Community Contexts for Literacy Development of Latina/o Children: Contrasting Case Studies

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This article examines language and literacy use in two communities in which Spanish-speaking children live and attend school, documenting the confounding of socioeconomic status, ethnic density, and access to Spanish language and print. Drawing on community observations and interviews with parents and children in a yearlong ethnographic study, we examine issues of heritage language maintenance and loss in settings in which children are receiving bilingual instruction but in which the communities provide substantially different support for Spanish. [Latinos, literacy, community studies, bilingualism]

Broadway in downtown Los Angeles is a Mexico City shopping street. San Juan de Letrán in days gone by: crowded, noisy, boisterous, and overwhelming. Los Angeles is in a time warp: its Mexican neighborhoods resemble Mexico City’s of years ago, before they were either bulldozed for ejes viales (high-speed multiline avenues) or intolerably overpopulated by the explosion of the informal economy. [Castañeda 1993;34]

Many Latinos in the southwestern United States live, shop, and work in neighborhoods that resemble city neighborhoods of Mexico where Spanish is commonly used in daily activities. Others reside in ethnically mixed neighborhoods, surrounded by English oral language and print. What are the effects of a neighborhood’s language and literacy characteristics on children’s literacy development, particularly in their home language? Research on the academic performance of immigrant Latino children has traditionally been dominated by questions of the efficacy of various programs of instruction. Debate has centered on language of instruction, specifically whether language minority children are better served in programs that make extensive and effective use of children’s home language, including teaching content and academic skills in the home language, or if programs carried out exclusively in English enhance children’s academic progress (Crawford 1995, 1992; Greene 1997; Rossell and Baker 1996). The premise of this article is that understanding language minority children’s language and literacy development requires placing that development within a broader sociocultural context that includes more than school program influences. The uses of minority and majority languages for a variety of purposes within the community provide opportunities for children’s literacy development. These factors also shape perceptions of appropriate roles and uses of languages other than English in the U.S. context.
This article examines Latino children's opportunities for language and literacy use in two very different southern California communities, focusing on the likely effects of these opportunities on children's literacy development in Spanish and English. Drawing from community observations and interviews with parents and children, we document the languages used in various community settings for a variety of purposes, the kinds of literacy materials used, and the interactions of participating families and children in these settings. Through these data, issues of primary language maintenance and loss in contrasting community contexts are explored.

Conceptual Framework

Bilingualism is associated with numerous cognitive, economic, and social benefits (Crawford 1995; Kloss 1998; Wiley 1996). As a result, the fifth reauthorization of the Bilingual Education Act in 1994 underscored the value of promoting multiple language skills, stating that "multilingual skills constitute an important national resource which deserves protection and development" (Crawford 1997:1). Unfortunately, the most recent reauthorization under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 retreats from the challenge posed by the 1994 law and makes no mention of the benefits of maintaining and promoting multiple language skills. Nonetheless, understanding the conditions under which primary languages are maintained (and proficiency enhanced) is clearly important both for understanding language and literacy development among language minority populations and to inform important matters of public policy.

Language Development in Multilingual Contexts

Language and literacy development among minority language speakers in the United States takes place within a larger context of majority/minority language status differences and the dynamics they engender (Martin-Jones and Jones 2000). In work with Puerto Ricans in New York, for example, Zentella (1997) argues that language behavior and attitudes cannot be studied without understanding fears about racial, ethnolinguistic, and economic subordination. Legislation seeking to ban bilingual instruction and, in years past, punishment of students for use of Spanish in schools are both examples of policies that a language majority has imposed on language minorities (Crawford 1992, 1997; Montoya 1998).

Additive bilingualism, in which a second language and culture do not displace the first language, has been associated with educational advantages and enhanced metalinguistic development (Cummins 1981, 1989, 2000; Dolson 1985; Genesee, Paradis, and Crago 2004; Thomas and Collier 1997, 2002). In contrast, subtractive bilingualism occurs when the acquisition of a second language and culture takes place at the expense of the first and has been associated with disabling educational settings for language minority students (Cummins 1989, 2000). For Latinos, the press toward assimilation and resultant subtractive bilingualism have been associated with devaluation of Spanish, subordination of Spanish-speaking populations, and underachievement (Garcia 1995, 2002). Subtractive bilingualism and primary language loss have historically been the pattern as speakers of other languages are incorporated into American society, despite the fact that immigration from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America provides a constant infusion of Latinos into the United States and a continual renewal of Spanish as the language of choice among large segments of this population (August and Hakuta 1997).
Literacy Practices in Latino Families and Communities

Ways in which children growing up in multilingual communities acquire and appropriate literacy in one or more languages have received increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades (Bayley and Schechter 2003; Martin-Jones and Jones 2000; McCarty 2005). The literacy practices in which families engage include not only the observable literacy events, or activities involving use of text, but also the cultural values, attitudes, feelings, and relationships that shape and give meaning to those events (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Street 1993). Home country experiences of Latino immigrant parents also shape the ways in which they engage in oral reading with their children, including their motivations for reading and their understandings, or cultural models, of the nature of literacy itself (Reese and Gallimore 2000).

As important as family practices are for children’s literacy development (Booth and Dunn 1996), these practices take place in larger community contexts that have the potential to influence family activities. The notion of community is useful in examining the “realm of local social relations which mediates between the private sphere of family and household and the public sphere of impersonal, formal organizations” (Barton and Hamilton 1998:15).

One way the community influences literacy activities is through access to printed material of a variety of types. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found a plethora of environmental print in the Shay Avenue neighborhood that they studied and described ways in which children read the signs, graffiti, billboards, and package labels that formed part of their urban environment. Neuman and Celano (2001) found “striking” differences in the availability of print resources in lower-income and middle-income neighborhoods, with middle-income children having access to a large variety of resources not available to children in lower-income settings. In their study of three schools and communities in central Mexico, Smith et al. (2005) contrasted writing carried out at school with community texts (including signs, flyers, posters, and ads) that focused on communication, utilized nonconventional grammar and conventions, and were not controlled or edited.

For children acquiring language and literacy skills in two languages, the situation is necessarily more complex. Different languages may be used in different contexts. In a study of the uses of written language among immigrant families in Chicago, Farr (1994) found that family language use depended on the particular domain of activity. Literacy practices related to religion were predominately in Spanish; those related to politics and law were almost exclusively in English (Farr 1994). In their study of a northern California Mexicano community, Vasquez et al. (1994) documented how families responded to the challenges of living in an English-dominant community, working together to construct nuanced meanings and maximize comprehension of unfamiliar English texts.

Accessibility to literacy opportunities in different domains and for a variety of functions is a potential contributor to children’s biliiteracy development. In his studies of language loss and reversal of language loss in international contexts, Fishman (1991, 2001) assessed heritage language vitality on a series of stages ranging from full use of the language in higher education, the work sphere, mass media, and governmental operations to knowledge of the heritage language by only a few isolated speakers. The stages in which language is used for the more powerful functions of employment, higher education, and government are termed “high-power” stages (Fishman 2001).
Languages are threatened with erosion and loss when they yield too few material or other-than-kinship advantages—in other words, when their use is restricted to non-power spheres. In her classic study of bilinguality in the New York Puerto Rican community in the early 1980s, for example, Zentella (1997) observed both intergenerational informal oracy as well as Spanish literacy in the home, community, and school. However, two decades later, García et al. (2001) found that in the same community, Spanish was used primarily for communication with the older generation. These findings indicated erosion of the heritage language, Spanish, over the 20-year period.

Focus of the Study

The present study examines literacy opportunities within complex social contexts. The focus is on multiple community literacy practices associated with different domains of public and private life. In both communities under study, primary language instruction (Spanish) was provided at the local public elementary school. However, the communities provide a stark contrast with respect to the use of Spanish in the surrounding community, outside of the home and school. This study is part of a larger set of interrelated projects documenting children’s early literacy development in Spanish and English, their classroom activities during language arts instruction, and out-of-school contexts of literacy use and development. Like scholars in the New Literacy Studies tradition (Barton and Hamilton 1998, 2000; Gee 2000; Street 1993), we conceptualize literacy as a social activity situated in specific social practices. The New Literacy Studies also make “central an analysis of the interplay between the meanings of local events and a structural analysis of broader cultural and political institutions and practices” (Fuller and Schultz 2001:585).

However, much of the work of New Literacy scholars has focused on everyday literacies outside of school. In an extension of recent work by scholars such as Hull and Schultz (2002) and McCarty (2005), we seek to explore empirically the relationships among literacy at school and literacies out of school, as well as to link traditional, cognitive assessments of literacy to a sociocultural framework of literacy development. The present study represents an initial step in this broader research agenda. Here we examine the linguistic worlds of children from Spanish-speaking families in community contexts using the frames of (1) availability of literacy (text) materials in Spanish and English in the community, (2) accessibility to multiple domains of literacy in Spanish and English in the community, and (3) the status of Spanish language and literacy uses in the community vis-à-vis English. Research suggests that the more children have the opportunity to draw from all continua of biliteracy—to interact with decontextualized as well as contextualized text, to engage in vernacular as well as academic uses of literacy, to make use of L1 as well as L2—the greater their chances of full biliterate development (Hornberger 1989, 2003). Our working hypotheses are that greater availability of textual material in Spanish will enhance children’s literacy development in Spanish. However, simple availability is not enough. Accessibility to multiple domains of literacy (religious, financial, legal, medical, entertainment, etc.) also is important. Finally, because of the minority status of Spanish in the United States, the use of Spanish literacy for higher-status functions will influence families’ literacy activities in ways that have the potential to enhance children’s literacy development. Although literacy use and development in home
and school contexts are undoubtedly crucial for children's literacy development, in this study we focus on community influences outside of school and home.

Methodology

During the 2001–2002 school year, we completed the pilot phase of a multiyear, multisite study involving Spanish-speaking children in kindergarten through second grade in 14 schools and their surrounding communities in California and Texas. This article focuses on the community contexts of literacy development in two of the 14 communities, both located in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. The two communities were selected in order to represent contrasting contexts in which children of Spanish-speaking immigrants live and attend school. The Platero community (all names are pseudonyms) is a densely populated, low-income, exclusively Latino urban neighborhood; the Garden community is a middle-income, predominantly Anglo suburban community.

All parents were surveyed using a written questionnaire sent home through the child’s classroom teacher. This protocol included questions in Spanish on family sociodemographics (occupation, length of time in the local community, parental levels of education), parental expectations regarding their children’s academic performance, and reported home literacy and homework practices. The return rate of the parent surveys was 76 percent.

A subset of 12 families was selected to be interviewed in greater depth; these parents participated in three home interviews over the course of the school year. All elected to have the interviews conducted in Spanish. Interviewers were bilingual Latinas, two of whom were preparing to be bilingual teachers. Two had been born in Mexico and educated in the United States, growing up in neighborhoods quite similar to the Platero community; the third came to the United States from Peru after completing schooling there. The family interviews focused on language and literacy practices at home and in the community, and on literacy attitudes and materials. Also included were parents’ perceptions of neighborhood patterns of language and literacy use, their perceptions about community resources and safety, and their participation in church and other community organizations.

The project investigators (the coauthors) carried out the neighborhood observations and interviews with school principals. We are both former bilingual teachers who reside outside of the communities under study; Goldenberg is a native of Argentina, and Reese has lived and worked extensively in Peru and Mexico. We conducted a survey, walking and driving the school attendance neighborhood in order to document (1) languages heard and observed in different neighborhood settings, (2) literacy materials of various types (books, newspapers, magazines, flyers, ads, forms, and cards), and (3) environmental print (including signs, banners, ads, product packages, labels, and notes). Samples of free printed materials were collected. Field notes and coded survey protocols were augmented by photos and video footage taken to facilitate coding and write-up. In addition, selected locales, such as grocery stores, convenience stores, libraries, and community centers, were identified for more in-depth observation. U.S. census data from the school locale also were collected. Thus, we developed familiarity with the communities as outside observers; we did not engage in face-to-face interviews with participating families but rather made use of complete transcriptions (in Spanish) of interviews with parents.
Children's literacy achievement in English and Spanish was measured using the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised (Woodcock 1991; Woodcock and Muñoz-Sandoval 1995). We chose this battery because it is the only measure with adequate Spanish and English parallel assessments of early reading skills (letter and word recognition and reading comprehension). The Spanish and English versions have been carefully calibrated (using Rasch scaling procedures) despite the fact that they have separate normative samples. Subtest reliabilities (coefficient alpha) range from .68 to .95. Test-retest reliabilities are .75-.95. One shortcoming of this measure is its lack of adequate validity data; no content validity is reported and the construct validity is questionable (Poteat 1995). We are confident that the test has satisfactory reliability and does an adequate job of rank-ordering students according to their proficiencies in reading on the types of reading skills taught and privileged in schools, and therefore is satisfactory for the comparative analyses reported here. However, readers should be aware of the measure's limits and what we can infer from the test scores.

Parent survey data for the 140 participating families living in the two communities indicated that all parents were native speakers of Spanish and were born outside the United States. The mothers in Platero families had an average 8.5 years of schooling and fathers had 7.9; Garden mothers had 8.9 years of schooling and fathers had 8.5 years. Platero mothers were less likely to work outside the home (60 percent worked outside the home compared with 71 percent in Garden), and those who worked were less likely to work in white-collar employment (8 percent compared with 14 percent). Fathers' employment was similar in the two communities, with 4 percent working in white-collar jobs and the majority employed in skilled trades. Although the majority of families in both communities earned under $30,000 per year, incomes were statistically higher for the Garden families than for the Platero families. These indicators put the Garden community families at a somewhat higher socioeconomic status. However, differences in family characteristics were not as marked as were those of the communities in which they reside.

Case Studies of Contrasting Communities

Community case studies were developed for each school/community using a common framework that included the following dimensions: general community description, school description, description of participating families, institutional resources, commercial resources, use of English and Spanish in the community, literacy use in both languages in the community, linkages between home and school, and social/historical setting. Coded narrative data from open-ended interviews of parents and principals and from observational field notes in the community, as well as quantitative data from the U.S. census and the community observational survey, were used in the construction of community case studies. Community case studies thus incorporated observational data from an outsider's perspective, as well as interview data from an insider's perspective.

A note regarding use of the term community in the present analysis is warranted. There is no universal way of defining the neighborhood or local community as a unit, and social science literature includes use of the concept of neighborhood as a social unit, as a spatial unit, and as a network of relationships, associations, and patterns of use (Chaskin 1998). Within the communities in which we were carrying out our
research, insiders’ perspectives varied greatly with respect to what they considered to be their community. Some families used the term to refer to the city in which they lived, others to the blocks surrounding their home, still others to refer to the apartment complex in which they resided. We opted to use the arbitrary definition of “school attendance area” (the area identified by the school as that within which students attend their neighborhood school) for the observational surveys, and we used the census tract in which the school was located for the census data. In family interviews, however, we left the term community unspecified.

The two school communities were selected because although in relatively close proximity to each other (approximately 25 miles apart in the same county), they represent different contexts: ethnic heterogeneity, socioeconomic status (SES), language use, and presence of social and commercial services. Table 1 provides a summary of key characteristics from the U.S. census of the Platero and Garden communities that illustrate the striking differences between them.

Table 1.
Summary of community characteristics

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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Platero</th>
<th>Garden</th>
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<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>33,005 inhab/sq mi</td>
<td>9,300 inhab/sq mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic population</td>
<td>97 percent</td>
<td>36 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population below poverty level</td>
<td>33 percent</td>
<td>11 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with less than high school education</td>
<td>79 percent</td>
<td>27 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population foreign-born</td>
<td>59 percent</td>
<td>33 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish speaking, w/no or little English</td>
<td>48 percent</td>
<td>14 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite these differences, the public school in each community has a bilingual program in which Spanish is used extensively for instruction in at least some of the classrooms. In 1998, voters in California passed Proposition 227, which sought to establish English-only education for English language learners in the state and to dismantle the bilingual programs then in place. Programs using the students’ primary language for instruction were permitted only under specific conditions. Thus, in the post–Proposition 227 era, the maintenance of bilingual education programs at the schools in our study is indicative of significant staff and administrative support for primary language instruction. The children in our study come from homes in which Spanish is spoken and most receive school literacy instruction in Spanish. However, at the community level, children in the two communities receive quite different exposure to language and literacy in the two languages, as the following sketches suggest.

School-Community Contexts

Platero School is located in a densely populated, low-income urban community with a population that is almost exclusively Latino. Families live in apartment buildings or in duplexes or triplexes, and many of the single-family homes have additional housing constructed on the back of the lots. Described by the school principal as a bustling neighborhood that is “very lively, vibrant, and fairly friendly,” this is a community with a lot of foot traffic, as parents and grandparents walk elementary school children home from school and women push strollers or carts laden with shopping bags home from the local market.
Because it is an area of high crime and gang activity, many parents are reluctant to allow their children to play outside except in closely monitored yards, driveways, or apartment landings. As one mother explained, the area "no es suficiente buena porque alrededor hay mucha violencia, no tienes la libertad de dejar jugar todos los niños" [is not very good because there is a lot of violence all around, and you don’t have the freedom to let all of the children play]. Because there are no public parks, children play on driveways or in apartment courtyards, or are kept inside.

The language heard almost exclusively on the streets and in local businesses is Spanish. One father observed: "Siempre estamos rodeados de pura gente que habla puro español casi" [We are always surrounded by only people who speak only Spanish, just about]. Among adults sitting on porches in the late afternoon, adolescents walking home from school, and parents chatting as they wait for the elementary school to be dismissed, conversations are almost exclusively in Spanish, and ranchera music (music typical of the ranchos or rural parts of Mexico) is heard coming from passing cars and open windows. Although the neighborhood surrounding the school is mainly residential, there are small markets and other businesses serving the local community. Signs inside and outside of the commercial establishments are in English and Spanish, and many target the immigrant community’s needs. For example, the local grocery store, one of a regional Latino-owned chain of 12 markets, stocks products from Mexico. Chilis of various types are piled high in open bins, and hand-lettered signs in the meat department label a variety of cuts of meat used in Mexican cooking. Clerks and butchers greet patrons in Spanish, and Spanish is the language heard exclusively among patrons of all ages. One mother described shopping there: “Encuentro lo que quiero, lo que necesito para la casa, cocina y todo eso, de comida” [I find what I want, what I need for the house, for cooking and everything for food]. Across the street, the Western Union advertises safe and rapid wiring of money to Mexico. Inside, although all forms and signs are printed and displayed in both languages, the only language heard in the crowded interior is Spanish. The numerous food trucks parked along the curb also provide service in Spanish and products for families who must rely on public transportation and walking to stores (while the single-family car is being used by the breadwinner, as is the case with several of the participating families).

In this densely populated area, there are no public parks. The Boys and Girls Club across the street from the school offers recreational facilities, classes, and computer access for a nominal fee. The public library is not close to the community; however, a bookmobile parks in front of the school one afternoon a week and offers books in both English and Spanish. The scarcity of public services impacts what families are able to use. For example, one mother explained that the preschool “queda lejos y por eso, … no puse yo a los otros” [It is far away and because of that, … I didn’t put the others (there)].

Platero School has maintained a developmental bilingual program (Spanish is used in initial academic instruction and then maintained even after children start learning academics in English) despite pressures following passage of Proposition 227. In this community that lacks in parks and recreational facilities, child-care facilities, and job training, the school is an outreach institution, opening its grounds and library to the public and offering parent classes in English and computers. The school also has fostered such programs as one for book donations from the Mexican government.
Garden School, on the other hand, is located in a more affluent suburban community, in which homes range from spacious two-story homes along a tree-lined green belt to more modest single-family homes closer to the freeway. There are several parks in the community, which is described by families as calm, orderly, and a safe environment in which to raise children. Families who live here described their community with pride: “El parque, es como un parque atractivo. Los demás quieren venir para acá” [The park, it is attractive. Everyone else wants to come over here]. Although the community is upscale, with relatively few apartments or duplexes in comparison to single-family buildings, there are clusters of condominiums, as well as single-family homes in which two or more families reside. The immigrant Latino families in the study tend to reside in one of these latter housing arrangements.

Although the participating families reported using mostly Spanish at home, outside the home the language of the community is almost exclusively English. In the large shopping center that lines both sides of a major thoroughfare, all the signs inside and outside of the businesses are in English. The large Protestant churches in the area offer services in English. Only English is used among the students on the playground during recess, and signs describing church activities are in English only. Two families indicated that there was a Catholic church with mass in Spanish in the community, although one father described it as “un garage. No es un templo formal” [It is in a garage. It isn’t a formal temple]. Spanish can occasionally be heard in this community, as couples talk softly as they stroll in the park, as men walk home from work in the industrial complex, or as children cluster around an ice cream vendor outside the condominium complex. However, the public language of the community is overwhelmingly English.

Spanish, when it is visible in public locales, tends to be in isolated sections. For example, the large chain drug store in one shopping center has a long aisle with over 300 different titles of books and magazines, with an additional 50 children’s books on display in the toy section. With the exception of People en Español, all of these are English texts. There is a small section at the end of one aisle labeled “Productos Latinos” that has some beauty and health products from Latin America, and a small section labeled “Hispanic Foods” offers a limited selection of canned goods. Similarly, in the public library, the small section of books in Spanish is located in a rear corner of the library in an area labeled “Foreign Language.”

Garden School has a dual-language program designed for both native speakers of English and native speakers of Spanish. The goal of dual-language programs is for initially monolingual children (whether they speak only English or only Spanish) to become proficient and literate in both languages. As is true of Platero School, the Garden principal and participating staff subscribe to the premise that maintaining children’s primary language is a benefit to them and the society more generally.

Like Platero School, Garden School also serves an outreach function in the community, since the Latino families whose children attend the school are on the lower end of the district’s socioeconomic distribution. Garden School leaves its gates open and encourages the community to make use of the school grounds during nonschool hours. Here, however, there are adequate resources and recreational facilities in the community, including American Youth Soccer Organization leagues, parks, handball courts, baseball diamonds, walking paths, two playgrounds, and a public library.
Availability of Literacy Materials in Spanish and English in the Communities

As the descriptions of the two communities suggest, availability of textual material in English and in Spanish varies greatly between the two community settings. Garden has a great deal more literacy material available. The branch library in this suburban community boasts over 100,000 books. However, although the principal proudly described her efforts to help the public library select books and increase its Spanish collection, one of the fathers commented that “No tienen gran variedad como en otros lugares que hemos ido. [Hay] secciones muy pequeñas de libros en español en la biblioteca” [They don’t have as much variety as in other areas that we’ve been. There are very small sections with books in Spanish in the library]. Similarly, in commercial establishments, there are more literacy materials available in Garden. Families can purchase magazines and paperback books at several large drugstores in neighborhood shopping centers. These materials, however, are only available in English. For example, one of the grocery stores had a display with a variety of signs for home or business use (e.g., Open, Hours, Do Not Block Driveway); however, the only sign available in Spanish was one that stated “No Soliciting/Prohibido la venta ambulante.” A local liquor store, located close to the industrial sector in which groups of Spanish-speaking males congregated to look for day labor, had a small cordoned-off area with adult magazines. Although the magazines were exclusively in English, a handwritten sign alerted patrons in both languages “This is not a library/No es una biblioteca.”

Overall, the Platero community offered fewer opportunities to obtain books, magazines, and free literacy materials than did the Garden Community. In the Platero supermarket, about five different titles of well-thumbed magazines were for sale in the checkout lines, but there were no sections dedicated to magazines, books, or children’s books and consumables. Platero was served by a bookmobile operated by the local library. A converted bus with the sides lined with bookshelves that featured books in English and Spanish in roughly equal quantities, the bookmobile parked in front of Platero School once a week. However, although tiny in comparison to the Garden library and offering much less with respect to English texts, the Platero bookmobile offered as great a selection of children’s materials in Spanish as did the much larger Garden library. The Boys and Girls Club offered tutoring by local university students, and children came after school to use the bank of computers for homework, computer games, or Internet use in both Spanish and English. At the Boys and Girls Club, although personnel were bilingual and able to communicate in Spanish, most printed material (flyers, signs, etc.) and all books in the designated “homework room” were in English. The regional Spanish language newspaper, La Opinión, was available at newsstands, along with local newspapers and multiple free magazines and flyers in Spanish. For example, one can readily obtain copies of El Clasificado, a classified ad magazine that also offers articles about health, cooking, and immigration law, or Pare de Sufrir (Stop Suffering), a newspaper published by the Universal Church.

Table 2 summarizes data regarding text availability and the percent available in Spanish. On the surface, and looking at total number of materials available regardless of language, the findings replicate those of the Neuman and Celano (2001) study. There was much greater availability of text in the higher SES community. English printed material was much more plentiful in the Garden community, both for sale
Table 2.
Availability and proportion of literacy materials in Spanish

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<th>Platero</th>
<th>Garden</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total books in library</td>
<td>2,475</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>29 percent</td>
<td>0.9 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total children's books in library</td>
<td>1,960</td>
<td>30,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>27 percent</td>
<td>1.6 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total magazines in library</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>43 percent</td>
<td>1.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total newspapers for sale</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>75 percent</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total magazines for sale</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
<td>0.8 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total books for sale</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in Spanish</td>
<td>0 percent</td>
<td>0 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and for checkout at the library, than in the Platero community. However, when looking at material in the minority language only, Platero—the smaller, more densely populated, linguistically and ethnically isolated, low-income urban neighborhood—provided access to a similar amount of printed material in Spanish as did the larger and more upscale Garden community. In addition, the proportion of literacy materials in Spanish was far greater in Platero than in Garden.

Accessibility to Multiple Domains of Literacy in Spanish and English in the Communities

Availability of a greater or lesser number of literacy materials is only one of the potential literacy resources a community can provide. Fishman’s (1991, 2001) studies of language loss distinguish between language used informally in the local neighborhood, languages used in institutional settings in the community, and languages used for broader economic, political, and academic functions. In addition to books, magazines, and newspapers available for purchase or loan within the community, community settings also provide opportunities for children to observe and participate in literacy use for a variety of functions and purposes. The literacy practices associated with the different domains may take on distinctive characteristics as well. For example, parents may fill out forms to send money to relatives in Mexico, read pamphlets about prenatal care, use a hymnal for singing in church, or read the cover of a video movie to see if it is appropriate for children.

There were many more opportunities to read and writing in Spanish in the Platero community than there were in the Garden community. The businesses in the area offered a variety of services in Spanish, from medical clinics to cell phone service. For example, a check-cashing facility advertised “envío de dinero a México” [sending money to Mexico] and a document center offered assistance with legal documents and immigration papers. Families also reported attending mass in the local Catholic church, where services were offered in Spanish. Although Spanish was heard almost exclusively in commercial settings, and forms and reading materials in Spanish were available, literacy materials were also available in English. In total, 43 different commercial establishments and institutional settings offered services in Spanish, while 40 offered services in English (or English as well as Spanish). Thus, in

Spanish institutions, Boys and Girls Clubs, offer its residents in more upscale Platero are optometrists, at all in all.

In contrast, with the exception of the Elks auto repair shop, other services in the Platero community offer no mass, while immediate patronization of the service is that the would like participation with its various offerings. These cautious of day labor.

Although one can see the stores and to the college, a few are isolated and abundant. However, languages, including English and the considered, (L2) may be included in literacy development.

Language Development

Literacy materials as well as multilingualism as well as the availability of these was considered for the study.
this community, any service offered that would involve access via reading or writing—for example, filling out forms to send money to relatives in Mexico—could be carried out in Spanish or English.

Spanish is heard, visible, and a vital part of the Platero community. It is used in institutional settings (medical clinics, church services, and, to a lesser degree, at the Boys and Girls Club). Spanish also is used in the commercial domain for a variety of functions (e.g., financial, travel, entertainment). However, the community does not offer its residents access to the full range of businesses and services that are available in more upscale communities such as Garden. For example, the medical clinics in the Platero area offer free pregnancy testing, but specialized medical services such as optometrists, orthodontists, acupuncturists, and hearing specialists are not available at all in either language.

In contrast, in the Garden community, there are no services offered in Spanish, with the exception of a Filipino market that offers a money-sending service and an auto repair shop, whose hand-stenciled sign read simply Automotriz Escobar. For all other services and functions of literacy, one must use English in this community. As in the Platero community, most of the families reported that they attend church, and one mother stated that her child engaged in reading “lectura de misa” [reading of the mass] while there. However, these families must drive some distance outside of the immediate community in order to attend mass in Spanish. This limits their participation in other activities at church, as well as the increased opportunities for literacy use that this participation could foster. For example, one mother commented that she would like to be more involved in church activities, but “como vivimos tan lejos, no participamos” [since we live so far away, we don’t participate]. In this community with its various shopping centers, 21C different commercial locales and institutions offer services in English, while only two or three signs in Spanish are visible. One of these cautions against loitering and soliciting work (an activity carried out by a group of day laborers not far from the liquor store wall on which the sign was affixed).

Although Spanish is used in the immigrant homes and some Spanish can be heard on the street in the Garden community, visible traces of written Spanish are limited to the collection of books at the library, selected flyers and forms inside the bank, and a few isolated signs. As noted above, in the Platero community use of oral Spanish is abundant and written forms of Spanish and English appear to be comparable. However, even though all services available in Platero are available in both languages, indicating language parity, a wide range of services and resources are not available in this low-income community in either language. This brings us to the consideration of the ways in which the relative status of English (L1) and Spanish (L2) may influence children’s language attitudes and use, and ultimately their literacy development.

Language Status and Language Loss in the Community

Literacy practices in the family can be influenced by the availability of text materials as well as by access to literacy use in multiple domains in their community. In multilingual settings, decisions to make use of one language or another may depend as well on the perceived prestige, status, or desirability of one language over another. Evidence for the higher status of one language over another can be of a variety of types. For example, in advertising in which two languages are utilized, one language
can be constructed as the authoritative voice of the advertisement through placement in the headline and use of large and striking prin: (Piller 2001). Exclusion of one language from the public or official domain, such as in government decision-making bodies, is another indication of the relatively lower status of that language (Jaffe 1999). In this section, we examine the ways in which language status may be revealed as potentially influencing language and literacy activities.

Although the Garden and Platero communities contrast sharply in terms of ethnic density and SES, the communities are similar in that the Spanish-speaking population in both areas is immigrant (i.e., most parents in the school are first-generation immigrants). Mexican families predominate, but both areas include immigrants from Central America and a few from South America as well. In both communities, the value placed by parents on bilingualism and Spanish maintenance is high: Most (91 percent) parents stated that it was “very important” that their children maintain use of Spanish, and all stated that it was “very important” that their children learn English. For some parents, family unity and communication were cited as reasons for language maintenance by children:

Para hablar ya con nuestros familiares es importante y es importante enseñarles a ellos también que no se pierda eso, porque después ellos también van a hablar con nuestros padres o con nuestros hermanos que están allá. Y si hablan puro inglés ellos, pos no les van a entender nada.

[To talk now with our relatives is important, and it is important to teach them also so that they don't lose it, because later they too will be talking with our parents and our siblings who are over there. And if they speak only English, well no one will understand anything.]

Others associated language maintenance with cultural maintenance and identity. One of the mothers observed:

Por ejemplo nosotros somos hispanos. Pienso que es bueno que tengan el idioma español por ser hispanos. Y también por ser nacidos acá que tengan el inglés.

[For example we are Hispanics. I think that it is good that they have the Spanish language because of being Hispanic. And also for having being born here, that they have English.]

Another parent contended that her daughter’s continued use of Spanish “para mi sería un orgullo, aparte de ser latina, de ser hispana” [for me would be a source of pride, apart from her being Latina, being Hispanic]. One father’s beliefs were grounded in experiences of discrimination. He stated emphatically:

En algunas fábricas yo he oído que les dicen que no tienen que hablar español, o los han castigado o los han corrido nada más porque hablan español. Entonces yo pienso que eso no debería estar, porque es como un racismo. Estamos en este país, que nos respeten nuestro idioma. En mi opinión yo quisiera que mis hijos crecieran con el español y con el inglés.

[In some factories I’ve heard that they tell people that they can’t speak Spanish, or they punish them or fire them for nothing more than speaking Spanish. So I think that this shouldn’t be, because it’s like racism. We are in this country, (they should) respect our language. In my opinion I’d like my children to grow up with Spanish and with English.]

Finally, parents in both communities reported no concerns that their children would be able to maintain Spanish; a commonly expressed sentiment was that Spanish would be maintained at home, regardless of whether it was used in the school or community.
However, despite parents’ desires that Spanish be maintained and their contention that maintenance of the language through home use was possible, some parents in the Garden community described situations in which there was evidence of Spanish language loss or erosion on the part of their children. One mother of a child in the English program realized that for her daughters “se les dificulta hablar español. Me están hablando los dos [idiomas]” [it is difficult for them to speak Spanish. They are speaking to me in both (languages)]. As another mother in the English program described:

_Ella se facilita más en hablar inglés que el español… Hay veces que no le entiendo cuando habla en inglés, y ella busca la manera en que yo le entiendo: Decírmelo aunque sea a muchas, o como sea, pero ella me lo explica._

[It is easier for her to speak in English than in Spanish… There are times that I don’t understand her in English, and she tries to find a way for me to understand. To tell me, even in a broken way, whatever, but she explains it to me.]

Even children enrolled in the two-way bilingual program were observed by their parents to prefer English. One mother stated of her children, “su idioma favorito y preferido es inglés” [their favorite and preferred language is English]. For this mother, the selection of the two-way program was a strategic decision to make sure that her children were able to use both languages. By way of contrast, none of the parents in the Platero sample described children’s loss of Spanish proficiency or reluctance to use Spanish.

In the Garden community, where Latinos were in the minority, families reported that, for the most part, Spanish continued to be the language in which adults and children communicated at home. During the community observations, however, very little Spanish use in public locales was observed. Although census figures place the percentage of Hispanics in the community at 36 percent and the percentage of monolingual (or near monolingual) speakers of Spanish at 14 percent, there were only two businesses of the more than 200 in the community that used Spanish publicly for signs or advertisements. And the single bilingual sign in the community was one that advised against “loitering” by unemployed men seeking day labor. Thus, in this community, even though children were learning to read Spanish in school and had the opportunity to hear and use Spanish at home, there were few opportunities for them to see Spanish used for a variety of purposes outside of their classrooms. This lack of public use of Spanish appears to be an example of what Perea (1998) terms Latino “invisibility,” or the relative lack of public identity and legitimacy of Latinos and the Spanish language.

This lack of public use of Spanish can convey powerful messages about language status. One Garden mother described an incident in which she was rebuffed in her attempts to use Spanish with a Latino clerk in the local drug store. She animatedly shared with the interviewer what she perceived to be the failure on the part of the clerk to interact with her in Spanish, associating reluctance to use Spanish with shame in using it: “Me indignas que digas eres mexicano y al mismo tiempo te avergüences” [It makes me indignant when you say you are Mexican and at the same time you are ashamed]. Similarly, in a study of Garifuna language use in Belize, Bonner (2001) describes emergence of the concept of shame regarding native language use. “The cause of the shame adults attribute to Garifuna children is not their language per se, but rather the marginal status of their language within the Belizean...
nation, as well as the association of Garifuna ethnic identity with poverty and low social status" (2001:86).

The social status of a language is closely related to economic status (Baker 1996). Where a minority language coexists with poverty, social deprivation, and unemployment, the social status of the language is affected. When a majority language is seen as giving higher social status and political power, a shift toward majority language use may occur. As documented above, various examples of the lower status of Spanish and the shift toward English preference and use are evident in the Garden community.

At the same time, the situation in the Platero community with respect to the relative status of English and Spanish is not as clear-cut. One father described the local language use as “puro español” [only Spanish], adding that English might be heard if there is “alguno que otro chollillo. El inglés se escucha pero con muchas malas palabras” [one or another cholo (lowlife)]. English is heard but with a lot of dirty words]. This association of English with juvenile delinquents mirrors García et al.’s (2001) observation that in the New York Puerto Rican community, English has the double identification as the language of power but also the language of African Americans, associated with poverty and racial stigmatization. In the Platero community, Spanish is the language heard almost exclusively in many local businesses, and conversations between customers and clerks are often initiated in Spanish. Thus, in this setting, as the language that is more commonly heard and expected to be used, Spanish could be construed as possibly of higher prestige than English. With respect to literacy availability and access, the two languages appear to be equally prevalent. However, in this low-income community, higher-status services or businesses and access to higher-status functions of language and literacy are not present in either language. One must go outside the community, where those functions are accessible in English.

Early Literacy Achievement in the Bilingual Programs

Children’s achievement on the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery suggests a pattern that to some degree parallels the contrasting language and literacy opportunities in the two communities. Achievement differences are not profound, and we would be wary of overstating any conclusions. Nonetheless, Garden students, who have greater literacy opportunities in English, also have somewhat higher scores in English. On English basic reading, Garden students’ mean standard score was 98.0 (sd = 17.7), compared with the Platero mean of 87.6 (sd = 14.7). On the English comprehension subtest, the mean Garden score was 94.1 (sd = 14.1), compared to the Platero mean of 90.6 (sd = 10.5). Despite lower socioeconomic levels, which would be expected to produce lower reading scores in both Spanish and English, Platero students scored slightly higher in basic reading in Spanish (mean = 140.5; sd = 22.5), compared with a mean of 135.4 (sd = 23.4) for the higher SES Garden students. (Spanish comprehension means were similar for the two groups: 106.5 and 107.1 for Platero and Garden, respectively.) A possible explanation for this pattern of test scores is consistent with the theme of this article: Community language and literacy characteristics influence children’s literacy learning opportunities. Thus, Platero students’ greater literacy opportunities in Spanish are reflected in their higher Spanish achievement scores. In fact, these enhanced literacy opportunities offset their socioeconomic disadvantage, at least in the early elementary grades.
Discussion

This article began with Castañeda’s contention that parts of Los Angeles resemble Mexico of days gone by. Although many Latinos live in neighborhoods that are highly segregated and in which signs, services, and businesses in Spanish abound, are literacy opportunities and practices in fact similar to communities in Mexico or other parts of Latin America? Even in communities with many more businesses and services in Spanish, one can question whether the functions for which Spanish is used are on par with functions for which one is expected to use English. For example, using Spanish in the Platero area, one can send money to Mexico, but one cannot obtain a loan to start a business. One can take classes at the local elementary school, but one cannot study a variety of academic subjects in Spanish (for equal credit) past grade five. Thus, although there may be exposure to Spanish and availability of Spanish books and printed material, the range of domains and functions of language and literacy use within those domains is still restricted in comparison to what would be available in the home country.

This imbalance (or asymmetry) highlights yet another way in which immigrants, particularly immigrants of low social and economic status, are disadvantaged: On the one hand, they have limited access to resources and educational opportunities provided in the societal language (English). Yet on the other, although they might live in communities in which resources and opportunities are available in their home language, these are limited as well and do not represent the full range of resources available to majority-language speakers. This dilemma is compounded for immigrants who are relatively less affluent and have lower levels of formal schooling than the general population in the host country.

Evaluation of the role of community factors with the potential to affect children’s literacy development, particularly availability of literacy material and access to a variety of functions of language and literacy, is made difficult by the confounding of socioeconomic status, ethnic density, and access to Spanish language and print. Previous research (Neuman and Céano 2001) suggests that the Platero students would be disadvantaged in terms of their literacy development and that their community would offer less with respect to literacy access and resources than would the Garden community. On the contrary, however, the community in which the socioeconomic status was higher also was the community in which the percentage of Spanish speakers and the opportunities to use Spanish language and literacy for many functions outside of school also were limited. The community in which Spanish was most prevalent was lower-income and ethnically segregated but afforded better or more plentiful opportunities for Spanish language and literacy development. This suggests an interesting dynamic: As families seek to improve living conditions and life chances for their children by moving into an area that is more upscale, safer, and quieter, they also are moving into an area in which access to Spanish literacy and use of Spanish for a variety of social functions is not as easy.

In both communities, the schools served an outreach purpose in the surrounding community. Both made attempts to go beyond the typical parent involvement activities of parent–teacher conferences and open house visits. The school in each case served to promote, indeed advocate for, the primary language of the students. However, in settings outside of school, through environmental print and in the stores and institutions in the community, children were receiving messages about the status
and social desirability of their native language and that of the dominant society. Even in communities with greater accessibility to Spanish language and print outside of elementary schooling, children received implicit messages about the more limited desirability and utility of Spanish. These messages ultimately may have a long-term influence on children’s language maintenance as well as continued literacy development. In the short term, erosion of Spanish proficiency and preference had already been observed by the parents of five- and six-year-olds in the English-dominant community in our study.

Our findings point to the fragility of heritage language maintenance, even in settings in which the elementary school staff actively promotes bilingual education programs. The advocacy roles of school leaders in our study in supporting parent organization efforts, promoting the acquisition of books in Spanish at the local library, and connecting with adult learning centers in the community represent positive steps that schools can take to promote languages other than English outside the school instructional program. However, our findings suggest the need for schools to redouble their efforts to promote heritage language use, not just as an interim measure to facilitate comprehension of school materials and events by nonspeakers of English but also as a valuable linguistic resource in its own right.

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