Academic Achievers: Whose Definition?
An Ethnographic Study Examining the Literacy [under] Development of English Language Learners in the Era of High-Stakes Tests

Pierre W. Orelus
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It is ironic that our ever-present preoccupation with closing the achievement gap is insufficiently articulated in current federal education policy. To this end, Pierre Orelus' study cogently underscores the fruitfulness of caring teachers' persistence in bridging the all-too-frequent gulf that exists between school and community together with an apprenticeship model that saturates youth in academic discourses. This is an encouraging and inspiring read.

Angela Valenzuela, College of Education, University of Texas at Austin, author of Subtractive Schooling and Leaving Children Behind.

Orelus' book provides valuable insights into the resources, including teachers' teaching practices, students' level of motivation, their family values, and the students' academic background, that contribute to academic achievement for English language learners. The author's close examination of what enabled four middle school ELLs to succeed academically illustrates that even students who are labeled “at risk” can succeed with the right support.

David Freeman, Ph.D.
Professor of Reading and ESL
Chair: Department of Language, Literacy, and Intercultural Studies
The University of Texas at Brownsville

Pierre Orelus draws on his personal experiences as an English-language learner to examine ELL’s academic achievement and underachievement.

Guadalupe Valdés, Ph.D.
Bonnie Katz Tenerbaum Professor of Education
Stanford University

This book addresses one of the most pressing issues facing US education – how best to support the academic literacy of English Language Learners. Pierre Orelus looks closely at teaching practices that contribute to students' academic growth, and he adds to the mounting evidence of the negative impact of high stakes testing and accountability on teaching, especially for students who are learning English. This is a powerful call to reject the culturally and educationally reductive practices promoted by No Child Left Behind.

Professor Pauline Lipman
University of Illinois at Chicago
Author of High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and Urban School Reform

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Pierre W. Orelus

*New Mexico State University, USA*
This book is dedicated to Jimmy Rosario, Angel Gonzalez, Rosemarie Martinez, Olga Martinez, Mr. Carmona, and Mary Hill who have been facing the hammer of standardized tests at their schools; and my wonderful wife, Romina Pacheco-Orelus, an inspiring educator, a brilliant thinker, and a fabulous mother.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Elsa Auerbach ................................................................. ix
Acknowledgements ........................................................................... xi
Synopsis .......................................................................................... xiii
Introduction: An Endless Journey ..................................................... 1
1. Beyond Empty Rhetoric: Examining the Determining Factors Leading to ELLs’ Academic [under] Achievement .................................................. 13
2. Unveiling the Flaw in the Deficit Theory: School, Family, and Student Academic Achievement ................................................................. 27
4. The Study Itself: Data Method Collection and Analysis .................. 51
5. Urban Teachers’ Teaching Practices and ELLs’ Academic Development in the Era of High- Stakes Testing ................................................................. 79
6. Achievers among [under] Achievers ............................................ 95
7. Academic Achievement: Whose Definition? Mapping the Literacy Growth of Maria, José and Juan in the Era of Standardized Tests ........... 123
Conclusion: Beyond Institutional Representation of Student Academic Achievement ..................................................................................... 145
Epilogue .......................................................................................... 151
Appendix ......................................................................................... 153
Bibliography ................................................................................... 201
Biography ....................................................................................... 207
Index ............................................................................................. 209
This study is an important contribution to the growing body of evidence about the damaging effects of NCLB and the regime of standardized testing on the academic development of English language learners. Looking closely at the impact of policy on the day-to-day educational lives of four English language learners, Orelus shows how pressures for accountability shape teaching practices to the detriment of learning. As the regime of teaching to the test permeates classroom life, students engagement with literacy as a meaning-making process is undermined; ironically, even students who have been labeled ‘academic achievers’ by their schools are deemed deficient through the lens of the testing regime.

This study is rich with other tantalizing implications: It certainly provides strong evidence that standardized test scores provide an incomplete and misleading picture, obscuring the engagement, determination and substantive academic growth of students like those Orelus studied. Further, it shows that even strong parental support, a solid basis in first language academic literacy, extraordinary work ethic and self-motivation, may not be enough to counteract watered-down, test-oriented pedagogical practices in fostering academic growth. Even with such strong contextual factors, English language learners may not be able to achieve grade-level academic proficiency within the three years of supported instruction that they are allowed. Finally and ironically, it reveals that constructing students as “achievers” may inadvertently obscure their learning needs and undermine their individual academic growth.

_Elsa Auerbach_
_Professor and Director of the Composition Program._
_College of Liberal Arts_  
_University of Massachusetts-Boston_
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and male ego prevented us from getting to know each other deeply as father and son. I hope we can do so in our next life. I miss you dad!

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SYNOPSIS

Student academic achievement is one of the most heated issues surfacing in the frequent debates revolving around school reforms, particularly since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Mandate. Often missing in such debates is a clear articulation of what available resources students have drawn on to achieve in school. Informed by socio-cultural theoretical framework and drawing on data collected over the course of five years, this ethnographic study explores what contributed to the academic (under) achievement of four middle school English language learners: Pedro, Juan, Jose, and Maria. These students were institutionally recognized as “academic achievers.” In this study, their academic achievement is defined as working at grade level in writing, reading, and speaking skills. However, rather than merely examining what they achieved, this study investigates the ways and the extent to which resources such as their teachers’ teaching practices, their level of motivation, their family involvement, and the academic background of some of them from their native lands enabled them to grow academically. Further, to determine how their literacy skills changed over time and to study their progress in academic writing, a textual analysis was performed on a selective set of essays that they wrote over the course of one academic year. Likewise, to examine to what degree their reading skills changed over time, an analysis of their reading skills was performed. Finally, this study critically analyses the discrepancy and tension between the school’s recognition of their academic achievement and the evaluation of their performance on mandated standardized tests.
INTRODUCTION

An Endless Journey

This book stems from my personal, learning, and professional experiences. Having faced the challenges of learning a new language and the opportunity to work with English language learners (ELLs) from diverse social class, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, I wanted to explore the linguistic and cultural struggles and academic achievement of language learners, especially those learning English. The research for and development of this study address the struggles and concerns of ELLs similar to mine; for this reason, I feel particularly invested in this research and bring much passion and energy to the study.

As a former ELL, I did not speak English prior to moving to the U.S. This is the reality of many minoritized ELLs. I vividly remember the challenges that I faced learning a new language and adjusting to a new culture. Having already spoken two languages before immigrating to the United States (U.S.) tremendously helped me, for I was able to transfer the knowledge acquired in my native tongue, Haitian Creole, and my first academic language, French, to the target language, English. However, these linguistic assets did not save me from cultural shock that I encountered here in the United States; nor did they protect me from xenophobia, linguistic, and racial discrimination that I experienced in college. I am reminded of a horrible experience that I had presenting a paper in one of my undergraduate classes.

With my limited English speaking skills, I was required to share with my monolingual classmates and the instructor my final paper by doing a presentation in class. After I finished presenting the paper, the instructor asked my classmates if they had any questions for me. Several students asked me questions, to which I responded. Then a white female student named Jennifer, who was sitting next to me, shouted, “I didn’t understand anything he was saying; how can I then ask him any question?” There was a silence in the class after Jennifer made this comment. The instructor, who pretended that nothing happened, proceeded to ask if any student had any questions for me.

I stood frozen and felt ashamed in front of the whole class after Jennifer made this insensitive comment. What I found particularly shocking about her comment was the fact that everyone else did not seem to have a problem understanding me but her. Furthermore, I was suspicious of Jennifer’s comment because, since the beginning of the semester, she showed a lack of tolerance and respect toward me when I spoke in class. For example, she interrupted me several times while talking as if the questions I was asking or comments I was making in class were not important, or annoyed her.

After the incident, I went home that day thinking about dropping off the class. I even thought about dropping out of college fearing that I would not be able to complete my associate degree at the community college that I was attending due to my temporary English language barrier. When I returned to that class the following
week, I was hoping that Jennifer would apologize to me for humiliating me in front of everyone in that class, but she never did. For the remaining of that semester, I became tongue tied and remained silent. I stopped talking in class fearing that my classmates, especially Jennifer, would look down on me for not being able to speak like them.

This painful experience has caused me a linguistic inferiority complex in the English language. That is, even though I am now fluent and proficient in English, I still question my oral competency and ability in English. I still experience some level of inner fear when I speak English, especially in front of people that I barely know. I feel this inner fear much stronger when talking to a native speaker and he/she says to me, “what?” “What did you say?” “Can you repeat what you said because I didn’t understand you.” Or, worse yet, when people say to me, “you’re a professor, really?” “In what language do you teach?” “Is it in French?” I have gotten this xenophobic reaction even from people for whom English is their second or third language and whose accent is much heavier than mine.

It seems to me that uninformed people tend to equate having a “foreign” accent to a lack of intelligence. In other words, if one does not speak like an “American,” that is, like a middle class white American, one’s intelligence has to be questioned, and one’s native language, if not English, can’t be appreciated and respected. In my view, this type of attitude has helped the proponents of the English-only movement to attack and eliminate bilingual programs in states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. This attitude has also helped create a stronger climate of xenophobia in the United States.

While I was finishing my associate degree at that community college, I had another painful experience with an English professor named Mathis. I took an English composition class with him after my sister in law assured me that I would do well in his class. She trusted that I would do well based on the fact that I helped my older brother with his English assignments when he was taking the same class but with a different professor. Though I was not orally proficient in the English language, I was able to read and write it fairly well. Furthermore, having already acquired academic discourse in my second language, French, I was able to write in an academic fashion in English though with some difficulties.

However, despite my strong academic background prior to joining Mr. Mathis’s class, I had an awful experience taking this English composition class with him. He scorned me numerous times for not being able to speak English well. He questioned whether I was the one who did my assignments for his class. He questioned my intelligence. Apparently, he equated my lack of fluency in the English language to lower intelligence. While he encouraged my classmates to meet with him during his office hours, he would not do the same for me.

I could not stop thinking that Professor Mathis was xenophobic and racist and that he did not want to waste his time meeting with someone who does not look like and speak like him. In his class, I was the only black person and the only student for whom English is not his first language. Being determined to not give up and drop his class, I took the initiative to ask him for an appointment. He pressured me to explain to him why I wanted to meet with him. Something I doubted that he
AN ENDLESS JOURNEY

did to some of my classmates who went to see him before me. Professor Mathis made me feel like I was a lost case, which did not deserve his time and attention.

While we were meeting, I mentioned to him that I was formally educated in my native land and that I was only experiencing a temporary language barrier. After the meeting, I noticed that he started showing some level of human compassion toward me. He suggested that I prepared a portfolio for the final project of his class instead of taking a required test, which would allow me to take English 102. He said that he doubted that I would pass that test. Being resolute to prove him wrong, I studied as hard as possible and took the test, which I passed. After I passed that test, moved to English 102, graduated from the community college that I was attending, I did not see Professor Mathis until eleven years later on the campus of University of Massachusetts-Amherst where I was pursuing a doctorate degree.

Professor Mathis was visiting that university to explore the possibility of applying for a doctorate in the English department. When unexpectedly we ran into each other, I said to him: “Are you Professor Mathis?” He responded, “yes, I am. You’re Pierre, right? You were in my English class at Massachusetts Bay Community College, right?” I then responded saying, “Yes, I was.” Professor Mathis went on to ask me, “What are you doing here.” I said to him, “I am finishing a doctorate in education.” With a surprising tone of voice, he replied, “Oh, wow! “Really?” “Good for you!” I said to him, “Thank you.” How about you.” Reluctantly, he said, “I am considering to apply for the doctoral program in the English department here.”

We talked for a while and wished each other good luck as we were leaving.

These painful experiences with my classmate Jennifer and Professor Mathis made me decide to pursue a Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics with a concentration on ESL (English as a second language). While I was working on my Master’s degree and later on my doctoral degree, I had the privilege to be acquainted with, mentored by, take classes, and work with phenomenal scholars such as Sonia Nieto, Elsa Auerbach, Pepi Leistyna, Donaldo Macedo, and Jerri Willett who are deeply vested in culture and language issues and classroom discourse analysis. These scholars inspired me to further explore these issues beyond the wall of the classroom. Ever since my graduate work, I have been exploring the history and politics of language in the United States (U.S.) and beyond. The knowledge that I have acquired exploring the literature on language issues helped me understand the underlying reasons that may have led many people to discriminate against those who speak hegemonic languages like English and French with a foreign accent.

Specifically, I have learned that language is not neutral. As Norman Fairclough brilliantly illuminated in his book *Language and Power*, language is intrinsically linked to ideology and unequal power relations between dominant and subjugated languages. Historically, those in power have always attempted to forcibly make those in subordinate positions in society to speak and embrace their dominant culture and language. This form of oppression can be traced back to the colonial period where the colonizers forced the colonized to speak their dominant languages (Wa Thiong’o, 1986; Pennycook, 1994). This form of linguistic oppression has been revived in the so-called modern or postmodern time through western neo-colonial language domestic and foreign policies such the English-only movement in the U.S. (Donaldo et al., 2003).
INTRODUCTION

In the U.S., for example, forcing minoritized people to speak English at the expense of their native languages is, in my view, a neo-colonial form of linguistic domination. Invading and occupying countries and expecting the people in the occupied lands to speak the invaders’ and occupiers’ language and embrace their western life style is a renewed form of colonialism disguising with a different mask (Pennycook, 1994). Finally, preventing minoritized students from speaking and embracing their own language (s) fearing that they would not be fully integrated in the dominant culture is a way of colonizing their mind and soul (Wa Thiong’o, 1986). In my view, there is no other name for this form of domination but “linguicism” (Philipson, 1992).

CONTEXTUALIZING MY EXPERIENCE TEACHING ESL/BILINGUAL COURSES

While I had only one semester left to finish my Masters’ degree, I was fortunate to be hired as a bilingual reading and ESL teacher at a high school located in Boston, Massachusetts. The majority of the students who attended this high school were African Americans and Cape Verdeans from working class background. While being interviewed for this teaching position, the principal of the high school bluntly asked me the following questions: “Do you know what you’re getting yourself into?” “Are you ready for the challenges you’ll be facing here in this school?” Realizing that I spoke English with an accent, he went further asking me, “How long have been speaking English?” His question made me realize that being close to finishing a Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics could not prevent me from facing another xenophobic experience with a high school principle who has a PhD in education.

As I was leaving his office after the interview, I started wondering about the culture of the school and reflecting on the questions the high school principal asked me. After a month teaching at the high school, I quickly realized that it was a very difficult and challenging place to effectively teach students. There were constant fights occurring among students in the school hallway as well as in the schoolyard. Students often purposely activated the school fire drill so they could disturb the whole school and take a break from their classes. The neighbourhood where the school is located has had a bad reputation: there was drug trafficking often taking place and people were often reported shot and/or dead as a result of gun fights over drug trafficking related activities. In addition, the school did not have enough resources (school materials and adequate administrative support were scarce) for teachers to effectively help their students achieve academically.

During my three years teaching at the high school, teachers were pressured to teach to the test. Students, including my bilingual/ESL students, were taking tests almost every two months regardless of their limited English proficiency skills. I constantly had to administer tests to my students. I was required to use a scripted reading curriculum to teach my students how to read. Following this scripted curriculum, weekly I gave my students a pre-test on Mondays and a post-test on Fridays. These tests were supposedly designed to help my students build on their vocabulary words. This curriculum did not allow me enough space to engage my students in sufficient critical literacy activity.
When I was not under the surveillance of my supervisor and the school’s assistant principals, who often came to my class whenever they wished, I engaged my students in activities that I thought would be meaningful to their lives. For example, I would ask them to write about their experience moving to the U.S. and discuss what they learned from that experience with their classmates. I would ask them to write about people who they feel are important to their lives and have inspired them. Some would write about their family and friends, while others would write short stories about terrific leaders such as Amilcar Cabral and Patrice Lumumba who fought for the independence of their countries from western colonial powers.

I had the privilege to have in my class many students who had the presence of mind to know that standardized tests like the MCAS (Massachusetts comprehensive assessment system) would most likely lead them to an academic dead end, that is, an academic journey where they would not be able to grow academically and creatively. Despite my opposition to these tests, I had to administer them to my bilingual/ESL students, including those who just arrived in the U.S. and could barely read, write, and speak English. In fact, in my class there were many students who did not receive formal education in their first language. For this category of students, taking these tests was much more painful.

In spite of the dedication and hard work of the bilingual program director who wanted all bilingual/ESL students at that high school to achieve academically, many of them repeated the same grade twice and did poorly on the MCAS, especially on the English section of this test. During my three years teaching at that high school, I also knew bright bilingual students who excelled and exceeded school personnel’s expectations. Some of my bilingual students graduated with honor and moved on to attend college. As a prime example, while I was pursuing my doctorate at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, I ran into two of my former high school students at that university who were finishing their Bachelor’s degree and planning to go to graduate school. After I survived the three years teaching at that high school, I went back to graduate school. Upon starting my doctorate, I had the privilege to be involved in a home-university partnership research program called ACCELA (Access through Critical Content and English Language Acquisition).

MY EXPERIENCE AS AN ACCELA RESEARCH FELLOW

ACCELA is a home/university partnership established between the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and three urban school districts. This partnership was designed by professors at the university and sustained with the assistance of doctoral students who served as Project Assistants and later as fellows. Through this partnership, urban teachers enrolled in the inquiry-based Master’s program acquired theories and methods in first and second language acquisition and multicultural education. This program encouraged and supported these teachers in their efforts to reach out to their ELLs’ parents and communities. Many of these teachers, including the ones with whom I worked, successfully created spaces for parents to be involved in their children’s learning. As Gebhard, Harman, and Seger (2007) maintain,
INTRODUCTION

This partnership was established in 2002 to support teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers in understanding and responding to the combined influences of No Child Left Behind legislation, statewide curriculum frameworks, high-stakes tests, the passage of an English-only referendum, and the adoption of mandated approaches to literacy instruction (p. 2).

Furthermore, one of the major structural practices of this partnership was a half-day conference organized by project assistants and professors involved in the project. This district-based conference created space for teachers, school administrators, and community members to critically examine district, state, and federal policies and institutional practices that impact teaching practices and the learning growth of ELLs. At this half-day conference, the teachers presented their final projects to the principals of their respective schools, parents, colleagues, and other members of the community.

I was an ACCELA fellow, and I worked closely with several ELL urban teachers enrolled in the Master’s program. Specifically, I assisted them in collecting and analyzing data for their Masters’ final project. One of the purposes of the teachers’ research projects was to critically examine their own teaching practices while exploring more effective ways to help their ELLs acquire necessary academic skills.

In addition to helping the teachers with their researches, ACCELA enabled me to conduct my own research. During the first three months of collecting data for this study, I juggled my roles as an ACCELA fellow and a researcher. At certain times I felt the primacy of the researcher role, i.e., taking field notes, interacting with the focal students, and interviewing Ms. Rosa, Ms. Jessica, Ms. Rosa, and Ms. Vanessa (pseudonyms) to get more insights about the academic growth of their students. Likewise, there were times when I dedicated mostly my time to answer questions that Ms. Rosa, Ms. Jessica, Ms. Vanessa and other teachers had about their own research projects. This hybrid position made me a more engaged and active participant-observer in the study. Indeed, my research questions emerged from these rich experiences.

The combination of working closely with in-service and pre-service teachers and observing their ELL students’ growth over the course of five academic years gave me a deep understanding of the context of this study. Specifically, my position as an ACCELA fellow allowed me to take field notes and videotape classroom interactions between these teachers and their students. In this way, Juan, Pedro, José, and Maria (pseudonyms), the four focal students in this study, came to my attention. One early video captured the classroom interaction between these students and their teachers. Pedro, for example, who was not yet able to speak English, was timidly interacting in Spanish with Ms. Rosa and a few of his peers (see transcript of the interaction between Ms. Rosa, Pedro, and his peers in appendix).

Two years later, this video helped me to trace the academic struggle of Pedro who, like Juan, José, and Maria, was eventually considered by the institution as academic achievers. When it was time to analyze data for this study I already had an extensive record of the focal students’ learning across a five-year period to draw on. I had accumulated over a five-year period videos and samples of the focal
students’ work that enabled me to capture through analysis their academic growth. I was particularly interested in finding out how and why these students were institutionally recognized as achievers while their classmates were not. Specifically, I wanted to examine what resources that had enabled them to “succeed” academically while their peers were lagging behind. I expanded on these issues in chapter three where I talk about the method and analytical tool used for data collection and analysis.

OVERARCHING GOALS OF THE STUDY

Student academic achievement is one of the most heated issues surfacing in the frequent debates revolving around school reforms. Parents, educators, and policy makers alike express great concern about student academic achievement. However, often missing in such debates is a clear articulation of what resources students have been allowed to draw from in order to facilitate achievement in school (Moll, 1988; Nieto, 2004; Valdés, 2001, 1999, 1996; Valenzuela, 2004, 1999; Auerbach, 1995, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Zentella, 1997). Drawing on data collected over the course of a five-year period, from 2003 to 2008, this ethnographic case study, which took place in Massachusetts, an English-only state, explores what contributed to the academic growth of four ELL students: Pedro, Juan, José, and Maria. As I will explain in-depth later, all of the focal students moved to the U.S. from their native lands when they were very young, ranging from age 7 to 12. Unlike Pedro who is Dominican, the other four students are Puerto Ricans. Unlike Pedro, José, and Maria, Juan was labeled as a special need student. They were all middle school ELLs who were institutionally recognized as “academic achievers.” In this study, their academic achievement is defined as working at grade level in writing, reading, and speaking skills. The middle school ascribed an “achiever status” to these students. However, rather than merely examining how and what they achieved, this study investigates the ways and the extent to which school resources such as teachers’ teaching practices, their level of motivation, family values, and the academic background of some of them from their native lands enabled them to grow academically in the U.S. middle school. By growing academically, I mean their literacy development. Further, to determine how their literacy skills changed over time and to study their progress in academic writing, a textual analysis was performed on a selective set of essays that they wrote over the course of one academic year. Likewise, to examine to what degree their reading skills changed over time, an analysis of their reading skills was performed. Finally, this study explores the discrepancy and tension between the school’s recognition of their academic achievement and the evaluation of low performance, for instance, of some on mandated standardized tests.

The three major research questions this study seeks to answer are: (1) what was the nature of Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Maria’s growth in academic literacy over the course of this study? (2) What resources were available to them, and how did they draw on them to sustain their growth in writing and reading skills? And (3) how was their academic achievement institutionally defined and represented,
INTRODUCTION

and what was the connection between the “institutional achiever status” attributed to them and their literacy growth? I attempted to answer these questions in the chapters where I discussed the findings of this study. In the sections that follow, I talk about the conceptual framework that this study draws on and go on to briefly describe the content of each chapter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in socio-cultural (Vygotsky, 1986; Bloome, 2004; Willett, 1998; Street, 1995; Bloome and Willett, 1996; Bakhtin, 1986) and systemic functional linguistic (Halliday, 1994; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Eggins, 2004) perspectives. I draw on these theories because of an interest in learning what literacy events and pedagogical choices made by María’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Pedro’s teachers may have enabled them to achieve academically. In addition, I explore how these students may have used these literacy events to co-construct knowledge with their teachers and peers and develop academic language to produce texts. A text can be the transcript of a face-to-face conversation between two people; the interaction between teachers and students; a lecture a professor gives; or a sample of students’ essays. Finally, I use socio-cultural theory and systemic functional linguistics as conceptual frameworks because they enable me to examine how the focal students used language to make meanings in texts embedded in and informed by both his own classroom situational context and by the cultural context of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. This legislation, as analyzed later, impacted what their teachers did in their classrooms with their students.

To achieve these goals, I drew on, among other terms, Vygotsky’s concept of knowledge construction. According to Vygotsky (1986), knowledge is not constructed in isolation. It is collectively constructed and historically and socially situated. Language plays a central role in co-construction of knowledge and meaning-making. In effect, it is the medium whereby people attribute meaning to and deconstruct meaning from texts. It is also the tool used to produce texts in specific contexts. As Knapp & Watkins (2005) put it:

Texts are always produced in a context. While texts are produced by individuals, individuals always produce those texts as social subjects; in particular, social environments. In other words, texts are never completely individual or original; they always relate to a social environment and to other texts (p. 18).

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1946) took the word ‘context’ a few steps further, linking it to the social function of language. To better understand and describe in depth the immediate context in which texts are produced, he coined the term “context situation,” which, in his view, needs to be linked to a broader influential context, which he calls ‘cultural context’ (Knapp & Watkins, 2005).

According to Malinowski (1923, 1946), cultural context helps explain the greater influence that, for example, state and federal mandates such as the NCLB legislation have on texts produced in a situational context such as a classroom. As I argue later, the written texts that the focal students produced in their
classrooms, except those produced by Juan, were constantly informed and influenced by pressures placed on students and teachers to be prepared for standardized tests such as the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System).

Furthermore, the language that Pedro, Juan, José, and Maria used to produce and make meanings through the texts as well as from texts has various functions: social, linguistic, ideological, cultural and historical. Social-cultural theorists explore these multiple dimensions of language (Bloome et al., 2005; Street, 1995; Macedo et al., 2003; Willett, 1996). Bloome et al. (2005) examined the extent to which language is used by teachers and students through classroom interactions to co-construct knowledge and make meanings of texts. Bloome et al. also point out the importance of language in conducting research and analyzing literacy events taking place in classrooms, stating that:

Our approach to the micro-ethnographic analysis of classroom language and literacy events is informed by our continuously evolving understanding of language, literacy, and classrooms. For us, language is not a ‘transparent’ vehicle for the communication of information. Any use of language (spoken, written, electronic, etc.) involves complex social, cultural, political, cognitive, and linguistic processes and contexts—all of which are part of the meaning and significance of reading, writing, and using language (p. xvii).

What Bloome et al. point out does not happen in a vacuum; the meaning that people make through the social use of language can be best understood by placing it in context. In Vygotsky’s conception (1986), establishing the link between text and context is key in knowledge construction; for example, how students construct knowledge and/or make meaning of texts in their community differs from the way they construct knowledge with and/or make meaning of texts with their teachers and peers.

According to the proponents of socio-cultural theory, language and texts are equally important factors in the domain of knowledge construction. People use language to co-construct knowledge both verbally and textually; as such, texts (written, oral, visual or otherwise) are the centerpiece of knowledge construction. Just as people construe meaning verbally, they do so through written texts. As Halliday (1994) and Fairclough (2003) illustrate in their scholarly work, the content of texts have different social effects on people depending on how they interpret and analyze them. Making meaning of texts, as Fairclough (2003) eloquently puts it, “depends upon not only on what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit—what is assumed” (p. 11). What is assumed to be in the text is frequently a reflection of the meaning analysts attribute to it. One can therefore only provide one’s interpretation of texts, and such an interpretation needs to be substantiated with evidence from the text (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). This is why making meanings of texts requires situating and linking such meanings to context. Freire (1987) maintains, “The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context” (p. 290).

In the case of a text written by an individual, “what is ‘said’ in [such] a text always rests upon ‘unsaid’ assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). In trying to identify what is
INTRODUCTION

assumed in texts analysts sometimes bring in their own assumptions into such analysis. However, these assumptions need be critically examined to avoid the possible misinterpretation of texts. As an example, when I first started interpreting and analyzing the texts produced by the focal students in their classes I was unable to unveil or understand the purpose that they were trying to achieve. This may have had something to do with the unchecked assumptions that I brought into their texts. By discussing my interpretation and analysis of their texts with colleagues and peers, I gained different perspectives that allowed me to approach their purposes for their texts. This, in turn, enabled me to better examine my biases and assumptions that may have impacted my analysis of their texts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Many studies (Trueba, 1998; Keenan, J. W., Willett, J., & Solsken, J., 1993) have explored the academic growth of ELLs. However, these studies have mostly focused on elementary and high school ELLs. Moreover, these studies generally address the outcome of ELLs’ academic achievement, with the exception of those of Valdés’s (1996) and Willett’s and Solsken’s (1993) looking at both the process and the outcome of such an achievement. In contrast, this ethnographic study examines a different age group— ELLs in middle school, which in Massachusetts encompasses sixth, seventh and eighth grades —and centers on the processes leading to the outcome of ELLs’ academic growth. In this sense, this study contributes to the small number of socio-cultural studies examining the processes of “successful learning” in a different context. The context of this study differs from others done in suburban areas in that it was conducted at a poorly funded urban middle school located in a city with a high rate of crime and poverty. Furthermore, this ethnographic study specifically adds to the literature examining the academic growth of one Dominican and three Puerto Rican ELLs. These are an ever-increasing group of Latino/a students who need to be further studied.

Finally, this study is important in that it challenges the assumption that ELLs’ parents’ inability to speak Standard English, or refusal to speak English with them at home, contributes to their children’s academic failure. Even though the parents of Pedro, Juan, José, and Maria could barely express themselves in English and they only spoke Spanish at home with them, this did not prevent them from passing on to their children the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1988) that they have as immigrant parents. Nor did this prevent Pedro, Juan, José, and Maria from being institutionally recognized as achievers, especially Juan who was labeled as a student with special needs.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Being completely objective while conducting research is impossible; researchers inevitably bring to the site their biases and, sometimes, their personal or political agenda. In this sense, researchers can only try to be as objective as possible, preventing their biases from drastically influencing how they go about their
research—that is, how they interact with their informants, collect and analyze data, and report their findings to their targeted audience. Moreover, how researchers choose to study certain groups inherently limits their research.

In the case of this study, a major limitation is its focus on one Dominican and three Puerto Rican students’ academic growth and the various resources that contributed to it. Given the limited scope of this study, one cannot use it to generalize about Dominican and Puerto Rican ELLs’ academic growth. Another limitation of this study is that I did not observe the classrooms of all the teachers who were involved in Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Maria’s learning; nor did I interview all of their teachers. Therefore, it is impossible to know how the teachers that I did not interview and whose classrooms I did not observe may have contributed to (or not) Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Maria’s academic growth. I only interviewed and observed the classrooms of four of Pedro’s teachers, two of Juan’s teachers, and two of José’s and Maria’s teachers. Furthermore, I was only able to observe their classrooms twice a week. Because of these factors, it is impossible to know what they did in their classes when I was not present that may have contributed to (or not) Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Maria’s academic growth.

**SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter one analyzes challenges that ELLs have faced in the U.S. school system. Specifically, this chapter explores many socio-political, linguistic, economic, and cultural challenges that these students and their teachers have grappled with in their classrooms and society at large. Some of the challenges entail ELLs’ cultural, linguistic, and social class backgrounds that often clash with what is valued in mainstream classrooms in terms of language of schooling and the dominant ideology that permeates the school culture and practices. This chapter proposes alternatives solutions to these challenges.

Chapter two expands on the first chapter reviewing in-depth the literature on student academic achievement. This literature encompasses explorations of the role social class plays in student academic growth; the arguments and counterarguments about the mismatch between school literacy and home literacy, and the impact this has had on the academic growth of student; and to what degree teaching practices, school-family partnerships, and parental involvement influence student learning.

This chapter also elaborates on the deficit theory partially addressed in the preceding chapter. This theory has been used to attribute the academic failure of marginalized students to their parents’ inadequate economic, educational and cultural backgrounds, and lack of interest in their children’s education. I critically analyze the flaw in the deficit theory. As a counterargument, I review the literature demonstrating how the cultural and linguistic resources of non-mainstream parents can be used in joint efforts by teachers and families to foster student growth. I also survey studies demonstrating how effective teaching practices can lead to student academic growth. Furthermore, in this chapter, I explore the literature on school-community partnerships reviewing programs that have been proven effective in closing the gap between school and families.
INTRODUCTION

I go on examining several school-family programs focusing on the literacy apprenticeship of non-mainstream parents into school literacy, as well as school personnel’s apprenticeship into parents’ home literacy. I believe that this partnership can play a crucial role in students’ academic growth by strengthening fluent communication between the two spheres of literacy. In addition, I outline several case studies closely examining the role of teachers’ instructional practices and family involvement in student academic growth. I conclude this chapter by making an appeal for bridging the gap between school and family.

In chapter three I begin by talking how I accessed the site. I go on describing the city where the school is located and the cultural and physical characteristics of the school. I also talk about challenges faces the school in meeting the expectations and standards set by the school district and the state, Massachusetts, where the English-only law had passed leading to the elimination of all bilingual programs.

Chapter four lays out the data method collection, organization, and analytical framework used for this study. I begin by describing how I collected data for this study and the nature of these data. I go on to describe how I organized the data. I then provide a detailed description of the participants involved in the study. Finally, I explain the analytical tools with which I approached the data.

Chapter five examines in-depth the degree to which the federal and state educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind mandate impacted teachers’ teaching practices and student learning at the middle school where this ethnographic case study took place. Drawing on data collected for this study, this chapter provides a detailed description of the social, learning, and teaching dynamics of Ms. Rosa and Ms. Vanessa who were trying to meet the school district’s and the state’s high-stakes test requirements while at the same time making the effort to engage their students in meaningful activities conducive to student learning.

Chapter six and seven present and analyze the collected data set to help answer the questions guiding this study: (1) what was the nature of Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and Maria’s growth in literacy over the course of this study? What resources were available to them, and how did they draw on them to sustain their growth in academic writing? And (2) how was their academic achievement institutionally defined and represented, and what was the connection between the “institutional achiever status” attributed to them and their growth in academic writing? In the last chapter, I question the institutional representation of student academic achievement proposing that we should focus instead on student growth as such definition can be problematic. I end this chapter by drawing on the findings of the study to make recommendations for further research regarding student academic achievement.
CHAPTER 1

BEYOND EMPTY RHETORIC

Examining the Determining Factors Leading to ELLs’ Academic Achievement

Student academic achievement is one of our most pressing educational issues, and as such often comes to the fore of debates revolving around school reforms. When debate shifts toward the academic gap between students, it often focuses on the gap between monolingual Caucasian, African-American, Latino/a, and Asian students as measured by short-or long-term standardized tests (Sleeter, 2005). This race and class-based comparison occurs despite the change in the student demographic involving increasing numbers of ELLs in the U.S. school system. Because of the growing numbers of ELLs, monolingual urban teachers have found themselves teaching these students for whose needs they are often unprepared (Nieto, 2004). A lack of ELL and bilingual teachers may be exacerbated by the elimination of bilingual programs across the U.S., specifically in states such as California, Massachusetts, and Arizona (Crawford, 2008).

As a result of the reduction of primary and secondary bilingual education programs in the states mentioned above, school systems in these states are experiencing a shortage of certified ESL/bilingual teachers as well as teachers professionally trained to work with ELLs (Crawford, 2008). A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2000) reveals that only 20% of teachers felt they were prepared to teach students with limited English proficiency (Crawford, 2000). A report by the same center indicates that only 2.5% of teachers who work with ELLs have a degree in ESL or bilingual education, and only 30% of all those teaching ELLs have participated in professional development addressing ELL needs (Crawford, 2000). This shortage of ELL teachers may be linked to the primacy of the English-only movement in some states such as Massachusetts (Marcedo et al., 2003). In consequence, many teachers are increasingly required to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students without adequate support or proper education related to language learning, cultural perspectives, and/or ELL teaching strategies (Valdés, 2001, 1999; Brisk, 2006).

As Valdés (1996) eloquently pointed out in her breakthrough book Con respecto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait, one of the tremendous challenges these teachers face is that ELLs often bring to school resources differing from those valued in traditional U.S. classrooms. These resources are often unappreciated and go unrecognized by school personnel (Freeman and Freeman, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Brisk, 2006). Worse yet, because of a lack of respect and tolerance often shown to minoritized and
non-dominant cultures and languages, ELLs may feel that their cultural resources offer little value. Nonetheless, the linguistic and cultural mismatch faced by ELLs in the U.S. school system does not necessarily constitute a dead end to their academic achievement. These differences can certainly impact students’ learning, especially when teachers perceive students’ diverse linguistic and cultural resources as problems rather than resources to be built upon for effective teaching (Nieto, 2004; Valdés, 1996, 2001; Brisk, 2006). Schleppegrell (2004) argues that, “schooling is primarily a linguistic process, and language serves as an often unconscious means of evaluating and differentiating students” (p. 34). Schleppegrell’s argument helps explain why, “In U.S. classrooms, linguistic diversity has commonly been viewed as a temporary, if troublesome, barrier to learning. After students learn English, the thinking goes, learning can then proceed unhampered” (Nieto, 2004, p. 211).

Policy makers too often fail to appreciate the scope and complexity of the challenges ELLs face. For example, besides having to cope with the difficult transition to life in the United States, ELLs enter a school system with structures that are often different from those of schools they attended in their native lands (Cummins, 2000; Fu, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Nieto, 2004). This transition is much more challenging for ELLs from poor economic and social class backgrounds. These students tend to live in poverty and therefore attend schools in marginalized neighborhoods with insufficient resources; this was the case with the U.S. middle school that Pedro, Juan, Maria, and Juan attended.

Moreover, many ELLs enter the U.S. school system without the educational background that teachers expect. When class and social background resulted in inferior or non-existent education, a great number of these students did not develop academic language and literacy skills in their first language that could be transferred to content-area studies in English. Indeed, many ELLs did not know how to read and write in their first language prior to starting school in the U.S. For this category of students, exponentially more time and effort are required to help them develop the language and literacy skills needed to grow academically. Even those with some English experience face challenges. Many ELLs have achieved some level of oral fluency in the English language, and are often conversationally fluent. However, conversational fluency is insufficient to certain academic tasks required in school (Cummins, 2000, 1989, 1988).

Researchers such as Cummins (2000, 1988) and Collier (1995) concur that it takes ELLs a long period of time—five to seven years—to develop the academic language fluency required to accomplish certain schooling tasks. Cummins (2000) makes a clear distinction between what he called basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), or conversational language, and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)—academic language. Cummins (2000) argues that the difference between the two lies in the academic registers of language. He states:

Oral classroom discussions do not involve reading and writing directly, but they do reflect the degree of students’ access to and command of literate or
Two features of academic registers are syntax and vocabulary. The latter often includes common words with specialized meanings. The same word that ELLs can fully understand while engaging in conversations with their peers might be challenging to comprehend if used in context-reduced task that requires academic language/register. For example, the word “corrupt” can be used in different contexts and mean different things. Some advanced ELLs might understand what is meant by “corrupt leaders.” However, if they come across ‘corrupt’ in a different context—for instance the sentence “something is corrupt in the computer”—they may be unable to fully grasp its contextual and scientific meaning. Moreover, for ELLs who have not developed academic language, complex sentences, i.e., sentences with multiple clauses, might be challenging for them to fully understand, as they are cognitively more demanding than simple sentences with fewer clauses.

In a similar vein, researchers such as Ramanathan (2005) and Hyland (2004), among others, argue that ELLs need to be taught academic writing if they are to succeed in the U.S. school system. For example, Ramanathan contends that, “Genre knowledge is especially important given that much recent research in education has pointed out ways that minority and L2 students are disadvantaged because genres are not explicitly taught” (p. 83). He also highlights the importance of unpacking the ideology and cultural-specific terms embedded in texts for students who may not possess the necessary background, explicitly giving them lessons in both the unpacking and the cultural specifics. Texts, by virtue of their content, are ideological tools; when using textbooks to teach writing to ELLs, Ramanathan encourages teachers to be cognizant of their ideological content. In Ramanathan’s view, it is crucial for these teachers to understand not only the content of a textbook but also the politics behind it.

He further argues that ELLs taught writing through these textbooks are “doubly disadvantaged: not only do they have to grapple with specific social problems, but they must also deal with tools that are in themselves problematic” (p. 94). By problematic tools, Ramanathan means shared cultural knowledge in the native culture that ELLs lack. In contrast, when students share the socio-cultural background of the native culture, they have an easier time with what is presented to them in school through these textbooks.

Another category of ELLs that lack academic language to a greater extent are those from countries experiencing war who arrive in the U.S. as refugees. Helping these students grow academically can be a great challenge for teachers, especially those working in schools with insufficient resources. Because these students often move from one region to another to protect their lives, they necessarily experience a discontinuity in their schooling. Such discontinuity impacts their learning, preventing them from fully developing literacy skills and academic language in the first place. As a result, when they enter the U.S. school system, these students often lag behind because they never acquired the academic language and concepts their peers developed (Freeman and Freeman, 2002).
Although these refugees want to achieve in school, the students often experience academic failure and are unable to be at the same level of students who start school with a strong academic background. In *Closing the Academic Gap*, Freeman and Freeman (2002) best explain this situation by stating that:

Many of these refugees have experienced war, persecution, pestilence, and famine. Their living conditions have often made schooling impossible. They hope to find a better life in their new country and have dreams of success for their children. Their dreams are not always realized, though, in part because the children begin school here without having had the educational experiences teachers in this country expect. Many have had little schooling, or none at all (p. ix).

At the same time ELLs face the challenge of grappling with content subjects, such as math, many of them are hard-pressed to master the English language of instruction. All too often, the teachers who are expected to meet their academic needs are “unprepared to make the linguistic expectations of schooling explicit to students” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 3). Ultimately, U.S. schooling is a new experience for many ELL students, with many linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles to overcome (Darder, 1995; Cummins, 2007; Brisk, 2006; Valdés, 2003).

Furthermore, for many ELLs, learning another language equals a new way of being, as language is intrinsically linked to culture. Many ELLs enter the U.S. school system a few months after arriving from their native lands. This leaves them with insufficient time for cultural adjustment. While they are expected to take on school tasks, they must also become familiar with the school’s cultural environment, which is, for many, in stark contrast to the environment to which they are accustomed. Despite these challenges, ELLs are often expected to grow academically at the rate of their monolingual peers. Yet progressing academically requires these students to develop new ways of using language, to make meanings as expected by the school system. Often, the way these students use language to participate in social interactions and communicate with members of their community and family does not prepare them to engage in “advanced literacy school-based tasks” (Schleppegrell, 2004).

Many scholars (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2004; Bernstein, 1988; Christie, 1998a; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) have demonstrated that children from non-mainstream home environments and communities do not use language in ways approximating typical school environments. This puts them at a disadvantage to advance academically. As Schleppegrell (2004) clearly states:

Our schools serve students who speak different languages and dialects, who have been socialized in different ways, and who face different kinds of challenges in their daily lives. Students whose cultural practices are similar to those of the school may be able to transfer those practices to the school setting, but students from other backgrounds may need to focus on the ways that language contributes to meaning-making as they engage in new social and cultural practices in order to succeed in achieving advanced literacy (p. 6).
Learning to use language in new and different ways, as suggested by Schleppegrell, can be a daunting task for those who have yet to master the English language. Christie (1998a), explicating the significant impact of the language component on student learning, called language the “hidden curriculum” of schooling. Language is indeed vital, and plays a major role in student learning. Everything that is done in classrooms, from asking and answering basic questions to engaging in new types of texts and construing meanings embedded in these texts, requires the use of language, frequently in very specific ways. Consequently, for ELLs whose English proficiency is often limited, such advanced schooling tasks involves challenges beyond knowledge and reasoning skills.

Furthermore, to navigate through and accomplish complex schooling tasks, students sometimes need to draw on specific academic registers. Schleppegrell (2004) defines register “as the constellation of lexical and grammatical features that realize a particular situational context” (p. 18). Schleppegrell goes on to add, “register illuminates the relationship between language and context” (p. 19). However, many ELLs have yet to develop academic register, and are unable to make the connection between language and context. As noted earlier, although ELLs might have achieved relative fluency in spoken English, this is insufficient to enable them to use language in specific contexts. Those who never developed an academic register in their first language find it even more difficult to draw on lexical and grammatical resources in the English language to accomplish difficult language-based academic tasks. Christie (1998a) argues that, as they move into complex literacy tasks, students are expected to draw on features of academic registers to construct the abstraction and generalization needed to deconstruct meanings embedded in texts. How can ELLs accomplish this difficult task when many of them are struggling to learn the basics of the English language?

MAPPING THE LITERATURE ON STUDENT ACADEMIC [UNDER] ACHIEVEMENT

The literature on student academic [under] achievement is vast. Many researchers from various fields and with different foci (education, socio-linguistics, linguistics, sociology, teacher education, multicultural education, etc.) have attempted to shed light on what leads to and/or impedes student academic growth (Delpit, 1992; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Nieto, 2004; Cummins, 2000). For the purpose of this study, this review of literature presents a synthesis of arguments and counterarguments set forth regarding the academic [under] achievement of ELLs. Specifically, this section reviews what researchers claim are the determining factors enabling or preventing ELLs’ academic achievement. It reviews major themes relevant to ELLs’ academic achievement, for there are many interweaving factors that led to Maria’s, Juan’s, Pedro’s, and José’s academic growth. Doing so, therefore, aims to inform an analysis of the institutional academic achiever status attributed to these students.

This review of the literature is divided in several interweaving parts, covering major themes relevant to ELLs’ academic achievement, including that of the focal students in this study. While some research focuses on the role social class and
CHAPTER 1

school curriculum play in student academic achievement, other research explores the literature on the mismatch between home literacy vs. school literacy, which, according to many researchers (Delpit, 1992; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), leads to academic failure of many students. The themes most pertinent to this study are Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and María’s teachers’ teaching practices, early apprenticeship in academic literacy, the influence or inspiration of their parents and other family members, and their self-investment in their studies. As demonstrated later, findings of this study suggest that a combination of these factors contributed to the focal students’ academic growth.

SOCIAL CLASS AND TEACHERS’ IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Social class is one of the root causes linked to the quality of student academic growth. Scholars such as Anyon (1981), Apple (1991, 1996, 2003), and Bowles & Gintis (1976) argue that students from privileged background often do better academically because they usually attend schools with adequate resources enabling well-paid and trained teachers to teach them more effectively. They further argue that these students are usually from highly educated families who apprentice them at home into schooled-like literacy practices (Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Bernstein, 1990).

Jean Anyon (1981) compared five elementary schools located in different socio-economic communities over the course of a full year. In the working class schools, she found that the teaching procedure was mechanical and involved rote memorization. Students were not encouraged to make decisions on their own or be creative; they had to follow whatever their teachers assigned to them. Students’ work was evaluated based on how well they followed what teachers did in class. Students were often told to copy and study what was written on the board; they were often tested on what they were told to copy in their notebooks. In contrast, in schools defined as “middle class,” “affluent professional,” and “executive elite,” students were challenged to be creative, independent thinkers and problem solvers. At these schools, Anyon (1981) noted that there was enough psychological space for teachers’ and students’ interactions. Teachers taught students in a way that prepared them for jobs requiring independent self-management. Such apprenticeship, however, was denied to working class students, whose schooling prepared them for routine and menial types of jobs. Consequently, this led to an achievement gap between privileged and working class students and reinforced the preexisting class patterns.

Leading thinkers in curriculum studies such as Apple have also analyzed the causes of student academic growth and/or failure. Apple (1997, 2003) did so by looking at it from a micro and macro perspective—that is, evaluating the relationship between what is produced in school settings and the larger world. Apple examined how school curriculum is used in such a way, consciously or otherwise, to put in a far better social position students of privileged class than those from underprivileged families. Apple contends that social power and status are interrelated to knowledge
and skills produced in school. He further argues that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have access to higher types of social power and status, because they receive what is essentially a tailor-made clerical and manual skills-oriented curriculum. In Apple’s account, the social power and status stemming from the production of knowledge and skills in school are only made available to students of higher socio-economic status.

Similarly to Apple, although more deterministic, Bowles and Gintis (1976) investigated how schools play a major role in reproducing class and race-based stratification. Bowles and Gintis believed that schools serve the interest of the capitalist system by preparing students for specific jobs in the capitalist market. They argued that education offers the “technical and cognitive skills required for adequate job performance” (p. 56). Likewise, students acquire appropriate behavior and interpersonal skills mirroring the dynamics of the labor force—that is, the relationship between workers and workers, and administrators and workers. Referring to Bowles’ & Gintis’ argument, Giroux (1986) avers, “Within this discourse, schools, teachers, and students have often been written off as merely extensions of the logic of capital” (p. 50). Bowles and Gintis maintained that whatever students are learning in school is configured to the logic of the capitalist mode of production. In their view, schools reproduce this cycle to strengthen the economic system:

The educational system helps integrate youth into the economic system, we believe, through a structural correspondence between its social relations and those of production. The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-preservation, self-image, and social identifications which are crucial ingredients of job adequacy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, as cited in Giroux, 1988, p. 84).

Anyon, Apple, and Bowles & Gintis address two major factors fundamentally impacting the academic growth of students in many schools in the U.S.: social class, and teachers’ different teaching methods and implementation of the school curriculum. Their analysis brings to the fore issues of concern such as (1) social stratification; (2) what is defined and accepted as legitimate knowledge, and who authorizes, values, and has access to it; how this knowledge is produced, reproduced, and circulated through schools and society at large; and (3) the unequal power relations among students and teachers. Moreover, their analysis suggests that schools constitute a site maintaining social class and stratification and reproducing economic systems. What these authors articulate can be an impetus to interrogate which voices and identities are represented in these curricular materials.

However, unlike what Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued about the reproduction theory, the findings of this study suggest that reproduction is not necessarily a negative thing. Depending on how one reproduces knowledge, for example, it can be beneficial to one’s academic development. As an example, Pedro’s ability to reproduce knowledge and academic literacy skills that he acquired at home and at school enabled him to do well in school and thereby be eventually recognized as an achiever by the institution.
The social class issue that Apple (1997, 2003) analyzed above is worth considering here for it plays a central role in Pedro’s academic growth. As illustrated later in the findings of this study, Pedro was able to grow academically and sustain this growth due to the fact that he was apprenticed at home into academic literacy and grew up with a mother who is highly educated and supportive. Specifically, Pedro had developed academic literacy in his first language before migrating to the United States. His academic literacy in his first language enabled him to acquire academic language in the second.

Researchers such as Cummins (1986, 1988, 2000) and Collier (1995) argue that it is easier for students who are literate in their first language to transfer knowledge acquired in that language to the target language. However, with immigrant students who are illiterate in their first language and/or whose schooling is interrupted before arriving in the host, it is much more challenging for teachers to help them develop academic literacy in their second language. Although significant, social class and correlation between academic literacy in L1 and L2 are not the only root causes affecting the academic growth or failure of students. There are other related critical issues at play, namely the mismatch between family and school literacy long considered equally influential.

HOME LITERACY VS. SCHOOL LITERACY

Many scholars (Heath, 1981; Bourdieu, 1990; Gee, 2001a; Valdés, 1996) have explored the extent to which the mismatch between home literacy and school literacy has impacted the academic growth of students. As noted earlier, students whose linguistic and cultural resources are recognized and appreciated by the school system tend to better academically than those whose resources go unrecognized. Willett & Rosemberg (2005), Nieto (2005), Freeman and Freeman (2005), among others, have made clear in their scholarly work that all students have resources that teachers can draw on to help them advance academically.

However, as these scholars concur, not all students have had properly trained, adequately supported, culturally and linguistically sensitive teachers who know how to effectively incorporate in their instructions students’ cultural and linguistic repertoires. Along the same lines, scholars such as Heath (1983) contends that students’ understanding of the way teachers should teach them and teachers’ understanding of how students should behave and respond to their instructions too often clash. Heath’s (1983) ethnographic study captures how these differences play themselves out in some classrooms in the U.S. school system.

Heath (1983) conducted a ten-year long ethnographic study exploring how families living in two different communities in the Piedmont section of Carolina, “Roadville” and “Trackton,” made use of language and literacy practices differing from their use in school. Heath examined how language played a major role in the socialization process between teachers and students at school. Because of the disparity between how language was used at home and at school, students from the “Roadville” and “Trackton” communities experienced linguistic and cultural difficulties in school while middle-class children did not.
Specifically, Heath noted the linguistic challenges that African-American students faced in school with teachers who were not accustomed to non-standard English speech. Heath argued that because the home discourse of these children clashed with the school discourse, these students had difficulty answering culturally specific questions asked in the school setting. The way they were taught to answer questions at home was different from how questions were asked and expected to be answered in mainstream classroom settings. In consequence, this led to misunderstanding and frustration in the classroom among both teachers and students. However, Heath found that when teachers were involved in multiple literacy activities with the parents and students in the community, they understood each other better and learned from each other’s linguistic and cultural differences:

The primary rationale behind the research reported here was simple: if change agents (teachers and parents) were willing and involved, knowledge about language use could proceed along a two-way path, from the school to the community, and from the community to the school (p. 124).

Heath’s argument suggests that the collaboration of teachers and parents can potentially lead to the academic growth of both working class African-American and white students.

Cope and Kalantzis (1993) take a slightly different stance regarding the literacy gap between privileged and non-privileged students. They argue that, “it is the role of schooling to make the nature of literacy explicit, particularly in order to provide marginalized groups of students access to literate culture and literate ways of thinking” (p. 63). Cope and Kalantzis (2000) believe that the U.S. school system is set up in a way that privileges monolingual students whose home discourse and literacy match with those of the school. This, according to these authors, put minority students at a disadvantage. Challenging the proponents of progressivism supporting the process-oriented teaching strategy and student-centered curriculum (e.g., Dewey, 1916) Cope and Kalantzis believe that minority students need to be taught directly the literacies of power. In their view, doing otherwise will be a disservice to historically marginalized groups.

Similarly, Delpit (1992) maintains that, unlike privileged students who have early exposure at home to the print-immersed environment (e.g., homes full of books), literacy, and knowledge valued and reflected in mainstream classrooms, minority students are at a disadvantage in a school system that embraces a certain white, middle-class type of literacy. Therefore, to avoid perpetuating the academic gap already existing at school, Delpit holds that teachers are obligated to ensure that poor minority students have access to the dominant school code. Delpit contends that teachers can do so successfully by taking control of the teaching process as opposed to simply letting students organize their own learning at their own pace. However, I ask: What about minority students who may have access to the school dominant code and yet still fail? Furthermore, how about students who might prefer to take ownership of their own learning rejecting the classroom structure and teaching methods that Delpit and Cope & Kalantzis propose? Does this mean they would not learn and achieve in school?
Losey (1995) also contends that the gap between home literacy practices and school literacy practices has a significant impact on student academic growth. Further, Losey argues that a parent who apprentices children into a home literacy differing from school literacy has little influence on whether children will succeed in school. Losey recognizes that a child exposed to home literacy matching that of the school is in a far better position to succeed in school. Losey points out that parents might benefit from training in apprenticing their children in literacy practices similar to what Sarah Michaels calls “school talk.” Michaels (1981) believes that “learning how to talk about decontextualized text” might help parents from non-dominant social classes further their children’s academic growth. She urges teacher practitioners to be mindful of the complexity of decontextualized texts, which have proven challenging to students whose literacy background is different from the literacy valued in mainstream classrooms.

Snow (1996), Scollon & Scollon (1981), and Bernstein (1990) have established the correlation between students’ academic growth and early home literacy apprenticeship, which many ELL students lack. Snow and Scollon & Scollon believe that caregivers’ and students’ co-construction of knowledge and linguistic competence at home will later help young children face academic challenges in school. In a study Scollon & Scollon conducted on the interaction of caregivers and children, they found that certain literacy practices helped prepare young children for later schooling challenges. One of the practices entails adults adding new information to children’s utterances when they interact; with the assistance of the adult, the child is able to expand and elaborate on what he/she utters and eventually create new structures of language. Scollon & Scollon also found that the co-construction of language at home between parents and children prepares the latter for the types of interaction, meanings, and language use that take place in school.

With respect to the language of schooling, Snow (1996) also conducted research with a middle-class family, where parents engaged their children in literacy practices aimed at preparing them to face the academic challenges of school. The parents whom Snow studied deemed it important to teach their children the middle-class model of school language. Knowing the type of literacy practices valued in school, these parents read stories imitating those practices aloud to their children. However, I ask: Does Snow’s and Scollon & Scollon’s research suggest that middle class parents’ aspirations and goals for their students shape what happens in the U.S. classrooms? Or, is these parents’ determination to apprentice their children at home in school-like type of discourse and literacy practices aimed to adapt their children to the status quo and maintain it in the process of doing so?

Snow’s findings are in line with Bernstein’s theory of coding orientations. That theory illuminates the major role schooling language plays in academic growth. Bernstein (1990) notes that students from diverse linguistic and social class use language in school in different ways. Bernstein maintains that middle-class students understand how to construct certain kinds of meanings when being asked open-ended questions; furthermore, these students know what verbal strategies used to answer these kinds of questions. They also understand the contextual relevance of these verbal strategies—when and where to use them. Working-class students, on
the other hand, lack these strategies due to a home discourse that does not prepare them for the school linguistic code. Consequently, many of them do not succeed in U.S. classrooms. These findings indicate that schools tend to favor the way middle-class students use language.

In these authors’ viewpoints, student-centered learning only favors privileged students introduced at home to the types of discourse valued in school. This, therefore, puts them in a far better position than marginalized students who need to be told explicitly by their teachers what to do in school. As Delpit (1988) argues, “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier (p. 34).” Building on Delpit’s argument, Cope and Kalantzis summarize the whole argument about student-centered vs. teacher-centered curriculum in the following terms:

The cultural bias of progressivist curriculum unconsciously favors certain students. The process writing teacher, waiting while the child struggles for control and ownership, actually favors White, middle-class students. Consider the ‘natural’ advantage children from print immersed environments have in the process classroom. Their homes are full of newspapers, computers, books, and letters. They already have an inkling of how a text works—its beginnings, middles and ends—and how text and image relate. They know what text does. In a very tangible way they can see the point of gaining for themselves the sort of control and ownership that comes with literacy. No amount of inner struggle, however, will tell students who do not come from such backgrounds what text is for and how it works. Writing is from a world outside their experience. These students need to be told the things that privileged students will be able to find out themselves (p. 45).

The major argument here holds that at certain schools, teachers and students often share the same or similar social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, neither these students nor these teachers have to cope with the cultural and linguistic mismatch between home and school (e.g., Heath, 1983) that underprivileged students experience. What these scholars argue also suggests that the content of curricular materials used at the school usually reflects the social class reality of privileged students. Consequently, it becomes easier for these students to relate to these materials and unpack the meanings embedded in them. However, students whose home discourse clashes with that of the school often fail academically; they fail because they do not know how to use the language of schooling (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2004; Cazden, 1988). As Vygotsky (1978) maintains, the “everyday language” through which they socialize at home is different from the “scientific language” used and valued in school, and which can be acquired through social interaction with “more adult experts.” For students not introduced to the language of schooling at home, it is suggested that they be taught the “code of power” (Delpit, 1992) if they are to succeed in school.

While Delpit’s argument might be relevant to the needs of some students, it is important to point out in passing that there is a fundamental difference between being directly told the “code of power” and being long apprenticed into it. If
teachers whose teaching practices are constrained by standardized preparation tests could teach their students the code of these tests, more likely than not they would do so. As the findings of this study showed later, Pedro’s academic growth did not stem from the code of power that his teachers taught him at the school, but rather from long home apprenticeship in academic literacy. This is not to suggest it is useless or pointless to directly teach students the school code of power, as it may have some value and be helpful for some students. My point is that teaching directly the code of power to students does not necessarily guarantee that they will succeed in school. Further, there is no empirical documentation to suggest that those who do not have access to this code are doomed for academic failure.

Many teachers have attempted to implement what Delpit and Cope and Kalantzis suggest above. Lipman’s (2000) research shows three high school teachers who manage not to let the incompatibility between students’ language and culture and that of the school impair their learning. Lipman’s (2000) subjects empower their students to challenge and unpack various beliefs embedded in the materials used in class. Lipman argues that these teachers were successful in doing so because (1) they are fully aware of the interconnection between culturally congruent pedagogy and social class, and (2) they embrace the cultural and linguistic resources that their students brought with them to school. These teachers apprentice their students into the dominant code, allowing those students to navigate the mainstream discourse. Having access to the dominant code enables the students to develop a bicultural identity challenging and resisting the dominant system.

Other case studies have observed how some teachers use curricular materials in a manner culturally, linguistically, and historically congruent to the needs of their diverse students. For instance, Dyson (2003), through ethnographic research situated in an urban primary school, presents the social world of students and their academic progress. Dyson finds that learning takes place when teachers draw upon their students’ “unofficial world” to allow them to simultaneously challenge and learn from the “school official world.” Dyson believes that teachers can succeed in doing so by engaging in a dialogic relationship with students, which in turn allows pedagogic spaces for the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students. This study finds that students can come to engage in the dynamics of the class if their home literacy and language are valued and respected in the classroom.

Similarly, other researchers such as Patricia Gandara (1995) and Celia Zentella (1997) show through case studies how linguistically and culturally diverse students grow academically despite their lack of access at home to the “language of schooling” (Schleppegrell, 2004). The students whom Gandara and Zentella observe maintain their home literacy, linguistic and cultural resources even as they differed from those valued in school.

Gandara’s study involved 50 Mexican-American students. Approximately 84% of these students who succeeded academically were from families where only Spanish was spoken. These families made sure that their children stayed attached to, valued and embraced their cultural and linguistic roots. Two-thirds of the
students spoke only Spanish when they started school; and their families did not apprentice their children at home into schooled-like literacy. This, however, did not lead to their academic failure.

Zentella documents a similar case in a study of 19 families living in a disadvantaged Latino/a community in New York. The students involved in her research were predominantly low-income Puerto Ricans. Those classified as the most successful students were enrolled in bilingual programs where teachers used the native language as an asset that they could build on to effectively teach them. These students did not have to abandon their native tongue and home literacy in order to succeed in school; nor did their parents pass on to or teach them literacy skills that the school valued. Yet, they were able to achieve in school, for they had teachers who appreciated and drew on their linguistic and cultural resources to explicitly teach them.

Although these studies do not necessarily apply to or reflect the reality of all marginalized students, they highlight how speaking a language at home other than English, or not being able to speak Standard English, is not and should not impede the academic growth of linguistically and culturally diverse students. The findings of this study concur with this perspective. As a prime example, Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and María’s parents did not stop speaking Spanish at home with them fearing this would prevent them from doing well in school. Nor did Pedro’s, Juan’s, José’s, and María’s teachers hesitate to use Spanish as an additional instructional language to facilitate their academic growth. Auerbach (1995, 1993) argues that using only English in an ESL classroom may prevent active participation of some ESL students, cause them frustration, and impact their ability to build on their literacy acquired in their first language. Similarly, Valdés (2001) points out, “The use of some of the students’ native language in the teaching of ESL, on the other hand, has found to serve as a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, for validating learners’ lived experiences, for increasing the level of trust between teachers and students, for making rapid gains in English-language development, for monitoring comprehension, and for obtaining information about the metacognitive aspects of language” (p.157).

In short, speaking Spanish both at home with their mother and in school with their teachers did not prevent Pedro, Juan, José, and María from advancing academically. Therefore, blaming parents for students’ academic failure because they refuse to speak English at home with them is not a strong argument. Indeed, leading figures in family literacy and language acquisition such as Catherine Snow (1997), Lourdes Diaz Soto (1997), Jim Cummins (2000, 2007), Valdés (2001, 1996), Auerbach (1995, 1993), and Freeman (2001), among others, demonstrate that parents’ persistence and consistency in speaking their native tongue with children is cognitively beneficial.

For example, Snow (1997) argues, “the greatest contribution immigrant parents can make to their children’s success is to ensure they maintain fluency and continue to develop the home language” (p. 236). Similarly, one conclusion drawn by Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001) in their book *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, is that students who are fully bilingual tend
to stay in school and progress academically, while those with limited bilingualism tend to leave school. These studies further show that mainstream classrooms do not have to be a site documenting only the failure of marginalized students. They can be settings fostering the academic growth of these students. The academic growth of Gandara’s and Zentella’s informants amply demonstrates the ability of students to succeed despite early home literacy “deficit” and lack of “language of schooling.” The following chapter elaborates on the deficit theory and looks at other important factors that may have facilitated and/or impeded the learning growth of students, including ELLs.
CHAPTER 2

UNVEILING THE FLAW IN THE DEFICIT THEORY

School, Family, and Student Academic Achievement

Although most pervasive in the 1970’s, the deficit theory is a recurrent theme in academia. According to this theory, the failure of underprivileged students in school correlates to the poor backgrounds and lack of guidance and support from the family. Poor students’ home environment is often deemed inadequate and chaotic, and therefore hostile to their learning. Baratz and Baratz (1971) observed the home environment and social class background of poor African-American parents in relation to the education of their children. These backgrounds are called “sick, pathological, deviant, or underdeveloped” (Nieto, 2005). Such classifications suggest that students from this environment will likely fail in school. The danger with this theory is that it fails to point out that while some families may be seriously dysfunctional, most are not. Worse, the deficit theory fails to interrogate and deconstruct these stereotypes and stigmas, which do not accurately reflect the reality of single, poor, minority, or working class parents. Further, the deficit theory disregards the effort and sacrifice these parents may make to ensure that their children succeed in school, as illustrated in the following studies.

Delgado-Gaitan (1990) conducted a study with twenty Mexican parents in Portillo, a town historically known as home to many generations of Mexican immigrant families. Delgado-Gaitan found these families supportive of their children’s education. Parents enrolled in adult ESL classes are aware that improving their own English skills would enable them to better help their children with schoolwork. They also participated in monthly meetings at their children’s school. Delgado-Gaitan observed these Mexican families trying to read to and with their children using literacy skills acquired in ESL classes.

This ethnographic case study is similar to Delgado-Gaitan’s. The middle school Pedro, Maria, José, and Juan attended ran an adult ESL program designed for parents to improve their English skills, allowing them to be involved with their children’s work. In fact, Pedro’s mother enrolled in this program, as she wanted to better support Pedro with his homework while at the same time establishing a stronger relationship with his teachers. As an ESL student at the same school her son attended, Pedro’s mother regularly participated in school activities involving parents. According to Ms. Vanessa, who taught both Pedro’s and his mother, the latter was outstanding in her involvement with Pedro’s education.

Researchers such as Auerbach (1995) and Hidalgo et al. (1995), having conducted several studies of family literacy, also find willingness within many underprivileged and poorly educated families to help their children become successful learners.
At school. For example, Auerbach notes that these parents often trust their children’
teachers and are thus usually inclined to do what is asked of them to ensure their
children do well in school. She, therefore, school personnel would do well to use a
participatory approach enabling non-mainstream parents to acquire school literacy
practices, which they could then transfer to their children.

Building on Auerbach’s argument, Hidalgo et al. maintain that a strong link or,
better yet, a well-established partnership between school and family is key to
fostering student academic growth. The Hidalgo study observed four non-mainstream
Puerto Rican families. These parents involved their children in many cultural and
literacy activities in their communities. Hidalgo, therefore, suggests that teachers
incorporate these activities in school curriculum to potentially promote student
academic growth.

Rogers’ (2003) case study of the Treader family is a prime example of the
dedication, determination, and willingness of economically and educationally disad-
vantaged families to help their children in school. Rogers relates the willingness of
a poorer African-American family who opened their doors to her as a researcher in
the hope of improving their literacy skills and those of their children. This family
has a daughter struggling at school who was consequently labeled “at-risk” by
school personnel. Because of her perceived inability to learn at the speed her
teachers expected, she was subject to placement in a special education program, an
institutional decision the parents opposed. Throughout the book, Rogers narrates
the unshakable determination of the Treader family to support their daughter’s
schooling despite their lack of resources, and their resolution to fight a school
established bureaucracy whose cultural and literacy practices differed sharply from
their own.

As the preceding case studies indicate, the deficit theory fails to acknowledge
that economically disadvantaged parents have desires and dreams for their
children, and are willing to work as hard to enable them as privileged parents. This
theory also fails to realize that these parents have resources that teachers can
incorporate into lesson plans to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students
more effectively. The deficit theory does not recognize either the sacrifices and
efforts teachers and parents, through school-family partnerships, can make to
ensure that students of all backgrounds advance academically. Nor does this theory
offer any suggestion as to how school personnel might promote parental involve-
ment with literacy programs designed to apprentice parents into school literacy
practices.

To understand how and why marginalized students do or do not achieve in
school requires closely and carefully examining at what goes on in classrooms: how
teachers teach, interact with, construct or fail to construct knowledge with students.
It is also critically important to examine the role family plays in the academic
growth of linguistically and cultural diverse students. Teaching practices and
family involvement in the education of students are crucial; however, they cannot
work alone. Larger social factors also play a major role in the academic success or
failure of many students. Both the state and federal government have a responsibility
to tackle poverty and the high crime level destroying many communities where
underprivileged students live. The roles teachers and parents play in student learning must be correctly understood; otherwise, social factors contributing to or hindering ELLs’ academic growth may be overlooked.

Educators such as Ravitch (1988), Hirsh (1987), and Bloom (1987) have long placed the blame for academic failure on teachers whom they claimed fail to give students strong English, math, reading and writing, and phonics skills. In an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times, Diane Ravitch (2005) states:

To really get at the problem, we have to make changes across our educational system. The most important is to stress the importance of academic achievement. Sorry to say, we have a long history of reforms by pedagogues to de-emphasize academic achievement and to make school more “relevant,” “fun” and like “real life.” These efforts have produced whole-language instruction, where phonics, grammar and spelling are abandoned in favor of “creativity,” and fuzzy math, where students are supposed to “construct” their own solutions to match problems instead of finding the right answers (p. 2).

In a similar vein, Hirsh (1987) calls for teaching underprivileged students “the set of cultural knowledge that these students need to succeed in society” (p. 24).

Unlike Apple (1991) and Kozol (1991), who link the achievement gap between privileged and underprivileged students to poverty and unequal distribution of resources in schools, Hirsh (1987) and Ravitch (1988) attack a perceived lack of rigor in teaching practices. They do not share the view that such gap is engendered by a preexisting resource disparity among students of different racial, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as manifested in the divide between poorly-funded and well-funded schools. Rather than advocate adequate resource allocation for public schools, Hirsh and Ravitch see public schools as having misused their resources, resulting in students’ poor reading and writing skills, lack of command of the English language, and low scores on high-stakes tests. That argument is grounded in the premise that students from uneducated families and poor socioeconomic backgrounds can succeed in school when provided with rigorous instruction and good teaching practices.

The common assumption informing such arguments holds that learning will always take place provided that there are trustworthy, certified, and well-trained teachers. Good teachers, in this view, can undoubtedly find ways to effectively teach their students regardless of horrible teaching and learning conditions, including a lack of material resources, overcrowded classrooms, and crumbling buildings, as featured in the movie called *Stand to Deliver*. This movie portrays a dedicated high school teacher who found ways to help his minoritized and underprivileged students to achieve in spite of the horrendous teaching conditions under which he was teaching. This movie may be inspiring to some teachers and students. However, the narrative constructed and circulated through the movie presents a superficial view of the struggle of marginalized students and teachers in the U.S. school system. The movie grossly fails to point out the horrible socio-economic, racial, and political conditions that led to the poor educational background and marginalization of the students this “fantastic” teacher saved from failing and dropping out of high school. In addition, the
content of this movie romanticizes the work of a teacher to the detriment of all others. Moreover, this movie unfairly excuses the responsibility of state and federal governments to make sure that schools are safe and have adequate resources so that teachers can teach effectively.

Finally, the view presented in this movie may offer privileged groups a further alibi to place responsibility for student achievement on teachers’ shoulders alone, while failing to unmask factors such as poverty, social class, and social inequality that negatively impact the learning of many poor students. In Savage Inequalities Jonathan Kozol (1991) brilliantly describes how these determining factors lead to the under achievement of many African-American students in cities like Louisville despite the hard work of many dedicated teachers. In this book, Kozol points out how most poverty-ridden inner city schools lack the resources teachers need to teach effectively. In stark contrast, teachers in schools located in rich suburbs generally have more than adequate resources made available to them.

These social factors are related to this ethnographic study, which looks at broader institutional and cultural practices and how these practices impact urban teachers’ pedagogical choices and how these teachers and students make meaning. At the same time this study looks at what can be accomplished on a local level with the immediate participants, harking back to the parent-involvement, students’ early apprenticeship in academic literacy, and teachers’ teaching practices as analyzed in chapters six and seven. The next section surveys literature underscoring the importance of school-family partnership. I begin with a family-community literacy program named FLAME (Family Literacy: Appriendo, Mejorando, Educando Learning, Improving, Educating) designed to encourage parents to be involved in the education of their children.

SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & STUDENT ACADEMIC GROWTH

FLAME is a community-based family literacy program used in the Chicago public school system in collaboration with the University of Illinois at Chicago. This exemplar of school-family partnership literacy programs runs on the assumption that parents who are strongly supported by the school and community can positively influence the learning of their children (Rodriguez-Brown, 2003). Also informing this program is the belief that parents who are highly confident and successful learners themselves can potentially be better teachers for their children. Through FLAME parents are given the opportunity to improve their English skills and get involved in school activities. Parents are also given the opportunity to share their own literacy practices with school practitioners while learning the school-literacy skills. FLAME values parents’ home literacy and treats parents as source of knowledge and support for children. Rodriguez-Brown (2003) avers that, “parents have been great teachers in my endeavors to support their needs as the most important teachers of their young children” (p. 134).

Similar to FLAME is the International Literacy Program (ILP) designed by Paratore (2003). ILP is a collaborative family-school literacy program between Chelsea Public Schools and Boston University School of Education students.
This program provides a framework for parents to share their literacy experiences and practices with teachers, their children, and friends. Parents are encouraged to actively participate in literacy activities with their children, by writing short stories and reading together; the journal entries parents and children wrote together were published. By so doing, parents become active members and agents in their children’s learning process.

Another goal of program is for teachers to be apprenticed into parents’ literacy practices so the teachers could incorporate these literacy practices—these resources—into the school curriculum. Paratore et al. (2001) eloquently explained the goal of this school-family relationship and its implications for student learning in the following terms:

The ILP is a carefully and thoughtfully designed family literacy program that could represent both premises in the conflict facing family literacy educators; ILP could teach ‘the codes’ (Delpit, 1995. p. 45), identified as necessary for knowing if one is to participate successfully in the mainstream of American life and, at the same time, could uncover, recognize, and build on the household ‘funds of knowledge’ described by Moll and his colleagues (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan 1986). Similarly, the California Parent Center (CPC), located in San Diego, creates space for parents and school staff to work collaboratively in support of students. A training center reaching out to parents statewide, CPC established programs bringing together parents, school district staff, and teachers to work as a team to foster student growth.

Through partnerships with John Hopkins University, the California Department of Education, the California State PTA, and the California Association of Compensatory Education (CACE), the CPC holds a Leadership Development Training Conference. This conference creates a platform for parents and school staff to discuss issues related to student academic growth, and develop ways to foster it. CPC also offers a Parent Involvement Liaison Certificate Program. This certificate program is designed for para-professionals willing to serve as a liaison between school and family. These para-professionals receive 15 hours of professional development training to prepare them for this task. In addition, CPC makes important information about parental involvement available monthly to parents and school staff through e-news posted online.

Numerous studies (Olsen & Mullen 1990; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Moll, 1988; Keenan, Willett, & Solsken, 1993) illustrate the extent to which teaching practitioners have found ways to create space for family involvement in student learning while foregrounding pedagogic spaces promoting active student participation in classroom activities. These studies also suggest ways in which curricular materials can be built upon and/or can emerge from “students’ funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1986).

The Keenan, Willett, & Solsken (1993) study is a case in point underscoring the importance of family involvement in student learning. This study documents a teacher/family collaborative project in which an urban teacher worked collaboratively
in community-oriented language arts education. In their findings, the researchers report that bridging the gap between school and community requires the teacher’s persistence in attempting to reach out to students’ parents to arrange family visits to classrooms. They also maintain that teachers need to explore the knowledge and skills family members have and encourage them to share these with children. Further, teachers should reassure family members that not being able to speak English fluently cannot and should not hinder teachers and parents’ and school-home collaborations. These researchers contend that parents will be more inclined to change their attitudes towards schooling and get involved in the education of their children if school personnel reach out to them and embrace and value their funds of knowledge.

Likewise, Olsen & Mullen (1990) document how 36 mainstream teachers in California found effective ways to teach minority students. The “success” of these teachers in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students stems from a teaching approach grounded in an intimate knowledge of their students’ learning styles, lived experience, language, and culture. Effectiveness further involves teachers’ sound understanding and application of second language acquisition (e.g., Gebhard 1999; Cummins, 1988); high and clear expectations set for students; and continuing teacher education to learn how best to teach diverse students. For instance, some of the teachers involved in this study took Spanish classes while teaching, or obtained the equivalence of language development credentials, to better accommodate the linguistic and cultural needs of their students.

Olsen & Mullen’s (1990) study also demonstrates how outstanding teachers in certain schools sought ways to meet the educational needs of minority students. These teachers did not assume that minority students were falling behind in school because of their socio-economic background or different language and culture. Instead, they made the effort to learn the language of their students and found ways to communicate with them and their parents.

Moll (1988) observes two outstanding urban elementary teachers who drew on students’ “funds of knowledge” to teach them critical reading and writing skills. These teachers were successful in doing so because they created pedagogic spaces for their Latino/a students who felt that their stories, personal and community experiences mattered in the classroom. These teachers’ classrooms were places where students and teachers co-constructed meaning from texts, and where teachers co-constructed knowledge with students by using the latter’s preexisting knowledge and communal resources. They emphasized that content matters as much as English proficiency. The teachers’ carefully assessed students’ language growth through the social context in which their language was used. Students were eager to participate in class discussions because the subject matter was meaningful and pertinent to their lives.

Carmen Mercado (2005) follows bilingual teachers and students’ parents as a liaison between the two. The study documents how teachers’ effort to reach out to Latino/a parents could make a difference in the learning of Latino/a students. Mercado created space or, better yet, a liaison between these bilingual teachers and Latino/a parents; through this liaison, teachers explored and became knowledgeable
about the cultural, communal, and spiritual resources of these parents. Mercado argues that this teacher-parent rapport enabled these bilingual teachers to develop a teaching pedagogy and method incorporating family resources and literacy to effectively teach their bilingual students.

There are also some programs at certain urban schools that serve similar purposes. The adult ESL program instituted at the middle school where this study took place is a case in point. As noted earlier, Pedro’s mother was one of the parents who took part in this program taking ESL courses in the evening. By taking ESL courses with Ms. Vanessa, Pedro’s mother was able to develop a strong relationship with her and other teachers at the middle school. While this relationship allowed Pedro’s mother to know how Pedro was doing in school, Ms. Vanessa was able to express any concern or ask Pedro’s mother any questions that she may have had about Pedro. This type of relationship between teachers and parents is critically important. Unfortunately, it does not happen often enough at schools.

Other studies have shown that high-achieving marginalized students have parents actively involved in their education (Clark, 1983; Rich, 1987; Henderson, 1988; Myers, 1985). Clark associates high achievement among these students with parental behaviors conducive to academic growth:

1. Parents established clear, specific role boundaries and status structures with the parent as dominant authority.
2. Parents frequently engaged in deliberate academic growth-training activities.
3. Parents had explicit academic growth-centered rules and norms.
4. Students showed long-term acceptance of norms as legitimate.
5. Parents exercised firm, consistent monitoring and rules enforcement.
6. Parents provided liberal nurturing and support.
7. Parents deferred to child’s knowledge in intellectual matters.

 Inferable from these studies is that teachers do not necessarily have to act as reproductive agents who, through teaching practices and pedagogic choices, lead students to reproduce the dominant ideologies that permeate curricular materials. Instead, they can be social agents who open spaces for pedagogic possibilities, and create communal forums allowing teachers, students, and family to collectively share their knowledge, learn from each other, and co-construct new knowledge. These studies also show that teachers should involve parents in their children’s learning and treat them as co-constructors of knowledge regardless of their racial, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this study, Ms. Rosa’s and Ms. Vanessa’s attempts to do so are notable, as I will explain later.

The research of Moll (1988) and Keenan, Willett & Solsken (1993) particularly highlights the importance of a good rapport between teachers and parents. They call for transformative pedagogies building on students’ linguistic and cultural interests and family resources to ensure students’ success in school and beyond. Ideally, pre-service and in-service teachers will use school materials in a way that is inclusive, culturally sensitive, and family and community oriented. Another key component of teaching practices is teachers’ level of care. Nel Noddings (1992) calls this the “ethic of care.” In Noddings’ view, teachers’ care or lack thereof is as critical as other structural factors contributing to or impeding student academic growth.
In her study with Latino/a students in Chicago, Nilda Flores-Gonzales (2002) underscores the importance of this care in teacher-student interaction and relationship building. She found that the high level of care teachers invest in daily literacy activities in which they engage their students significantly and positively impacts student learning. Specifically, Flore-Gonzales argues that when teachers show they care for their students, by valuing the culture and language they bring to class and setting high expectations for them, students do better in school.

Angela Valenzuela’s (1999) three-year study of Mexican and Mexican-American students in a Texas high school also shows that the success of many of these students correlated to the high level of care exhibited in teaching practices and teacher-student interaction. Although most teachers were found not to care in a way that affirmed students’ diverse linguistic and cultural heritage, those that did made a difference in students’ lives. On the whole, however, teachers practiced a “subtractive” form of schooling that demeaned children’s cultures, languages, and community-based identities. Valenzuela argues that such disrespect puts marginalized students in a very vulnerable position often leading to academic failure.

In Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education (2005), Nieto documents the case studies of two students who succeed in school despite the horrible social and economic conditions of their families and their involvement in actions that society defines as deviant and/or criminal. In refutation of the deficit theory, Nieto maintains that these students did well in school because their teachers cared for them and respected, valued, and affirmed their language and culture. Nieto states,

Both [Ron Morris and Paul Chavez] live in poverty with large families headed by single mothers; both have been involved in antisocial and criminal behavior; and both have had negative schooling experiences. One might be tempted to write them off because of these circumstances, but both Ron and Paul are now learning successfully in alternative schools (p. 256).

Nieto goes to aver, “Deficit explanations of school academic growth cannot explain their success” (p. 256). It is necessary to understand that caring for students does not mean giving out hugs and sugarcoating the realities of school and life. Teachers do a disservice to students by pitying them or holding them to low standards. As Nieto eloquently puts it, “Care means loving students in the most profound ways: through high expectations, great support, and rigorous demands” (p. 270). Teachers’ caring attitude towards students is relevant to this study; nonetheless, as demonstrated later, factors such as social class, parental involvement, early apprenticeship in home academic literacy, and student motivation and investment in their learning played the key roles in Pedro’s and Juan’s academic growth.

School-partnership based programs like ACCELA and FLAME described in this study have proven to be effective in bridging the gap between school and family by helping teachers develop a partnership with the parents of their students. Because of these programs, parents gain a better understanding of what their children are learning in school, and how they can best support them with their learning. Equally important, teachers involved in these programs gain, through rigorous professional
development and courses, a good understanding of the literature on family literacy, theories on second language acquisition and multicultural education, which they try to incorporate in their teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

The overview of this review of the literature in this chapter and the preceding chapter suggests that social class, family background, students’ early apprenticeship in home academic literacy, parental involvement in student education, and teacher’s caring attitude all play a role in promoting student academic success. Each can become a resource used to further student academic growth. This ethnographic study examines these multiple resources and shows how they come together to create an ecology that leads to the academic growth of Pedro, Juan, José, and Maria. The next chapter describes the context of the study pointing some of the characteristics of the middle school where this study took place.