the U.S. Census and to Spanish Colonizers, rather than the population to which it refers. In contrast,

the term *Latina/o*, although not without its own critiques (e.g., MacDonald, 2004), emerged from activist groups within the population. What is perhaps more problematic than the use of terms themselves was Monique's hierarchical distinction between who is Hispanic and her own identity, which she constructs as more privileged. In fact, during interviews, Monique frequently referenced her ability to "pass for White." Despite being raised in both Mexico and Texas, Monique assumed her instructor has placed more value on her position as a White student, and articulated this instance through that perception.

Comparisons to "Others": Critical and Deficit Perspectives

Deficit perspectives were often made evident in conversations about differences between their group (my focus group from Roland High School) and the other students on campus. Exposure to students of a different class, especially those who had grown up in the same Central Texas town, led participants to articulate elaborate assumptions and comparisons about their secondary educations and those of their classmates at SU.

Manuel: "It's so competitive."

Idalia: "You have to like keep on track."

Manuel: "But I don't know their grades. I'm assuming they have better grades than me, but I don't actually know."

Holly: "Why do you assume that?"

Manuel: "Because they look smarter."

Holly: "What makes a kid look smarter?"

Idalia: "They are always reading.'

Alex [laughing]: "They are blonde-haired and blue-eyed. Nah, I'm just playing. No, I'm just saying you assume."

Manuel: "Yeah, it's just like a stereotype I guess."

Holly: "So the stereotype is that White kids will do better?"

Manuel: "Yes, and they usually do."

Alex: "They look like they come from richer schools."

Idalia: "And they have the

background, better training, and more experience."

Manuel: "Their educational backgrounds are more…"

Alex: "The curriculum they come from was more challenging."

Idalia: "And their parents who can hire like…in high school they probably had like mentors or tutors or whatever. Tutors who taught them how to do things in college, like college work."

The conversation moved quickly from competition to a seemingly light-hearted reference to privilege. Additionally, the participants verified the purported stereotypes, based on their ideas about those students' secondary educations. Though mentioned jokingly, "blonde-haired and blue-eyed" was equated with others "looking smarter." Next, even though they admitted it was a stereotype that White kids do better in school, participants drew conclusions about others' success in early college based on the presumed resources available to them prior to attending SU. Because of wealth and location, these students were positioned to succeed at SU before ever arriving, and if that thought is taken to its logical completion, then conversely, students who did not attend those schools were not positioned to succeed at SU (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002). Data highlight that new academic literacies were initially difficult for participants to learn, and they assumed, under the guise of competition, that other students who came from "better" high schools did not have the same difficulties (Zamel & Spack, 1998).

In many interviews, participants both reflected and refuted the widely held institutional and societal belief that urban-schooled students are underprepared for the rigors of university academics. Manuel said the following about his high school experience: "I guess at Roland, we focus too much on how to get students out of there, rather than on what we learn." Though he and the others then explained that their education at Roland was not inferior, Manuel then stated:

"The curriculum I think is like the same in all schools, you know, the faculty and teachers try and teach us the same things. It's just that, I guess, the ethnicities, you know Black and Hispanic, the kind of school Roland is, so we don't strive. The teachers, they're there. They can teach you something. But we choose not to. I guess because all our lives we have been knowing, or I guess people have been telling us, you know, just because we are Hispanics, Mexicans or whatever, and Blacks, we can't succeed. But we can be better than Westforest but I think we choose not to because of that."

While arguing that the curriculum at his urban high school was "the same" as the curriculum at other schools, Manuel also placed the blame for a perceived lack of student success squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves. He articulated a societal discourse of minority youth being lazy when he said, "we don't strive," but at the same time, he was aware of being positioned this way by these same discourses. He then spoke of Westforest (a local, wealthy predominately White high school near the lake) and argued that Roland students could "be better" than the students at Westforest at being successful in college, but that they made a choice not to be. Again, there is the apparent contradiction of a developing critical perspective and an articulation of deficit perspectives. The following excerpt was in response to Manuel's statements:

Alex: "Yeah, and they tell us to succeed *even though* we're minorities…"

Manuel: "They make us feel inferior."

Alex: "Yeah."

Idalia: "Oh, that's bad."

Again, data suggest that a local instance brought out deep-rooted feelings about racialized and classed societal discourses regarding success and failure (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2004). In this dialogue, the participants also recognized the ability of others to "make" them "feel inferior." As they often did throughout the course of my study, they attempted to interrupt these notions. Their responses, though often couched in the same deficit language to which they had grown accustomed, demonstrates possibility and agency in the lives of Latina/o students. Despite the great resistance they perceived in widely held beliefs about their previous education, participants still focused on authoring themselves in very specific ways at SU. They attempted to position themselves as students capable of using academic literacies and able to identify as college students (Holland, et al., 1998). It is in this agency that I find hope for impacting Latina/o student matriculation at the university.

Implications

This research affirms Latina/o students are both subjects and agents; identities are not stagnant (Urrieta, 2007). They change, shift, and alter (Holland, et al., 1998), and they can be complex and contradictory (Villenas, 2006). At the same time, the literacies that students attempt to navigate at the university are just as complex and contradictory as the identity negotiations they experience. Though this research was conducted with college students, the implications for postsecondary education cannot be neatly separated from implications for secondary education. The early college years are a unique time in young adults' lives, and these issues need to be addressed at both levels. At the secondary level, this research offers insight into the preparation of Latina/o youth for the academic literacies and cultural issues they will face as they attempt to become members of a new community. At the postsecondary level, it offers possibilities for assisting Latina/o students once they successfully enter the university to be positioned for success, not failure. While a number of studies in a variety of fields have focused on Latina/o youth in secondary contexts (e.g. Valenzuela, 1999), little attention has been paid to the navigation of academic literacies and subsequent identity (re)constructions of Latina/o youth as they struggle to navigate early college life. The ways in which students are positioned affects how they view themselves. There are issues of power attached to students' learning, and the subsequent impact of their university literacy experiences on their identity development affects their ability to be successful in a variety of university contexts.

Throughout their early college literacy experiences, participants in this study could point to discourses (Foucault, 1977) they encountered in university life, including those of race, class, and Whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997). Their conversations frequently highlighted an understanding of the ways in which their positionings impacted their college careers. The semiotic mediators of the university, in the form of academic literacies, "adopted by people to guide their behavior…serve to reproduce structures of privilege and the identities, dominant and subordinate defined within them" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 143) were both underscored and utilized as improvisational tools in the experiences of these students.

However, even with this awareness, through the course of their educations they adopted some of the racist language and ideas they were arguing against. It was common for their conversations to be peppered with anti-Mexican or anti-urban school rhetoric, often subtly inserted into discussions of race and class. In addition to a critical awareness of the discourses that both surround and impact them, this study suggests that students would benefit from tools to analyze their *own* discourses. At times, it appeared they had internalized various societal discourses related to issues such as race and class. While they often seemed capable of recognizing these discourses in their encounters with others, they repeatedly failed to recognize their own internalizations of discourses. It appeared they stopped short of recognizing their own unintentional use of such language, though they were clearly able to point to society's perceptions of them as urban-

schooled Latina/os. An emancipatory pedagogy steeped in issues of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) would assist both students and teachers. Students would have the opportunity to learn to interrogate their own literacy practices as well as those of the people around them. A framework of critical literacy at both the high school and university levels could offer instruction to educators in how to incorporate critical discussions into multiple content areas and encourage critical questioning as a regular part of students' daily academic lives.

Data suggest that students' ability to acquire the various literacies of their early college experiences regularly figured into their identity constructions. In this study, the university, steeped in issues of power and knowledge, quickly became a difficult cultural world for participants to navigate. As such, their unique perceptions of their own identities altered based on their positionings within the university. These positions were often connected to their perceived successes and failures with new academic literacies encountered at SU. They chose various ways of authoring themselves as students, as Latina/os, as similar and/or different from their classmates, as they were exposed to the new literacies of SU. There was a constant battle between participant perceptions of self and the perceptions dictated by those in positions of power within the cultural world of the university. These were inextricably tied to academic literacies.

Implications: Secondary Schooling

The data from this study suggest that exposing students to a variety of academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), the mediating tools of the discourses of the university (Holland, et al., 1998), can be vital to student participation in this new world. This instruction is crucial throughout Latina/o students' schooling, but seemingly more important throughout adolescence

(Garcia, 2001). Thus, in secondary education, as neighborhood schools become less and less ethnically and economically mixed (Kozol, 2006), it remains imperative to assist students in negotiations of race and class issues, even when these negotiations exist only as hypothetical situations. These critical thinking skills, along with critical lenses through which they can view the world, are an important piece of adolescent literacy development. Students' exposure to critical literacies provides them with opportunities to interrogate societal practices and positions afforded them within institutions (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

The experiences of these participants at State University suggest that college as we have come to "know" it is about more than academic achievement; it is also about issues of race, class, and disconnect, especially for students not of the dominant culture. The curriculum spaces (Cary, 2006) of the high school, which are epistemological spaces of the production of discourse, knowledge, and power, not merely places where students learn a particular value-free curriculum, offer a place where students might begin this initial exploration, an opportunity for them to develop into more critically-minded individuals before entering the university. Thus, the field would benefit from more research that studies the implementation of critical literacy in teacher education classrooms and in on-going staff development practices. Additionally, research that highlights student responses to critical pedagogy would help to inform our practice.

Implications: Postsecondary Education

The university, as an institution, is steeped in issues of power. The discourses inherent in the daily functioning of the university system are deeply ingrained (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Holland, et al., 1998; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Therefore, this study's findings provide evidence that students, particularly those

whose educational backgrounds differ dramatically from the majority of students enrolled at a university, could benefit from an educational philosophy that takes into account the impact college life has on students' personal development and the ways in which the daily interactions within the university impact the identities of students (Holland, et al., 1998). This could be achieved partially through programs already in existence, such as the transition programs available to students at the university, as long as the philosophies of the programs were extended and grounded in a theory of critical literacy (Lewison, et al., 2002; Van Sluys, et al., 2006) or emancipatory education (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The needs of students at the university are connected to issues associated with the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) and the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1990), but these need to be made more transparent to students and include practical techniques for assisting both students and educators in understanding the complexities of student identity transformations.

Therefore, data highlight the possibility of university programs similar to those suggested for secondary schools. In addition to tools for teaching academic literacies, university curricula could offer elements of a critical pedagogy throughout. This focus on university campuses would not just help urban-schooled students learn to navigate the new and difficult literacies of university life. Other students from more privileged backgrounds would also benefit from an ongoing exposure to difference and a forthright conversation confronting and complicating understandings of diversity. The culture of the university could be greatly impacted by such exposure. At the same time, data suggest that professors and other university staff could benefit from similar staff development practices in critical pedagogy advocated for by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002).

Implications: Literacy Research

This study, limited in scope to

students at one university, has several implications for future research. However, I feel it is important to highlight some limitations of my study. While participants participated in transition programs that surely had an impact, it was beyond the scope of this study to analyze those programs. More analyses that look at these programs are needed. Additionally, the focus of this study was young adult students. Future research might offer portraits of professors and other actors as a means of further developing the field. Finally, this study focuses on a group of Latina/o students at one large, public, competitive state university. Student experiences vary based on a number of factors, including context. More research is needed to understand how student experiences differ in a variety of postsecondary contexts.

While previous literacy research has demonstrated the importance of contextualized, complex accounts that highlight the deep connections between literacies and identities, data from this study suggest that the field would be enhanced by more studies that focus on this link after students' secondary school experiences and throughout the first two years of their college lives. Between research on students' secondary literacy experiences and the literature on adult literacy lies an untapped area of study— young adulthood. For many individuals, this time marks one of the most difficult transition periods in both the literacies of their lives and in the myriad identities negotiated in the various figured worlds in which they participate (Holland, et al., 1998). Additionally, research has shown this to be a time when many minority students leave the university system (Kirst, 2004; Valle, 2007). Findings suggest that students could benefit from a deeper understanding of access and places to negotiate issues of power at the university. This study maintains that a focus on student identity development, coupled with literacy development, as a way to deepen understandings of what is

typically understood as "transition" to the university, could help with the retention and matriculation of Latina/o students. Research that highlights what students face on a daily basis as they struggle to navigate the academic literacies of the university is imperative to improving the early college experiences of Latina/os.

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