

***Si Hablas Español Eres Mojado:* Spanish as an Identity Marker in The Lives of Mexicano Children**

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Introduction

EVERY TWO OR THREE WEEKS, THE CHILDREN IN THE FIFTH-GRADE TEAM OF SOUTH Alamo school were assigned to new groups for language arts, social studies, or science assignments. This was done because the teachers wanted the children to know how to work cooperatively. Indeed, there was a great deal of cooperation among some of the children. As they worked they could be heard to argue, explain, question, gossip, sing, and complain. A notable aspect of this group talk was that a great deal of it was in Spanish. In particular, there was a group of eight children who, although they all spoke English fluently, maintained Spanish as the primary language of their social group.

In this article I discuss the functions of Spanish in the school lives of these children. I document this discussion through the experiences of five children, members of a friendship group that I followed.

As I came to know the children better, I realized that while Spanish served to unify them, it also served to keep others out. Looking more closely at their dynamics, other divisions between them and their peers became evident. How had these divisions come about? What role had the children themselves played in creating these divisions? Were these configurations the result of deliberate attempts by the adults in the school to segregate the children? Or were they more a result of an unconscious enactment of societal behaviors and beliefs that are held about language minority children? These questions are critical in examining the lived experiences of language minority children in public schools. Their perceptions and the choices they make for themselves must be understood in light of the complex and reflexive interactions between public school policy, the curriculum, their teachers, and the values and beliefs of their families. In this article, I will

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explore these questions to some extent, by examining the developmental needs of the children in light of the socio-historical and political context in which their schooling took place.

Language Minority Children and the Search for an Ethnic Identity

Adolescence, particularly at its earliest stages, is a critical time for children to begin the search for an identity (Santrock, 1993). For those who are minorities, this is an especially critical search because in essence, their task is to develop, at the very least, a bicultural identity — one for their interactions with white society and one for interactions with their own group (Sue and Sue, 1981; Gibbs, 1989; McAdoo and McAdoo, 1985).

Much of the work that has been done on minority children's identity development comes from the field of cognitive developmental psychology. Consequently, there has been a great deal of emphasis on the developmental stages children go through in their identity formation (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987b). In particular, African American children's experiences have often been used as the basis for studying and theorizing about other minority children (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987b; Hatcher and Troyna, 1993; Sue and Sue, 1981). Generally, most of these models start with children showing little or no self awareness of ethnicity or race, at ages two or three, then moving to awareness and the beginnings of racial attitudes, at about four or five, to own group preference at about eight, and then to attitude crystallization at about age 10 (Ramsey, 1987; Vaughn, 1987; Katz, 1987; Aboud, 1987).

Later, in adolescence (and adulthood) many minority students may follow Cross' model of Black racial identity development (Tatum, 1992; Sue and Sue, 1981; McAdoo and McAdoo, 1985). These stages include: *pre-encounter*, where the person attempts to assimilate because of the unconscious internalization of stereotypes from mainstream society; *encounter*, often brought on by an experience that forces the individual to reassess her ability to assimilate in a racist society; *immersion/emersion*, where the person immerses herself in her own culture, while turning away from whites; and *internalization*, where the individual has achieved a healthy sense of racial or ethnic identity and can now transcend racial and ethnic boundaries (in Tatum, 1992; Sue and Sue, 1981). This identity formation process may be ongoing, and anyone may revisit these stages at particular points in their life (Tatum, 1992).

It is difficult to know how closely these models may reflect children's own conceptions of race and ethnicity. To a great extent, these models are based on experimental research in which children were forced to choose among stimuli that had been preselected on the basis of physical characteristics, such as skin color, thus confounding children's perceptions with those of the researchers (Hatcher and Troyna, 1993). By positing a white/black dichotomy, the researchers have made evident their own views of the salient characteristics of identity. Further-

more, within each group, ethnic identity has been treated as if it were uniform, across all members. However, these neither reflect the reality of a multiethnic society, nor do they allow us to understand minority children's own perceptions, as they live in a multiethnic world.

This understanding must be based on the reality of children's lives, from different ethnicities, at different ages. Furthermore, it must be informed by an examination of the sociocultural and political contexts in which the children, their families, and their schools exist. This broader view will allow us to see the complexity of their lives — the interactions between children's culture, their parents' notions of ethnicity, and the ways in which schools conceive of ethnicity, both implicitly and explicitly — and to make sense of the choices they make. In this way, we can also examine individual or subgroup conceptions of ethnicity within one ethnic group, and in comparison with other minority groups.

Language and Ethnicity

Language appears to be salient as an ethnicity marker for both majority and minority children. In Hatcher and Troyna's (1993) ethnographic study of nine and 10 year olds, white British children frequently mentioned the languages of their Asian and Caribbean classmates as one aspect of their identities. African American adolescents have been especially aware of their own styles of speaking as a link to their identity (Labov, 1982; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). For minority children who speak a language other than English, their lack of English has often been the basis for school, classroom, and ability assignments. Some of the more common practices have included placing students in grades lower than their age cohorts, retention, placement in special education classes, and restricting access to advanced academic subjects and intramural activities (Crawford, 1989). This differentiation on the part of the school has been keenly felt by language minority children who have responded by selecting and maintaining their own friendships on the basis of native language use (Benjamin, 1993).

Public schools in the United States have played a critical role in assimilating millions of children to American beliefs and behavior (Tyack, 1974). Although the curriculum in the last 160 years was overt in its capitalist and Protestant messages, in the last 30 years, schools have used notions of psychology, convenience, and the job market to push assimilation (Adams, 1988; San Miguel, 1987; Tyack, 1974). One of the most significant outcomes of these policies has been the eradication of languages other than English from countless communities. Through punishment, embarrassment, and emotional blackmail, millions of children came to understand that the languages their parents spoke were undesirable and even harmful (San Miguel, 1987; Crawford, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Fillmore, 1992; Adams, 1988). Despite the schools' efforts before World War II, many minority languages persisted.

In the late 1960s, with the passage of the Bilingual Education Act, the federal government finally acknowledged the existence of languages other than English

as an educational issue for public schools. Unfortunately, in both letter and spirit the Bilingual Education Act judged these languages as impediments to school success and pushed for a rapid transition to all-English study (Lyons, 1990). The effect of this view has been the fortification of English as the only legitimate language of instruction (Lyons, 1990; Spener, 1988).

In New Mexico, before World War II other institutions like the Catholic Church and the local governments of small communities continued to use Spanish publicly, thus supporting its maintenance. For the most part, many of the *Nuevomexicano*¹ communities were relatively self-sufficient and isolated, even within larger cities like Albuquerque and Santa Fe, insulating them from the schools' efforts (Institute, 1990; Benjamin, 1993).

For hundreds of years, people have spoken Spanish in South Alamo. Like most of the *Nuevomexicano* communities of the past century, both in and outside Albuquerque, South Alamo was populated by families who were involved in farming and weaving. In the early 1900s, when the Santa Fe Railway established a freight yard and tie-treating plant close to South Alamo, there was a great economic transformation. The opportunities for better employment and education attracted many new arrivals from the surrounding mountain communities. This large influx increased the size of the community. However, South Alamo, like many other *Nuevomexicano* communities surrounding the city, did not become incorporated into Albuquerque until the 1940s (Simmons, 1982). Thus, it was able to maintain an insulated village-like atmosphere, where residents had close ties, and Spanish remained as the primary language of communication.

In the mid-1960s, a bilingual education law was passed in New Mexico that attempted to respond to the needs of communities like South Alamo. The focus of this law was those students whose families had lived in New Mexico for many generations, namely *Nuevomexicanos* and American Indians. It provided for the teaching of the heritage language of these students, the incorporation of their cultures into the curriculum, and the development of English-language abilities. State funding was provided to districts that made applications to the state delineating the delivery of these services.

Mexicano Migration to South Alamo

It appears that a considerable number of Mexicanos migrated to South Alamo at the time of the railroad expansion. Indeed, this expansion had a tremendous influence generally on Mexicano migration to the U.S. (Cardoso, 1980, in Massey et al., 1987). In South Alamo, the area in which many Mexicanos settled was known as La Barcasita, after the town in Jalisco (La Barca) where many of them came from (personal communication, 1994). Oral history projects conducted in adjoining neighborhoods corroborate the presence of Mexicanos since the time of railroad expansion. These neighbors cite past and continuing celebrations of Cinco de Mayo and fiestas that pay homage to the Virgen de Guadalupe, neither of which

are celebrated widely by *Nuevomexicanos*, as proof of the Mexicano presence (Institute, 1990).

Life-long *Nuevomexicano* residents of South Alamo have been aware of the presence of Mexicano families in their neighborhood. Some of these immigrants became their friends and neighbors. Many of the Mexicano children, after a few years, were indistinguishable from their own. In fact, it was during my research that some South Alamoans realized that one or another classmate they had played with in the past had come from a Mexicano family. This was especially true for those adults over the age of 40.

Nevertheless, although local *Nuevomexicano* South Alamoans recognized many positive attributes in the Mexicanos, i.e., the cohesiveness of their families, the respect for age, their work ethic, and maintenance of Spanish, at times they were also ambivalent about their presence, joking about getting a “*mojao*” (*mojado* or wetback) to do some work cheaply. These feelings can be traced back to the middle part of the last century, and through the struggle for statehood when *Nuevomexicanos* were forced to distance themselves from Mexicanos, because of American racism. At the same time, as they were incorporated into the nation, there was a need for *Nuevomexicanos* to establish an identity that acknowledged their heritage and their attachment to Nuevo México as their place of origin (Acuña, 1988; González, 1994).

In South Alamo this ambivalence seems to have grown over the years. As increasing numbers of Mexicanos came and the differences between younger, more English-speaking *Nuevomexicanos* became more pronounced, divisions between the two groups grew. Adult *Nuevomexicanos*, under 40, discussed the often negative relations that had existed between themselves and the Mexicano children in school. Those Mexicanos who did not quickly assimilate by changing their dress, hair, and language were shunned by the *Nuevomexicano* native-born children. Over the years, as more *Nuevomexicano* children have shifted to English, the distance between the two groups has widened. The shift to English can be observed in many of the small businesses in the neighborhood. Spanish is used by *Nuevomexicanos* only with elders or with monolingual Mexicano customers.

South Alamo has maintained a Hispanic² population of between 85 and 83.1% of the total population. Since 1980, U.S. Census questionnaires have incorporated subethnic breakdowns under the Hispanic Origin question that included Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Other Hispanic categories. In that year, of those who claimed they were Hispanic, 2,019 (55%) declared they were Mexican. In 1990, 2,210 (64%) declared they were Mexican, a nine percent increase (1980 and 1990 U.S. Census). Given local *Nuevomexicano* identification as Hispanic or Spanish as a way of distinguishing themselves from Mexicans, the claim of Mexican ethnicity would seem to indicate the presence of some individuals who were either born in Mexico or who still maintain ties with that country.

The School

The South Alamo Elementary School serves most of the families with elementary school-aged children in the neighborhood. Ethnically, the school population was overwhelmingly Hispanic. Of the 91.9% who were Hispanic, roughly one-fifth were Mexicano. Anglos made up 4.0%, African American 2.1%, Native Americans 1.4%, and Asian Americans .5%.

Within the school staff, out of a total of 60 full-time staff, 40 were Hispanic, 19 were Anglo, and one was African American. Only three of the 40 Hispanics were from outside the state. The rest were born and raised within the state. Two teachers and two support staff members were born and raised in the South Alamo neighborhood.

In the main office, the teacher's lounge, the library, and various resource rooms, the main language among the staff was English. Some of the teaching assistants would speak Spanish to each other, and some code-switching went on among all of the *Nuevomexicano* staff. Yet socializing and work was primarily conducted in English, following the practice of many schools for language minority children (Skuttnab-Kangas, 1995).

The ambivalence felt by *Nuevomexicanos* toward Mexicanos and the Spanish language, as a public language, described earlier, was exemplified by the language behavior of most of the teachers in the school. The same ambivalence could be seen at the district and state levels. The use of Spanish in state-funded bilingual programs was relegated to a one- or two-hour Spanish-enrichment class designed for the *Nuevomexicano* children who no longer used Spanish as a predominant language of communication (New Mexico State Department of Education, Bilingual Program guidelines). For immigrant students, state bilingual programs emphasized the acquisition of English. Thus, state policy implicitly favored English as the official language of schools, especially when large numbers of immigrant children were present.

At South Alamo a state-funded Spanish-language enrichment program was present in the school, as well as English as a Second Language classes for monolingual Spanish speakers. Nevertheless, there was no explicit language policy *vis-à-vis* the use of Spanish and English to guide teachers, students, and staff overall. Given the presence of the state-funded program, perhaps both teachers and administrators felt there was no need for such a policy. However, by ignoring this issue, both teachers and administrators were in fact ignoring the reality of many of the students' lives. By ignoring this reality, the leadership of the school was condoning the status quo, the use of English as the only official language (Stubbs, 1995).

One possible exception to the implicit English rule was the bilingual room, where the two Spanish-language resource teachers did most of their planning. In their case, one was likely to hear a great deal of sustained, more formal Spanish

conversation. As the only officially designated Spanish teachers in the school, they were more conscious of maintaining Spanish publicly.

As in the case of many of the small businesses in the neighborhood, Spanish was spoken in the main office mostly with the Mexicano parents. A very few instances were witnessed where *Nuevomexicano* grandparents initiated conversations with the school staff in Spanish, but these remained minimal, throughout the six months of the study. In the halls and out on the playground, especially before and after school, one could see many small groups of Mexicano parents (mostly mothers) waiting with toddlers for their older children. While they waited, they visited with each other in Spanish.

On any given week, one could find at least one bulletin board decorated in Spanish in some public place, i.e., the hallways, the cafeteria, etc. Generally, these had been provided by the bilingual resource teachers. However, in the classrooms, the most one would see written in Spanish was the pledge of allegiance and the class rules. An exception was one first-grade classroom where all of the students were limited English speakers. Similar situations seem to exist in other schools in the city (Ortiz and Engelbrecht, 1986).

The Fifth-Grade Class

What functions did Spanish serve in the lives of Mexicano children once they had learned English well enough to function in an all-English environment? To answer this question, I followed the daily experiences of a group of five Mexicano children, who were all friends, in a fifth-grade team. The team consisted of two fifth-grade classes that were combined and whose teachers shared teaching responsibilities for both classes. All five children came from families where the parents were Mexican nationals who were settled migrants (Portes and Bach, 1985). Three of the children had been born in the United States, one had come as an infant, and the other had migrated at age five.³ Of their classmates, 22 of the 46 children came from homes where Spanish was the primary language. Almost all of these families had at least one parent who was Mexicano. Of the remaining 26 children, 24 were *Nuevomexicanos*.

The two teachers, Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez, worked together sharing responsibilities for both of their classrooms. This allowed them to capitalize on their teaching strengths. Mr. Gutiérrez taught the high-achieving math students and those with difficulties in language arts. Ms. Chávez taught the high-achieving language arts students and those with difficulties in math. By sharing the barrack that housed their team, teachers and students moved easily back and forth, from one class to another.

Despite this apparent fluidity, the students grouped themselves into six cliques, reflecting to a great extent the values and hierarchy of the school. These cliques were observed on the playground, during self-selection activities, in the cafeteria and library and were confirmed by the students in conversations held over

six months. Interactions between some of these cliques were quite congenial. Between other groups there was tension. However, during teacher-assigned group work sessions, the children were forced to interact with each other. It was only out of the teachers' hearing reach that these frictions became apparent. Conversations with the focal children and with their classmates revealed that the children were well aware of these tensions.

The children with the greatest status were the high achievers. These were followed by those who were popular with the opposite sex. The next group was made up of the athletic children, primarily boys. This group and the popular group held the same status within this hierarchy, and there were some children who were members of both groups. The fourth group consisted of several pairs of friends who were average students who were not athletically inclined.

Within the lower ranks of this hierarchy were two groups. The first group was made up of troublemakers, both boys and girls, who caused trouble among their classmates as well as with the teachers. The lowest status group consisted of the monolingual Spanish speakers whose access to advanced study and some of the social life of the class was limited. The monolingual Spanish speakers were integrated for math work according to their abilities; however, for other parts of the curriculum, such as language arts and reading, they worked separately with Spanish-language texts, when they were available. When Spanish materials were not available, they used primary-grade English materials, which caused some of their classmates to ridicule them for doing "baby work." Their embarrassment, lack of English, and lack of understanding about American culture further isolated them, thereby reinforcing the tracking patterns created by the organization within the classroom.

The five focal children were members of the cliques at the upper end of the hierarchy. Three of the children were excellent students, one was very popular, and the fifth child, while an average student, was very well liked by both boys and girls. However, because of their consistent use of Spanish, the five focal children interacted with the other Spanish speakers in all six groups. The use of Spanish allowed them to ignore the tensions between some groups and socialize freely with other Spanish-speaking children across all groups. This included socializing with and helping the monolingual Spanish speakers. This difference in behavior set the focal children apart from the other groups, in a sense creating a seventh group. At the same time, their insistence on speaking Spanish became the source of other tensions.

Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez had been at South Alamo school for nine and 10 years respectively. Mr. Gutiérrez was born and raised in South Alamo and continued to live in the southern part of the neighborhood, next to his grandparents who had raised him. Ms. Chávez was raised in another New Mexican city and came from a similar working-class background. Both teachers were deeply committed to their students. They often spoke to the children about the difficulties they

themselves had experienced in school as minorities and encouraged them to persevere in their education.

Despite this commitment, Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez, following the implicit rules of the school, only used Spanish to speak to the monolingual Spanish speakers. This might occur in a small group activity or in front of the entire class. However, they neither instructed the class as a group in Spanish, nor did they use Spanish to speak to the bilingual children in any official way. The teachers' language behavior was in no way unusual for South Alamo or generally for the district. Like Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez, most Hispanic teachers at South Alamo were concerned that students succeed academically, and for them English was the language of success. The use of Spanish was a temporary fix until students could function in an all-English curriculum. In their eyes, Spanish-language instruction was not a part of the regular curriculum. Rather, it was an "extra" or special program and was the responsibility of the bilingual resource teachers.

The only regularly scheduled, official use of Spanish by a teacher was by Ms. Black, the bilingual resource teacher, when she taught the bilingual class twice a week for 30 minutes. She conducted her lessons using both English and Spanish. For the most part, the content of these lessons consisted of short presentations on Spanish or New Mexican history. For example, several weeks were spent on the contributions of the Moors to Spanish culture and language. Although Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez were present during these classes, they did not participate in any of Ms. Black's activities. Occasionally, the focal children responded to Ms. Black's questions in Spanish. For the most part, however, the focal children also followed the implicit rules of the school. They did not use Spanish for any public or official purposes. Clearly, for them Spanish was a private language used among themselves and with certain individuals outside their immediate group.

The children used Spanish among themselves for a wide variety of purposes: for accomplishing their school work, for thinking through new subject matter, for maintaining social relationships, for talking about their lives outside school, for play acting in imaginary worlds, for sustaining conversations, and for keeping on track through self-talk. The frequency with which each of these functions was used was tied to classroom structure, peer group memberships, and individual personalities. Through this language, the children were able to express individual interests and characteristics. One child provided himself with constant self-talk. Another was able to play out her soap opera fantasies. A third child was able to display her flirtatiousness. Each one was able to speak about those aspects of their lives or their persons, which were a part of their inner selves. Spanish was not only an expression of their identity as Mexicanos. It was the vehicle for exploration and expression of themselves as individuals, a means to the construction of self.

However, even across ability groupings, work groups, and schedules, all five focal children interacted mostly with the other Mexicano children in the class.

Spanish seems to have acted as a social cohesion for all of the Spanish speakers. The consistent use of their mother tongue throughout the school day by the focal children further reinforced their identities as Mexicanos within the class. Their continued use of Spanish also served to identify the children with the larger Mexicano population living in South Alamo, setting them apart from a large group of their classmates and neighbors. For the focal children, and others who chose to continue using Spanish after learning English, it would appear that their sense of ethnicity was tied to the continued use of their first language (Smolicz, 1981). Indications from other studies are that ethnic identity may play an important role in the maintenance of a first language (Smolicz, 1981; Herman, 1972; Johnson, Giles, and Bourhis, 1983; Benjamin, 1990).

At the same time, the focal children's identification as Mexicanos made them the target of much hostility by some of their peers, who frequently called them *mojados* and taunted them with threats to call *la migra* (either the Immigration and Naturalization Services or the Border Patrol, which are viewed as one and the same entity). In reality, these remarks held no real threat since all of the children were either born in the United States or held resident status. They could have ignored them. Instead, these taunts were taken for what they were — racist slurs that denigrated the children's heritage and their own emerging identities as Mexicanos. The response to these fighting words often resulted in some kind of physical altercation as the focal children attempted to defend themselves. Rather than yield to the pressure to give up their Mexicano identity, as several children in the class had done, the focal children persisted by maintaining Spanish as their in-group language. In this sense, then, the use of Spanish served as an opposition strategy to the prejudice that was directed at them. Its use effectively excluded all non-Spanish speakers, including most of their *Nuevomexicano* schoolmates.

These racist insults may well have been used as the quickest and easiest way to hurt Mexicano classmates. Hatcher and Troyna (1993) found that white children most often used racial insults for instrumental reasons, i.e., for gaining the upper hand in conflict situations, or achieving a desired outcome in their interactions with children of color. Only infrequently did these remarks reflect true beliefs. Similarly, in the present study, Mexicano children were often insulted during some kind of disagreement — for example, when fighting over someone's affection. As in the classrooms described by Hatcher and Troyna (1993), the *Nuevomexicano* children echoed the slurs that were directed at Mexicanos in South Alamo. Whether the *Nuevomexicano* children actually believed their classmates were inferior is difficult to know. What these insults do show, however, is the distance perceived between *Nuevomexicanos* and Mexicanos, both in the school and in the neighborhood.

As young adolescents, there is some evidence that both *Nuevomexicano* and Mexicano children in this fifth grade were beginning to consciously choose an ethnic identity. During the week of standardized testing, one of the *Nuevomexicano*

children, Jesse, complained to Mr. Gutiérrez that it was foolish to fill out the ethnicity question of the test form, saying that it made no sense since everyone in the class was Chicano. It could be argued that Jesse's intent was to be inclusive of all of his classmates. However, his remark effectively denied the mexicanness of some of his classmates. As he was speaking, Jesse caught one of the Mexicano children's eye. Immediately after that, Jesse told Mr. Gutiérrez to forget his remark and a long, uncomfortable silence filled the room. Clearly, Jesse had broached a taboo topic. Neither the teachers nor the students were prepared to speak openly about this issue.

In another example, I discovered quite by accident that Julio Antonio, one of the focal children, refused to have any dealings with the children who had at any time insulted the Mexicano children. This refusal included working with particular people in a group, talking to them, or even passing them a paper. In perhaps one of the sadder examples of emerging identities, Jessica, whose mother was Mexicana and whose father was *Nuevomexicano*, frequently bragged to her classmates that even though her mother spoke Spanish, she did not. Moreover, she made sure that everyone knew she was Spanish and not Mexican.

Like so much of the rest of the children's culture, these battles occurred out of the earshot of teachers. If teachers were aware of these problems, they rarely mentioned them. For the most part, teachers and administrators would get involved only when there had been a physical fight. In many of those cases, the Mexicano would be told that name calling was not a reason for fighting and he would get punished. As in the case of language, school leaders refused to deal directly with issues of racism. By turning a blind eye to the racist slurs, the leadership in the school was effectively condoning their use. Furthermore, by punishing children who defended themselves against these verbal assaults, the implicit message became that their identity choice was a mistake.

This behavior on the part of the school often upset the parents of the focal children who would say, "*Maestra, yo estoy de acuerdo que castiguen a mi hijo(a), pero ¿por qué no le dicen al otro niño, que no debe de insultar a los demás?*" (Teacher, I am in agreement with my child's punishment. But why don't they tell the other child that he should not insult his classmates?)

In fact, the parents may have been contributing unknowingly to these tensions. Their explicit messages to their children of maintaining Spanish and remaining true to one's identity as a Mexicano was in direct conflict with the school's implicit policies.

This seems to have put many children in a bind. On the one hand, their parents were telling them to maintain ties with their roots and their ethnic group; on the other, the school's unspoken policy about the desirability of English over any other language and of an assimilated ethnic identity challenged their families' identities. The effects of this bind were beginning to show — in fights, in some children's refusal to speak Spanish, and in other children's maintenance of it in the class. In

the middle school, where the search for identity becomes one of the major tasks of an adolescent, these tensions appear to have become critically intensified, often erupting into violence. The older siblings of the focal children recounted the terrible experiences they had had in middle and high school. For those who were unwilling or unable to shift to English or conform to a more assimilated identity, the consequences were frequently rejection, suspension, and even expulsion (Weinberg, 1994).

Schools and the Assimilationist Agenda

Unfortunately, these tensions are not confined to the small community of South Alamo, or even to New Mexico. In Chicago, where I once lived, conflicts between Puerto Riqueño and Mexicano adolescents often revolved around who was more assimilated. Among Chinese American school children, the ABC, American-born, often discriminate against the FOB's, those Fresh Off the Boat (Kingston, 1989; L. Wong Fillmore, personal communication, 1994). Across the nation and among many different groups, young people have internalized the belief that it is wrong to preserve linguistic or cultural identities.

This intolerance for differences is reflected at many different levels in American society — at the ideological level, where definitions of being American are generally restricted to English-speaking white Europeans, at the political level, where access to a political voice was limited to English-speaking white Americans for many years, and at the social level, where the benefits of living in American society have only been available to those who acquiesce in the American legacy of the “melting pot,” in exchange for a mythical common heritage (Crawford, 1989; Takaki, 1993; Skuttnab-Kangas, 1995). Public policies and institutions have enforced this sociopolitical reality, coercing both immigrant and indigenous peoples to give up their ethnic and linguistic identities.

As public institutions, the schools have been an important mechanism for driving this assimilationist agenda. The criteria used for classifying students, both overtly and covertly, the rewards for those who conform to English and an assimilated identity, and the punishments, including expulsions, for those who won't are all part of the ways in which schools play an important role in reproducing racist and unequal structures (Fine, 1991; Sleeter, 1993; Cummins, 1992). In so doing, they serve all groups badly, both the privileged and the marginalized. In this study, neither group was getting the support they needed for a healthy identity.

Although both teachers and students in the school were overwhelmingly *Nuevomexicano*, this was hardly reflected in the curriculum. In fact, there was little discussion by the teachers or the principal about how to make the curriculum more culturally relevant. South Alamo, as most schools in the district, was in the process of becoming a site-based managed school. Most discussions in the various administrative and curricular committees dealt with the “at-risk” characteristics of

the families they served. The teaching staff and the administrator were very conscious of the poverty and “dysfunctional” aspects of some of the families, i.e., crime, gangs, drugs, etc. In their meetings and conversations, the focus was usually on helping students to conform to the expectations of the school, such as homework, returning library books, and raising test scores. During certain holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, particular aspects of *Nuevomexicano* culture were highlighted, but these were not a part of the everyday curriculum.

Most adults in the school believed that the bilingual program took care of the cultural and linguistic needs of both *Nuevomexicano* and monolingual Spanish-speaking Mexicanos. However, this was limited to the two 30-minute Spanish classes that the bilingual resource teachers delivered weekly. Even in these classes, for many of the children it was difficult to make the connection between Spanish history and most aspects of *Nuevomexicano* history or culture that mirrored the children’s background. The Spanish curriculum was completely isolated from the rest of the course of study, having been added *after* the “regular” curriculum had been designed. As such, it had a very low status, and the message that sent to the children was clear — their culture and their language had no real place at school. Given this situation, is it any wonder that some of the *Nuevomexicanos* sought an identity by disparaging others?

For the Mexicanos, the message was even more destructive. By disregarding their considerable skills in the Spanish language, and offering Spanish lessons that were infantile and overly simple, the school was effectively ignoring their knowledge and barring the Mexicanos from making any contributions to the school, until they could be made in English. In addition, the focus on Spain in the Spanish curriculum further underscored the negative perceptions about Mexico and Mexicans. The Mexicano children also had a need for a curriculum that reflected their reality. Although in some respects they had enjoyed more cultural support at home because of their frequent trips to Mexico, they did not have access to more formalized knowledge about their language and culture available through texts.

This school could have played a critical role in helping children to form healthy identities. By acknowledging their languages and placing them on an equal footing with English, as well as by explicitly teaching children about their cultures and the elements shared by the two groups, the children would have been freer to make more positive identity choices (Skuttnab-Kangas, 1995). Yet there was little awareness on the part of teachers and administrators of their role in the children’s identity development. Until administrators and teachers acknowledge this responsibility and have an opportunity to study and reflect on the ways in which schools have perpetuated these differences, there is little hope that things may change in South Alamo or in other schools like it. Moreover, this may not happen until changes occur in the ways in which teachers and administrators are educated. Colleges of education, professional educational organizations, and other educa-

tional networks must acknowledge the role they have played in reproducing racist and linguistic structures (*Ibid.*).

Conclusion

The children in this study were using the information that was available to them to engage in their search for an identity. As such, they used the overt messages and behaviors they saw in their homes, their neighborhood, and the school. They also used the implicit messages around them, especially those in the school, to help them try to make sense of the differences among them (Hatcher and Troyna, 1993; Matute Bianchi, 1989). Unfortunately, as has been stated, there seemed to be little understanding among the adults in the schools that this was a need they had.

For linguistic minority children, the maintenance of an ethnic identity is critical. Certain groups can never really assimilate because of history, color, or physical characteristics. As educators, we need to acknowledge that for many, assimilation is not an option. Most importantly, there needs to be a recognition of the role the schools have played in children's identity formation.

The children at South Alamo were lucky, in one sense. They had teachers who, for the most part, looked like them and had had very similar experiences in school. Ironically, even with these similarities most teachers at South Alamo, regardless of their ethnicity, were unwilling to examine how their practices confirmed racist and linguistic structures.

Increasingly, as the student population in the United States becomes more diverse, the teachers are becoming increasingly white (Sleeter, 1993). This poses a problem to colleges of education. How can teachers be made aware of racism and the ways in which schools reproduce racist structures? Sleeter's study of a group of white teachers does not give us much cause for optimism (*Ibid.*). She found that white teachers were very uncomfortable acknowledging the salience of race. Moreover, it was very difficult for teachers to accept the notion of institutional racism because they could not distinguish between the educational rhetoric about equality and the practices that are often predicated on inequality (*Ibid.*). According to Sleeter, the best solution to this problem is to recruit minority teachers since their experiences of institutional racism might lead them to be more critical of current school practices.

Though minority teachers might more easily acknowledge the possibility of racism, I also believe they will have difficulties critiquing their own and the schools' practices. Many minority teachers, like those at South Alamo, have survived their academic and professional training by ignoring or repressing their experiences of racism while in school and at the university. Many language minority teachers were forced to give up their languages in favor of English (Ada, 1995). Worse yet, many minority teachers, like some of the children in this study, at some point in their lives were forced to make the choice of leaving their own ethnic and linguistic identity in favor of assimilation and English. Now, some of

those same teachers find themselves in the position of having to use that discarded language in school (*Ibid.*).

This history puts many language minority teachers in a very difficult position. After having accepted the idea that their languages and cultures had no place in the school, they are now given the message that they must use these languages, but with certain caveats: it applies only to monolingual ethnic language speakers and only until they learn English. These conflicting messages are very confusing, to say the least. To suggest that Ms. Chávez or Mr. Gutiérrez need only have used more Spanish in their classes to improve their practice is to deny their own schooling experiences. Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez were good teachers, but they, too, had been denied the opportunities to know about their own language and culture. Moreover, they had been silenced by a university and professional system that viewed minority language children as “problems” to be solved and that sought Band-Aid solutions to those “problems,” while failing to take responsibility for their part in the creation of those problems. Ada suggests that for minority language teachers to provide creative education to students, they themselves must first “experience the liberating force of this type of education” (*Ibid.*: 241).

Mr. Gutiérrez and Ms. Chávez wanted their students to learn to work cooperatively — a worthy goal. However, cooperation can only truly happen when all parties are on an equal footing. The five focal children in this study, their Spanish-speaking classmates, and most minority language students in this country are not on an equal footing with their English-speaking white classmates. Moreover, they can never be on an equal footing until this fact is recognized by educators at every level, and until we understand and accept our responsibility in helping children develop healthy identities.

NOTES

1. The term “*Nuevomexicano*” will be used in this article to refer to those of Spanish-speaking descent who have lived continuously in New Mexico for several centuries and who, while sharing some cultural characteristics with those from Mexico, identify primarily with their *patria chica*, Nuevo Mexico (González Velásquez, 1994).

2. The U.S. Census refers to all people with Spanish in their background as Hispanic. As such, it is an inclusive term. This should not be confused with the way in which *Nuevomexicano* is used in this article.

3. The five focal children were chosen after observations revealed that they continued to speak a great deal of Spanish with each other, in spite of the fact that the school considered them fluent in English. None of these children attended ESL classes, and they were not designated as Limited English Proficient.

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