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CHAPTER 39

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES, IDENTITY, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the notion of *imagined communities* as a way to better understand the relationship between second language learning and identity. It is argued that language learners' actual and desired memberships in imagined communities affect their learning trajectories, influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of English. These influences are exemplified with regard to five identity clusters: postcolonial, global, ethnic, multilingual, and gendered identities. During the course of this discussion, we consider the relevance of imagined communities for classroom practice in English education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses ways in which language learners' actual and desired memberships in "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) affect their learning trajectories. We will start out by explaining the notion of *imagined communities* with reference to language and identity. Then, we will show how the process of imagining and reimagining one's multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of English in terms of five identity clusters: postcolonial, global, ethnic, multilingual, and gendered identities. We will argue that the notion of imagined communities has great potential for bridging theory and praxis in language education and for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy.

The theoretical framework adopted in the present chapter is best viewed as poststructuralist or postmodernist. While the terms *poststructuralism*, *postmodernism*, or *critical inquiry* serve as an umbrella for a variety of theoretical approaches adopted by different researchers (see Morgan, this volume, for a fuller discussion), in the present chapter we will use the terms interchangeably, emphasizing similarities that they all share. Of particular importance to us is the postmodernist focus on *language* as the locus of social organization, power, and individual consciousness, and as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). *Learning*, in turn, will be seen as a situated process of participation in particular

communities of practice, which may entail the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context (Wenger, 1998). Thus, “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (p. 215), a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge. While the situated view of learning as socialization has been productive in the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, so far it has focused predominantly on learning that takes place as a result of the learners’ direct engagement in face-to-face communities. Learning that is connected to learner participation in a wider world has been little explored. Yet we humans are capable, through our imagination, of perceiving a connection with people beyond our immediate social networks. Our orientation toward such imagined communities might have just as much impact on our current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of our everyday life. We argue that the notion of *imagination* as a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities, developed by Anderson (1991) and Wenger (1998), allows us to transcend the focus on the learners’ immediate environment, as the learning of another language, perhaps more than any other educational activity, reflects the desire of learners to expand their range of identities and to reach out to wider worlds (Kinginger, 2004; Kramersch, 2000; Kramersch & von Hoene, 2001; Norton, 2001).

Our discussion of the role of imagination in second language learning draws on three complementary sources: Anderson’s (1991) view of nation-states as imagined communities, Wenger’s (1998) view of imagination as a form of engagement with communities of practice, and Markus and Nurius’s (1986) view of possible selves as the link between motivation and behavior. In his work on the role of language in the creation of nation-states, Anderson traces ways in which the invention of printing technology in the capitalist world gave new fixity to language and created languages-of-power, different from older vernaculars. The nation-states, in turn, were conceived around these languages, as imagined communities “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Anderson’s analysis presents imagination as a social process, emphasizing the fact that those in power oftentimes do the imagining for the rest of their fellow citizens, offering them certain identity options and leaving other options ‘unimaginable’.

Wenger’s (1998) situated learning theory provides a complementary perspective to that of Anderson, presenting imagination as both an individual and social process. In his view, imagination is a distinct form of belonging to a particular community of practice and a way in which “we can locate ourselves in the world and history, and include in our identities other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives” (p. 178). In this, Wenger’s insights converge with the well-known psychological theory of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, thus linking cognition, behavior, and motivation. For both Wenger and Markus and Nurius, possible selves, linked to memberships in imagined communities, shape individuals’ present and future decisions and behaviors and provide an evaluative and interpretive context for such decisions, behaviors, and their outcomes.

Norton (2000, 2001) has incorporated Wenger’s (1998) views into the study of second language learning and education, suggesting that learners have different

investments in different members of the target language community, and that the people in whom the learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who provide (or limit) access to the imagined community of a given learner. The goal of the present chapter is to build on the previous arguments, demonstrating how nation-states may shape the imagination of their citizens and how actual and desired memberships in various imagined communities mediate the learning of—or resistance to—English around the world.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITIES

In what follows, we will discuss membership in imagined communities in terms of five identity clusters that have relevance to English as an international language: (a) postcolonial, (b) global, (c) ethnic, (d) multilingual, and (e) gendered identities. While separating the identities into these five subcategories for purposes of clarity and better focus, we acknowledge that much of the time these multiple facets of learners’ selves are inseparable. Thus, for example, postcolonial identities are centrally concerned with questions of ethnicity, while ethnicity may be implicated in the construction of multilingual identities. Our survey does not aim to be comprehensive or all-inclusive: rather, with a choice of one or two examples from diverse contexts, we aim to illustrate how languages—and identities linked to them—lose and acquire value in the linguistic marketplace through the work of imagination.

Postcolonial Englishes

Anderson’s (1991) lucid analysis makes it clear that in the modern era, nations are no longer created in blood but imagined in language. Hebrew offers an extraordinary example of a language that served to unify Jews from all over the world who otherwise had little if anything in common, sometimes not even religion. At present, postcolonial contexts offer a particularly fertile area for examination, since newly imagined national identities and futures are often tied to language. Due to British colonial history and, more recently, to American cultural and linguistic imperialism, English is implicated in this process of reimagination more than any other language. In the era of globalization, postcolonial nations and subjects are forced to take a stance with regard to the role that English as a global language will play in their future.

Even a brief look at these decisions demonstrates that English—and identities that can be fashioned out of it—is imagined differently in different contexts. One of the key issues in Africa, for instance, is the language of literature and thus of the national narrative, and numerous African writers have expressed their views on this issue in press and at conferences on the role of English in African literature (Miller, 1996). This attention to the written word is not surprising, since, according to Anderson (1991, p. 134), nationalism is conceived in the print-language, not a language per se. What is surprising are the opposing stances taken by individuals in seemingly similar contexts. Thus, in 1977 a well-known Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, publicly refused to write in English after having published four successful novels as well as numerous essays, plays, and short stories in that language. In doing so, Ngugi decried his allegiance with the language of Kenya’s colonial past, in which the poorest and most oppressed citizens of the country could neither read nor

communicate. Instead, to transcend the “colonial alienation” of the African intelligentsia from its own people, he chose to write in the local language Gikuyu, which at the time had not developed traditions of written narrative. In contrast, another famous African writer, Chinua Achebe (1965), argues that while English is a “world language which history has forced down our throats” (p. 29), it is also the language that made it possible for Africans to talk to one another and to create national rather than ethnic literatures.

Miller’s (1996) insightful analysis indicates that these diametrically opposed visions of African national identities and English are not incidental, for they carry with them different visions of the future of African nation-states. While Ngugi imagines the Kenyan future as a revolutionary change within the country, Achebe’s vision encourages African unity and places Africa on a par with other countries in a global community. Notably, Achebe’s view does not entail an uncritical appropriation of English as spoken and written by some imaginary native speakers: rather, Achebe (1988) intends to indigenize the language, declaring, “Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it” (p. 50). Instead of reimagining themselves, Achebe and other like-minded writers reimagine English and refashion their relationship to it, creating hybrid work that, like Nuyorican bilingual poetry, can no longer claim allegiance to one language only and draws on multiple languages and literary traditions (Miller, 1996; for an in-depth discussion of the tensions between English and indigenous languages in postcolonial Africa, see Obondo’s chapter in this Handbook).

A similar approach to the reimagining of English in postcolonial contexts is that undertaken in South Africa, where a focus on *People’s English* represents a challenge to the hegemony of Standard English (Norton Peirce, 1989). Rather than dispensing with the use of English in public discourse, advocates of People’s English take the position that English should be appropriated to serve the interests of the majority of people who use it. Central to the argument is that models of communicative competence should focus on what is *desirable*, rather than socially acceptable, in the learning and teaching of English. Recent research on world Englishes confirms the fact that appropriation and indigenization of English is the route taken in many postcolonial contexts, from India to the Caribbean (cf. Baley & Gortlach, 1982; Kachru, 1982).

In sum, recent explorations in language policy and sociolinguistics indicate that in postcolonial contexts, national identities are oftentimes fashioned in relation to English as a global language. While some countries may renounce English as a language of colonialism, others may take a neutral stance, neither privileging nor discouraging English, and yet others may choose to appropriate and indigenize English, constructing national identities simultaneously through and in opposition to English. The link between national identities and imagined communities plays an important role in language and educational policies, thus confirming Anderson’s (1991) thesis about public media playing a key role in shaping the public imagination and creating identities for public consumption.

English and the Global Marketplace

In contrast to postcolonial contexts, in which developing countries are seeking to address their ambivalent relationship to English, other countries for which English is not a postcolonial language aim to promote Standard English in order to align

themselves with the Western powers and gain an entry into the global market. A striking example of foreign language education as a mirror of national allegiances is seen in Eastern Europe, where, after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the newly emerged countries aim to refashion themselves as democratic and capitalist. An important aspect of this social and economic change involves language education reform, which has eliminated or severely limited Russian as a primary foreign or second language and established English (followed by German and French) as key to national prosperity and global cooperation. While prior to 1989, international contacts of Eastern European and Soviet citizens were restrained and supervised, and the opportunity to use foreign languages was rather limited, the dissolution of communist regimes offered unlimited possibilities for international collaboration—and a pressing need to engage in them in view of the breakdown of the Soviet economy. New political and economic futures involve new national identity options—in particular those of “citizens of the world”—and, as a result, lead to a significant increase in foreign language learning motivation. While Russian, the language of the Big Brother, was often ridiculed and resisted in Eastern Europe, English is now receiving a warm welcome, and former teachers of Russian are being retrained as teachers of English.

Hungary provides an excellent example of this trend towards English and other European languages. The country’s realignment with the West has resulted in a marked increase in the numbers of those enrolled in foreign language public and private schools as well as those who take certification exams in these languages. In 1996, three times as many people took foreign language proficiency exams as in 1987: this trend documents both the growing interest in foreign language education and the realization of the importance of certified knowledge (Medgyes & Miklosy, 2000). The growing preoccupation with foreign language competence is continuously in the public eye as the one and only issue on which three different Hungarian governments elected since 1990 came to an agreement. The media endlessly discusses the insufficient language competence of the average Hungarian; employers publish increasing numbers of job advertisements in English to filter out the “linguistically deficient”; the bookstore windows are adorned by language books and dictionaries; and the streets of major Hungarian towns display “Learn English Fast and Easy” language school ads (Medgyes & Miklosy, 2000). It is not surprising then that even Hungarians, who previously did not see the relevance of English—or any other foreign language—to their personal and professional future, are reconsidering their attitudes and reimagining themselves as sophisticated multilinguals, engaged members of the European Union. On the other hand, as citizens of any small nation, they also exhibit ambivalence as to the possible involvement with NATO and the West and fears that English may come to contaminate and displace their own language (Biava, 2001; Medgyes & Miklosy, 2000).

Research in Israel provides another example of the increased symbolic value of English within the global marketplace and the communities that are imagined by English language learners. Kheimetz and Epstein’s (2001) study suggests that English is crucial in the professional and social integration of scientists from the former Soviet Union in Israel. As more and more professional meetings, Internet communication, and publications take place in English, it is English, rather than only Hebrew, that is instrumental for successful transformation of Soviet scientists into Israeli ones. Quantitative results of the study revealed significant differences

between those who studied English and those who studied either German or French regarding feelings of personal self-actualization and job satisfaction, and both statistical tests and personal interviews demonstrated that command of English was the determining factor for risk of losing a job. A successful physicist the authors interviewed for their study said that he pities Russian scientists who don't speak English, as they have no professional future ahead of them, and advised all Russians who would like to continue being scientists in Israel to study English as intensively as they can. In turn, another scientist who lost his job admitted that his lack of mastery of English narrowed his professional and social options and ultimately cost him his first job. Even though initially he did get a professional job in Israel, he couldn't read professional literature in English, nor could he follow the conversations of his colleagues whose Hebrew abounded in English terms: instead, he suspected that they were laughing at him behind his back. He cited the difficulties in communication, which stemmed both from low English proficiency and from low self-esteem, among the main reasons for losing the job.

To sum up, recent research in sociolinguistics, language policy, and language education also suggests that, in the global marketplace, national—and individual—identities are often constructed in relation to English as the language of world economy. Some countries, like Hungary, may encourage a greater role for English as a way to enter the global marketplace and create a more visible national identity, while individual citizens in non-English speaking countries may invest in English for career advancement purposes.

Ethnicity and the Ownership of English

Even in countries in which English is the dominant mother tongue, research suggests that there exists much ambivalence about who constitutes a "legitimate" speaker of English. The American writer David Mura (1991), a third-generation Japanese-American, once remarked in despair that "in the world of the tradition, [he] was unimagined" (p. 77). The utter invisibility of second- and third-generation Asian-Americans in the media led his classmates, and later his coworkers, to constantly challenge his "ownership" of English, which clashed, in their mind, with his Asian features. To researchers in language education, this practice does not come as a surprise: in many English-speaking contexts, the ownership of English by white immigrants is contested to a significantly lesser degree than that by racialized newcomers. Miller's (2000) ethnographic study of ESL students' socialization into the mainstream in an Australian high school demonstrates that white and fair-haired Bosnian students assimilate quickly, establishing friendships with the English-speaking students and appropriating a range of discourses in English, while the dark-haired Chinese students remain isolated from the mainstream. The Chinese students in her study stated that they had felt discriminated against, because neither their peers nor their teachers acknowledged their legitimacy as L2 users of English in the same way they acknowledged the legitimacy of their European immigrant classmates who resemble Australians physically. Similarly, Norton's (2000) research with immigrant women in Canada documents the case of the Vietnamese woman Mai, who perceived a "perfect Canadian" as one who was both white and English-speaking. During the study, Mai described the alienation that her nephews experienced as Chinese/Vietnamese people in Canada and explained how the eldest child, Trong, had chosen to change his name from a Vietnamese one to an Anglicized

one. Mai had objected to this practice and had said to her nephews that they should not reject their heritage, explaining, "With your hair, your nose, your skin, you will never be perfect Canadians" (p. 149). Like Mura and the Chinese students in Miller's study, Trong would remain unimaginable as a mainstream Canadian.

It would be highly erroneous, however, to posit that all newcomers in Australia, Canada, the U.S., or Britain aim to speak Standard English and emulate its white middle-class speakers. Ibrahim (1999) found that African students in a high school in Toronto were learning to reimagine themselves as Black, rather than as Sudanese or Nigerian, and by speaking what he calls *Black Stylized English* (BSE) to position themselves with regard to the racial divide constructed by the North American society around them. Similar arguments are brought up by Bailey (2000) with regard to Dominican American students in the U.S. who adopt African American English vernacular as a language of solidarity with their African American peers while simultaneously using Spanish to differentiate themselves from the same peers. This and other work suggests that in order to understand the learners' investments, we need to examine their multiple communities and understand who can and who cannot be imagined as a legitimate speaker of a particular language variety in a specific context.

The extent to which identity options are seen to be publicly visible and politically valued is implicated in the kinds of communities that language learners imagine and desire for themselves. In this regard, the media is central in the shaping of ethnic and racial identities, in particular with regard to language: while powerfully presenting and endorsing some identity options, the media can also make some identity options "invisible" or, at least, devalue and delegitimize them. The work of Stuart Hall (1992a, 1992b) has been particularly influential in documenting the ways in which the media reproduces a limited range of identities for minority citizens. With respect to questions of race, he notes that it is the silences that are highly meaningful: what isn't there says a great deal about what is or is not valued in a given society. A poignant example of the ability of popular culture and the media to shape language attitudes comes from a groundbreaking ethnographic study by Orellana (1994) that demonstrates that even the youngest children are very sensitive to both negative and positive images offered by the media. Following three Spanish-speaking children enrolled in a bilingual preschool in the US, the researcher found that these children's initial spontaneous use of English occurred when playacting at being superheroes and other figures from children's popular culture. One child, Carlos, also explicitly stated that when he grows up, he will speak only English because this is the language spoken by Ninja Turtles, Batman, and Peter Pan. Like few other studies, Orellana's work demonstrates that monolingual English-speaking characters, which successfully capture children's imagination, transmit powerful ideas about which linguistic identities and possible selves are preferable to others. What remains unsaid is the fact that some speakers of English are, in unforgettable Orwellian words, "more equal than others"; and that down the road, Carlos' ownership of English may be challenged on the grounds of his ethnicity, first or last name, or the color of his skin.

In short, it appears that ethnicity and race play an important role in institutional and individual imagined communities of legitimate speakers of English. And as English language learners reimagine their futures in a changing world, the question "Who owns English?" will become ever more strident and contested (see Norton, 1997).

English Language Learner or Multilingual Speaker?

Complementary to debates over who may be considered a legitimate speaker of English are debates over the framing and positioning of English language learners. Given the power of English within the larger global community, English language learners, the “marked” case, are often positioned within a deficit framework that limits the kinds of identities and communities that can be imagined by and for these learners. In English-speaking countries, in particular, those who have learned English as a second, third, or fourth language are often seen as non-native speakers, limited English proficiency students, interlanguage speakers, or language learners. A Japanese learner of English in Canada in Kanno and Applebaum’s (1995) study recalls that once a classmate yelled at her, “Are you deaf or ESL?” (p. 43). This classmate drew on a powerful—and ever-present in North America—discourse that equates bilingualism and non-native speaker status with disability and cognitive impairment (Hakuta, 1986).

As English language learners grow up, they become ever more sensitive to the label *ESL*. In contexts like South Africa, *second language* is often equated with *second class*. Thesen (1997) argues convincingly that the categories that are used to label English language learners in tertiary education in South Africa are highly political, and can have the unintended consequence of exacerbating the challenges these learners face. She draws on the work of Ndebele (1995) to make the case that the term *disadvantaged*, for example, is a cause for concern: “The namer isolates the named, explains them, contains them, and controls them. In this way a numerical majority can, in part through linguistic manipulation, simulate a majoritarian character” (p. 4).

Recently, several scholars challenged the deficit model, accusing mainstream linguistics and SLA theory of monolingual and ethnocentric biases and pointing out that in a world where more than half the population is bi- and multilingual, it is monolingual—and not bilingual—competence that is the marked case (Braine, 1999; Cook, 1992, 1999, 2002; Grosjean, 1998; Kachru, 1994; Lippi-Green, 1997; Sridhar, 1994). Instead of reproducing the native/non-native speaker dichotomy, these scholars proposed to bridge the fields of bilingualism and SLA and see previous *non-native speakers* as bilinguals (Grosjean, 1998) and as legitimate L2 users (Cook, 1999, 2002). However, while scholars continue battling against the monolingual bias on the pages of learned journals, the researchers’ plight remains ignored by the general public, which typically doesn’t read scholarly disquisitions. Thus, the monumental task of imagining diverse—but nevertheless legitimate—owners and users of English falls on the shoulders of public individuals: politicians, media personalities, and, in particular, writers.

Recent analyses demonstrate that the theme of reimagining language ownership dominates the pages of cross-cultural memoirs and fiction published in the United States, from Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* and Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* to Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (Pavlenko, 1998, 2001). This is not surprising, since in 1999 alone, the U.S. National Book Award in Fiction for an English language novel went to Ha Jin, a native of China, who had begun learning English at the age of 21, and four out of eight Guggenheim fellowships for fiction went to foreign-born non-native speakers of English (Novakovich & Shapard, 2000). Award-winning prose and poetry by bilingual writers, such as Julia Alvarez, Andrei Codrescu, Jerzy Kosinski, Kyoko Mori, or Bharati Mukherjee, have completely

changed the landscape of North American literature, redefining what it means to be an American writer.

The reimagining of linguistic membership and ownership takes place in the work of these and other bilingual writers in two ways. On the one hand, by composing their work in English, the authors appropriate the language, implicitly claiming their right to it. On the other, some also proclaim their linguistic rights and allegiances explicitly, stating, like Eva Hoffman (1989), that English is the language of their inner self. The written medium is ideal for this discursive battle over legitimate ownership: while in spoken interactions, opinions of some L2 users may be discounted by others due to their physical appearance or traces of non-standard accent in their speech, published texts constitute excellent equalizers and unique arenas where accents are erased and voices imbued with sufficient authority. Consequently, many contemporary bi- and multilingual authors and scholars explore the links between their multiple languages and selves in ways that were previously non-existent and/or impossible: challenging the essentialist notions of self; deconstructing various ethnic, national, colonial, and gender identities; creating new discourses of hybridity and multiplicity; and imagining new ways of “being American”—and bilingual—in the postmodern world. We can only hope that these hybrid and multilingual identities will find their way into the public media so that new generations can learn to imagine themselves as members of a linguistically diverse world, rather than one dominated by Standard English.

English and Gendered Identities

Cutting across postcolonial, global, and ethnic identities in relation to the learning of English is gender as a system of social and discursive relations (Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller, & Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001). Recent research demonstrates that in different contexts, English may offer language learners the possibility of imagining different gendered identity options for themselves. On the one hand, many women around the globe see learning English as a way of liberating themselves from the confines of gender patriarchy (Kobayashi, 2002; McMahill, 1997, 2001). A survey of 555 high school students in Japan found that female Japanese students are significantly more positive toward—and more interested in—learning English, training for English-language related professions, and traveling to English-speaking countries than their male counterparts (Kobayashi, 2002). As a result, in 1998, according to the Japanese Ministry of Education, 67% of foreign language majors among the university students were female, with English being the most popular choice. This trend is not surprising, since young women continue to be marginalized in mainstream Japanese society, and English teaching and translation offer them a socially sanctioned occupational choice, a profession that is “ladylike,” although not well paid. Further, McMahill argues that many young Japanese women consider English to be intrinsically linked to feminism and thus are motivated to learn it as a language of empowerment.

On the other hand, Goldstein (1997), Kouritzin (2000), and Norton (2000) suggest that immigrant women in Canada do not necessarily consider English to be the only key to social mobility and enhanced opportunity. At times, in particular workplaces, a greater mastery of English may lead to a decrease in productivity and lack of support from colleagues (Goldstein, 1997; Norton, 2000). In other contexts, immigrant women may choose not to attend English classes because of cultural

constraints that require them to prioritize their roles as housekeepers, mothers, wives, and caretakers. Still others may choose not to attend English classes if they feel that the English curriculum is not consistent with their desires for the future. Norton (2001) makes that case for two immigrant women who removed themselves from their English classes because their teachers did not appear sympathetic towards their investments in particular imagined communities. While Felicia from Peru was heavily invested in the local Peruvian community, Katarina from Poland was anxious for validation by a community of professionals. The central point, Norton argues, is that an imagined community presupposes an imagined identity—one that offers an enhanced range of possibilities for the future.

REIMAGINING ENGLISH TEACHING

The discussion above allows us to draw a number of implications that the imagined communities perspective has for language classrooms. To begin with, recent research suggests that the work of bilingual writers can be successfully appropriated for both ESL classrooms (Almon, 2001) and TESOL teacher education classrooms (Pavlenko, 2003), where it serves to challenge the dominant notions of native speakerhood and to give birth to discourses of resistance to dominant ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism. Writing appears particularly important in this approach, as written texts may represent uniquely safe spaces in which new identities can be invented and new multilingual voices “tried on” (Pavlenko, 2001). Norton’s (2000, 2001) work demonstrates that students’ non-participation in specific language practices can be explained through their investment in particular imagined communities and through their access (or lack thereof) to these communities. If we do not acknowledge the imagined communities of the learners, we may exacerbate their non-participation and impact their learning trajectories in negative ways. Kanno (2003) notes, further, that it is not only classrooms but also schools that have imagined communities. In her study of four schools in Japan that serve large numbers of bilingual students, she examines the relationship between the schools’ visions for their students’ future, their current policies and practices, and their students’ identities. She makes the case that it is the least privileged bilingual students who are socialized into the least privileged imagined communities, when it is precisely this group that would benefit from an education that would dare to imagine a different set of options for the future. We conclude with the hope that English language teachers in different parts of the globe may consider the ways in which our own multilingual classrooms can be reimagined as places of possibility for students with a wide range of histories, investments, and desires for the future.

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CHAPTER 40

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SOCIAL IDENTITY AMONG BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses academic achievement and social identity development among bilingual students with respect to changing demographics of increased linguistic diversity and poverty for school-aged children in the United States. Institutional policies and practices are described that lead to blaming the victims of institutional inequity for low test scores and high dropout rates. Contrasting paradigms in literacy research are also discussed in relation to how perspectives of monolingual meritocracy lead to language loss and perpetuation of deficit discourses that negatively affect social identity formation for bilingual students. The authors argue that educators can play an important role in transforming inequities in the politics and practices of schooling, and they provide a model for the successful academic achievement of English language learning (ELL) and bilingual students. The model includes three essential components for literacy development and academic achievement: (a) human resources, including ELL students, their families and communities, and ESL and bilingual education professionals; (b) dialogic pedagogy; and (c) a curriculum for democratic citizenship, and economic and community development.

INTRODUCTION

The academic underachievement of racial, linguistic, and cultural minority students has been documented consistently throughout the history of public education in the United States (see, for example, August & Hakuta, 1997; Kozol, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Despite intense educational reform efforts during the 1990s, the reading achievement gap between racial, linguistic, and cultural groups remained constant between 1992 and 2003: "At both grades 4 and 8, the average score gaps between White and Black students and between White and Hispanic students in 2003 were not found to differ significantly from those in 2002 or 1992" (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004, p. 13).

Similarly, the NCES reported no reduction in the reading achievement gap between 1998 and 2003 for low-income students (eligible for free or reduced lunch) as compared to higher-income students (not eligible for free or reduced lunch). Poverty among school-age children has remained at high levels in the United States, with obvious and predictable effects on student achievement. How can children learn if they are hungry, are carrying out shift work with their parents, or have severe dental problems? The dire economic and social conditions under which too many Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) English language learning (ELL) students live,