



**Title of Project:**

Investigating Identities of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in an Afterschool Book Club

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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

As the population of immigrant students has continued to grow, scholars and educators have focused their attention on the unique needs of this population in the United States. However, research has shown that many educators do not have sufficient background knowledge or experience in working with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Research shows that students' learning is reinforced if teachers incorporate students' background knowledge into the curriculum, especially if students are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (Moll, 2013). In addition, research has shown that literacy practices in schools often focus on native-English-speaking students, which might marginalize CLD students (Au, 1998; Au, 2013; Nieto, 2010). Moreover, many language and literacy studies have emphasized examining CLD students' literacy development in academic settings; however, few research studies have investigated literacy learning that takes place in a variety of settings outside of school. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine elementary CLD students' learning and identity positions through participation in an afterschool book club. In this study, I drew on a poststructuralist view which considers identity as multiple, dynamic, across time and space, and a site of struggle (Norton, 2011, 2013). One important tool to examine identity is Gee's (2011) conception of capital D Discourse. He defines the concept as ways of speaking/listening and reading/writing that show how people act, interact, value, feel, dress, think, and believe in order to communicate their social identities in different social communities (Gee, 2011).

**Research Questions**

- (1) What social practices contribute to the elementary school girls' participation in an afterschool book club?
- (2) What kinds of identities do CLD students construct in the afterschool book club?
- (3) What Discourses about language and culture emerge in the afterschool book club?



## **Research Methodology**

**Setting and Participants.** This qualitative study was part of a larger research project that was designed to improve 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>-grade elementary school girls' reading development and awareness of their gender roles. The afterschool book club took place on Fridays during the academic school year in an elementary school in Midwest of the United States. The members of the research team included university professors, doctoral students, and undergraduates who had an education degree. In the book club, each research member led a group of elementary school girls to read and respond to children's literature chosen by their own groups. The group discussion leaders also designed activities to invite the elementary school girls to participate in the group discussion. In this study, I focused on a group of 5<sup>th</sup> graders who had participated in my group for four semesters in the afterschool book club. I paid attention to girls who had culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and examined how they performed consistently with the identities they had constructed in different social practices.

**Data Collection and Data Analysis.** Data collection took place from January 2013 to May 2016. Data resources included audio and video recordings from book club discussions, field notes from observations, semi-structured interviews, and the girls' oral and written responses that reflected their personal stories and participation in the book club.

My data analysis was not linear; it was retrospective, which enabled me to identify and confirm emerging themes. For instance, I revisited the old files to create interview questions to triangulate my findings and discover new themes. I categorized the data through open-coding and analytical coding from various data resources in order to triangulate the findings. I asked questions and used Gee's (2011) analytical tool to find out how the CLD girls' constructed *identities, relationships, and sign systems and knowledge*. I also adopted Fairclough's (2011) suggestions for examining the grammatical feature of the texts, for instance, how pronouns were used in each CLD girl's conversations regarding language, ethnicity, race, or gender. Moreover, I also looked for evidence of power behind the discourse, as suggested by Fairclough's (2001) dimensions of critical discourse analysis, to explore how the CLD girls' discourses and identities were influenced not only by face-to-face interactions but also by larger social orders. Specifically, the various types of data collection allowed me to triangulate data and use multiple methods to investigate a given issue (Denzin, 1978).

## **Summary of Findings**

The findings of the study can be separated into three major themes: elementary school girls' participation and community in the afterschool book club; CLD girls' identities, and their language and discourse. In terms of participation, the findings showed that the afterschool book club provided multiple functions for the elementary school girls regarding their emotional, cognitive, academic, and social needs. For instance, the routines that took place in the book club and the members' active participation were important to the creation of the figured worlds of the book club. According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2003), figured worlds "rest upon people's abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized 'as if' realms" (p. 49). Also, the book club offered a safe space for the girls to share their personal stories and allowed emotions to enter the group discussion. Some girls were more willing to share their struggles and felt more comfortable questioning the social norms in the discussion group. Additionally, the conversation and discussion of different gender roles and discursive gender practices were crucial to the girls' awareness of their gender identities and power relations. One CLD student



reported that participating in the afterschool book club had allowed her to learn from her peers and be more aware of her own agency, which helped her construct different identities for both inside and outside of classroom settings.

In terms of CLD students' identity positions, the afterschool book club provided a safe social space for the girls to maintain multiple power relations among the members, leading to the creation of alternative literacy practices. Moreover, the afterschool book club allowed girls to learn to respect one another and provided a venue for CLD girls' stories to be heard and valued in the book club. Data showed that both CLD and non-CLD students gained awareness and sympathy when they were exposed to topics and issues related to different cultures through reading and discussing children's literature in the group. Furthermore, the book club was also a space to explore multimodal ways of learning and multiple identities. These elements were important to the construction of the book club community. As a researcher, my understanding of the CLD girls' identities and discourses also increased.

In terms of CLD students' language and discourses, the findings showed that the CLD students' diverse background was important to the creating of their ethnic identities. Also, the discourses emerging from the group discussion about race, ethnicity, friendship, and gender also contributed to their identity construction. Lastly, although multiple identities and discourses were discovered, CLD students' multiple identities sometimes created personal struggles, particularly when they participated regularly in different social communities.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study can help provide suggestions for policymakers and practitioners who are interested in providing effective English education for CLD students of different age groups. The findings indicated that CLD students' identity positions were complex and that both the use of their heritage language(s) and the language(s) used in their adopted culture affected their identity construction and their participation in the different social worlds available to them. Therefore, it is essential for ESL/EFL educators to recognize and gain a deeper understanding of CLD students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and incorporate them as funds of knowledge in formal classroom settings in order to empower CLD students (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2011). Additionally, it is important for educators to take other sociocultural factors into consideration to embrace diversity in classrooms.

For teachers of literacy and language education, providing a safe space for early adolescents or students who might be underrepresented to ask their questions and talk about their concerns regarding individual differences, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or social class, is imperative for CLD students to explore their struggles and understand their emerging multiple identities. One possible way to expose elementary school students to power tensions is by incorporating children's literature dealing with different social issues into the curriculum and inviting students to respond to the literature through discussions and conversations about their life experiences.

For policymakers, teacher education programs play a significant role in preparing teachers to meet students' diverse learning needs and enhance all students' awareness of diversity around them. Therefore, teacher education programs should provide a curriculum for pre-service teachers that allow them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of CLD students' language and literacy learning patterns, such as how literacy practices in their homes and communities affect their emerging identities. Another alternative suggestion for policymakers is



to invite CLD students' family members or individuals who have a similar cultural background to share their life experiences to validate CLD students and create opportunities for all students to learn about different cultures.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study can help shed light into conversation about the relationship between the construction of identity and learning in the language and literacy education. However, it is worth noting that the discussion of identities and literacy practices presented in this study were situated in the context of an elementary school as the girls participated in and interacted with the members in the book club. Thus, it is essential to carefully take complicated sociocultural factors and students' social relationships into consideration when examining students' identities in different social contexts in future research.



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