

## Hidden Teachers, Invisible Students: Lessons Learned from Exemplary Bilingual Paraprofessionals in Secondary Schools

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*Excerpt from fieldnotes: After school today I saw Talia with middle school students clustered about her, asking questions in loud voices, all at once, about everything from help in talking to another teacher at their small Idaho school; how much school candy costs; a question about when a parent should arrive at Talia's house for a ride to that night's school Open House; an invitation to a sister's first communion. Finally, when a student asked her whether the school bus was likely to be late picking him up at his rural stop again the next day, Talia threw her hands up in the air, laughed, and said, "Look, I know you guys think I know everything, but sometimes I just don't!"*

In recent years the number of students who are English Language Learners (ELL) in U.S. schools has increased dramatically (Mercado, 2001). When

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they meet bilingual paraprofessionals like Talia in the classroom and on school grounds, ELL students learn that these paraprofessionals *do* seem to know everything (or at least the important things to survive at school). Bilingual paraprofessionals help students move through multiple, complex, unfamiliar school settings and make connections to life outside school.

In the northwest states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, school districts serve a student population whose home languages and cultures are increasingly diverse. In urban areas of Washington and Oregon, schools serve Hmong, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican, South American, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, and Filipino students. In many rural areas of these states, linguistic minority students (most of whom are of Mexican descent) comprised more than 50% of the total student body by the early 1990's (The State of Washington's Children, 1992). Schools need teachers and staff who understand ELL students' experiences, and who can communicate with second language learners easily and with sensitivity.

At the same time, there has been a steady increase in the number of bilingual paraprofessionals employed in Title I programs, special education, and districts with ELL and bilingual programs. Many rural and semi-urban districts, like the districts in this study, have opted to use bilingual paraprofessionals as the only staff available to assist (and often to teach) linguistic minority students in a given school (Torres-Guzman & Goodwin, 1995; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995). Over 95% of paraprofessionals in schools today are women working for little more than minimum wage with no benefits (French, 1999). Recent data also indicate that the work of paraprofessionals in all areas of education has shifted from mostly clerical tasks to greater instructional, diagnostic, and counseling responsibilities. The paraprofessionals in the present study reflect these trends.

Fieldwork in this study of bilingual paraprofessionals in four Northwest school districts suggested that they possessed specialized linguistic skills, teaching dispositions, and cultural mediation abilities on which they drew as they interacted with other classroom teachers, ELL students, and parents. However, much of their work as paraprofessionals in the secondary schools studied remained unsupported and officially unrecognized.

### **Goals of the Study**

Within this context, then, the aims of this three-year, multiple-site ethnographic study were to closely and collaboratively examine the work of four exemplary bilingual paraprofessionals in secondary schools in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Data suggested that these bilingual paraprofessionals had, against the odds, made visible their largely invisible ELL students within their respective school districts. They had reached ELL students in ways that most other teachers had not, worked within nearly overwhelming demands on their time, under fragmented schedules, and received very little pay or institutional support for their efforts. Early in the study, it

was clear that these largely hidden teachers were making positive changes in their schools and in English language learners' lives. How had they accomplished these things? What might teacher educators learn from them in order to better prepare future teachers to work with linguistic minority students?

A broad purpose of this ethnographic study, then, was to collaboratively investigate and describe the most effective characteristics of paraprofessionals' work with ELL students across a range of secondary school settings. More specifically, the paraprofessionals and two university researchers sought to identify and describe crucial aspects of the "culturally responsive pedagogy" (Gay, 2000) which bilingual paraprofessionals employed as they successfully met ELL students' needs.

### **Theoretical Anchors for the Study**

Three complementary critical theory perspectives provide a set of useful constructs for data analysis in this study: Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction; a critical sociological perspective on the analysis of U.S. majority/minority race relations, from which comes Baker's (1995) concept of "ideological colonialism"; and emerging conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy.

#### ***Cultural Capital and Cultural Reproduction in Linguistically Diverse Communities***

Scholars who subscribe to Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) theories of cultural reproduction propose that schools reproduce and maintain the attitudes and beliefs of their larger communities (Grenfell, 1998). Bourdieu (1991) explains that, in communities with many cultural groups, different ways of using language, different values and beliefs, even different styles of dress, serve to constitute and display those groups' cultural capital. Any group's cultural capital is intimately connected to the perceived prestige of that group within the community. In the four diverse school districts in this study, the native English-speaking groups were perceived by most community members as having the most prestige and the most cultural capital. On the other hand, the cultural capital of linguistic minority groups was significantly less.

Critical theorists posit that "children in school are evaluated on how closely their cultural capital mirrors that of the dominant society, [which is] reflected in the requirements for success in white middle-class schooling," regardless of the linguistic or cultural backgrounds of the students in the school and regardless of their actual abilities to learn school curriculum (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995). Educational ethnographers have suggested that students and teachers "do schooling" primarily by learning to act and talk together in culturally-defined, socially acceptable ways (Hicks, 1995). From a cultural reproduction perspective, students in schools develop their own understanding of the cultural capital possessed by

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different community groups as they learn the interaction styles and cultural knowledge which “deserve” to be studied and replicated within a given school and community.

Teachers’ — and bilingual paraprofessionals’ — ways of speaking are imbued with authority (or not) by virtue of their status within the school, which is in turn influenced by the cultural capital they possess within the larger community. As they participate (or not) in school activities, students quickly learn who has cultural capital, who can and who is expected to easily take part in “legitimate” classroom discourse, and who is routinely excluded. In a study like the present one, undertaken in districts with large numbers of linguistic minority students, educational stakeholders’ attitudes and beliefs about who can legitimately speak and what languages are to be used in classrooms have special relevance.

#### *Ideological Colonialism*

For Baker (1995) and other sociologists (e.g., Foley, 1990), communities can generate, and schools can reproduce, a sense of “ideological colonialism” held by mainstream, powerful stakeholders in a community vis-à-vis minority community members. In his study of race relations in rural towns in southern Idaho, Baker (1995) found that the attitudes of the White community members were clearly expressed in a school system which was invested in increasing the cultural capital of White community members and de-valuing the cultural capital of minority group members. Most Whites believed that “[school] failure of Mexican Americans is the consequence of individual and cultural deficiencies of the Mexican American community” (p. 19).

Baker (1995) used the term “ideological colonialism” to describe the prevailing attitude of English-speaking Whites toward minorities in their communities. Such an attitude, he writes, “enables its believers to see oppressive race relations as normal. This is accomplished, in part, by ignoring the existence” of the minority population (p. 19). Further, Baker explained, the prevailing ideological colonialism among those with the most cultural capital meant that their view of the inherent “correctness” of their own American way of life prohibited them from changing — or even questioning — school procedures that failed to accommodate linguistic minority students (p. 20).

The ideological colonialism espoused by communities and schools like those in this study effectively prevented most school faculty from questioning the reproduction of inequitable practices and conditions for linguistic minority students in schools and for linguistic minority residents in the larger community.<sup>1</sup> Bilingual and bicultural paraprofessionals, on the other hand, were not supporters of prevailing ideological colonialism. Rather, they found themselves struggling against ideologically colonial attitudes and policies and encouraging other faculty in their districts to recognize their negative impact on linguistic minority students’ access to quality education.

### ***Culturally Responsive Pedagogy***

Early fieldwork in this study suggested that exemplary bilingual paraprofessionals connected school curriculum and instruction to ELL students' lives in meaningful ways. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Gay (2000), Irvine (1992), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Lipka (1998), we define culturally responsive pedagogy as having three salient features: (1) the use of students' cultural knowledge to help them create meaning and understand the world; (2) a focus on not only academic success, but social success in multiple cultural settings in schools and communities; and (3) the empowerment of students to critically examine their education and their roles in creating a democratic society.

The cultural contexts for each teacher in any school are unique, and in a constant state of flux, as new students and families enter and leave. Therefore, as the work of Lipka (1998) and Collier (2002) suggests, school teachers and paraprofessionals need the energy and the ability to increase their knowledge about community life during a continuing process of self-education as communities change. If students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Nett, & Gonzalez, 1992) outside school include the handling of masa dough and chukar hunting (as they do in two schools in this study), teachers need to be familiar with making tortillas and know when opening day is for bird season. The development of culturally responsive pedagogy is an ongoing process as teachers make learners' knowledge central to their construction of knowledge about school curriculum and their worlds.

## **Methods**

Researchers and paraprofessionals employed ethnographic methods for studying life in schools and communities outlined in Spindler and Spindler (1992), Watson-Gegeo (1988), and Cazden (2001). Since describing and documenting the expertise of the paraprofessionals was central to the study, it was undertaken collaboratively with the paraprofessionals' participation in data collection and analysis.

A multiple-site, multiple-year format was adopted, since we were interested in bilingual paraprofessionals' work with students over time in a range of secondary school settings. Eisenhart (2001) notes that in ethnographic studies which cover several settings, "the "specialness" of one site is lost; what is gained is the ability to make connections among distinctive discourses and practices from site to site" (p. 221). In this manner, "attention is redirected to the cultural forms that connect and construct various people in context, regardless of their previous social affiliations or cultural traditions" (pp. 221-222).

Moreover, as Heath (1996) and Cazden (2001) have suggested, neither communities nor schools nor students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are fixed cultural entities. Students, teachers, and families move — often effortlessly — through multiple cultural contexts every day. The different perspectives encountered in four distinct schools by university researchers mirrored the daily realities of the paraprofession-

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als as they moved from classrooms to playgrounds to community settings with ELL students.

In the fall of 1999, all bilingual paraprofessionals in four school districts in secondary schools in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho were identified and their work descriptions catalogued. As university researchers visited the schools in these four districts and began fieldwork, a number of very dedicated bilingual paraprofessionals were identified by teachers and students as “highly effective” in terms of their relationship with students, teaching styles, and commitment to education.

As data collection progressed, four outstanding paraprofessionals in two rural and two semi-urban districts were asked to participate in an in-depth examination of their work. From October 2000 to June 2002, university researchers and the paraprofessionals kept fieldnotes about their various duties and the multiple cultural contexts they and their students typically encountered; collected relevant school documents; participated in formal and informal interviews with students and with school and community members; and developed questions for further exploration. University researchers visited all schools frequently, and selected lessons taught by paraprofessionals in a whole-class setting were audio- and video-taped over the 2001-2002 school year. These video and audio tapes provided a rich data set for exploration of classroom discourse patterns, instructional styles, and culturally relevant pedagogy used by paraprofessionals. Transcription and analysis of classroom videotapes was undertaken according to critical classroom discourse analysis methods outlined in Kumaravadivelu (2000), Cazden (2001); and Green and Wallat (1981).

### **Bilingual Paraprofessionals and Their Schools**

The paraprofessionals in this study<sup>2</sup> have diverse linguistic backgrounds and teaching experiences. They work in different schools in three different states; their districts ranged from very small and rural (only 1100 students total in grades K-12 in an agricultural town) to very large and semi-urban (over 21,000 students in a mid-sized port city). See Table 1, “Bilingual Paraprofessionals: Personal Information,” and Table 2, “Bilingual Paraprofessionals: District Information.”

#### ***Talia: The System Manipulator***

Talia worked two years as an ELL paraprofessional in a small, rural Idaho school district. About 27% of the students there are designated as ELL students, but poor identification and tracking procedures for secondary students means that this number is probably low. Her duties comprised teaching, identifying ELL students, administering standardized tests, counseling families, translating school documents, and serving as a parent-school liaison for students grades 6-12. During her third year, Talia was hired under emergency certification as the district’s only English as a Second Language (ESL) and Spanish teacher, serving students at both the middle school and high school.

Table 1  
Bilingual Paraprofessionals: Personal Information

Paraprofessional	Age	Years in District by Spring 2002	Native Language	Country of Origin
Ileana	53	12	Spanish	Cuba (lived in Panama, Peru)
Sarah	49	6	English	U.S. (lived in Brazil)
* Talia	25	4	English	U.S. (lived in Mexico)
* Maria	31	6	Spanish	U.S. (grew up in L.A.)

\* It should be noted that in the final year of the study, both Talia and Maria had completed state and university requirements for their teaching certificates. They remained in their districts as ELL teachers; their responsibilities remained much the same.

Table 2  
Bilingual Paraprofessionals: District Information

Paraprofessional	City & State	Schools Served By Para	Total # Students	Total # of ESL Students	#ESL Students "Covered" by Para
Ileana	Vintage, WA	1(HS)	2000	700	100
Sarah	Beaver, WA	1(HS)	200	31	20
Talia	Easton, ID	2 (MS, HS)	725	200	75
Maria	Westville, OR	1(HS)	300	200	70

In our study, Talia became known as the "system manipulator" because she had worked to pull her schools into compliance with existing state and federal guidelines for serving ELL students. In the process she learned a great deal of school law. In spite of initial resistance from some teachers to her efforts on behalf of "kids who are just going to drop out anyway," Talia designed and began to teach an ambitious

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ELL curriculum. Talia is in her mid-twenties. She grew up in eastern Oregon with her English-speaking family, and lived several years in Mexico during her high school and college years as she completed her Spanish language degree. She passed the national TESL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) PRAXIS exam her third year in the district. Enrolled in night and summer classes at a local university during 2001 and 2002, she earned her state certification as an ELL and Spanish teacher by the third year of the study (fall 2002).

#### ***Maria: The Pushy Lady***

Maria worked for five years in her rural Oregon district as an ELL aide. In her town, over 50% of the students are ELL. Most ELL students are of Mexican descent. Maria “covered” both the middle school and elementary school, working with groups of ELL students in classrooms and hallways, going from class to class with groups of students, sharing recess and bus duty with other aides, translating homework for students and parents, and testing ELL learners twice a year.

Maria dubbed herself in the beginning of the study as a “pushy lady” due to her energetic, confrontational approach to student advocacy, often in the face of strong resistance from school administrators. She was a community activist, elected repeatedly to serve on her local political action committee and the Migrant Council. In her early thirties, she has three school-aged children. Maria grew up in Los Angeles in a Spanish-dominant family, learning English as her second language in school. When her school district refused to give her time off during the week to pursue courses in certification, she quit her paraprofessional job for a year to complete most of her teaching degree requirements. In the second year of the study, summer 2001, her district re-hired her under emergency certification as the high school ELL teacher. During the study’s final year, she earned her teaching certification, and is working toward an ELL endorsement.

#### ***Sarah: The Communicator***

Sarah has worked eight years as a paraprofessional in her mid-sized Washington school district. Her district has only 2% ELL students, many of whom come to school as recent immigrants from all parts of the world. This year, Sarah works with 20 of the 30 ELL students in one high school, but other years she has worked in as many as four schools, helping students with coursework in all their classes, working to involve them in all aspects of school life whenever possible.

Sarah, the “communicator,” has been an effective broker for her students and her school’s ELL program. Often Sarah is called to the office as soon as a new student arrives; after meeting with the student and family members, she quickly finds classes and teachers who will best meet the needs and strengths of that student. Her sound advice for placing ELL students is respected. She is in her late forties and has two grown daughters. Sarah’s native language is English, but she speaks Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian fluently, a result of living and working in Brazil for

many of her adult years. She is working toward school certification in a career-ladder program at a local university.

***Ileana: The Shining Example***

Ileana has worked for twelve years as a paraprofessional in a large urban district in Washington. Over 35% of the students are ELL. Ileana's work with students involved assisting ELL learners with all their school coursework in the school's special "ELL Wing," teaching computer classes in the school's general vocational program, acting as a social services link for students and families and the school, and finding ways to draw new immigrant families into her district.

Ileana is in her mid-fifties, with three grown children. She grew up speaking Spanish in Cuba, and has since lived in Panama, Peru, and the United States. In the 2000/2001 school year, Ileana was named Top Paraprofessional for her district and for the entire state of Washington, due to her outstanding work in and out of school with second language learners, their families, and other teachers. Ileana loved her work in the ELL Wing, but her varied duties often took her into parts of the high school and outside community where ELL students were misunderstood. Another teacher in the district notes, "Even though there's an awareness in the ELL wing about issues our kids deal with, many other teachers really don't get it. For them, it's like the wing is here to fix these kids, so that we can then teach them." Ileana will complete her teaching degree as part of a career-ladders program with a local university in 2003, when she expects certification as both a language and a computer literacy teacher.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy within Eurocentric Schools**

So what, exactly, was it about these paraprofessionals which enabled them to reach ELL students, teach them well, and keep them in school? It wasn't an easy task, as the schools in which they worked were largely traditional and Eurocentric. Many teachers and administrators believed, as one teacher put it, that ELL students needed to be "brought up to speed in English" before they might ever have anything to contribute to the schools. In the four districts in the study, the schools typically did not, in Dilworth and Brown's (2001) terms, "form and maintain connections with their students within their social contexts" if those students and their families were linguistic minority group members (p. 654).

Talia, Maria, Sarah, and Ileana all addressed ideological colonialism in their schools through culturally responsive pedagogy. The intimate connections they created and sustained with students enabled them to mediate home-school differences and teach effectively. As culturally responsive educators, they were all able to (1) use students' cultures to create meaning as they studied academic content; (2) help students reach academic success through careful attention to their social and

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cultural success in and out of school; and (3) empower students and families to question school methods and procedures used in educating language minority students, re-designing home-school relationships as necessary for students' success. Table 3 provides an overview of ways in which bilingual paraprofessionals enacted effective practices across these three dimensions. Selected vignettes are presented below which illustrate how these paraprofessionals embraced and enacted a culturally responsive pedagogy.

***Using Students' Cultural Knowledge  
To Create Meaning in the Classroom***

“When students discovered that I was fluent in their languages, both colloquial and formal — and very comfortable and knowledgeable about Mexican families because of my years there — they began to trust me. Some were initially taken aback by the amount of effort an Anglo girl was willing to put forth for them... these students need a liaison between cultures, between administration, faculty, parents and students, so they can learn,” wrote Talia in the first year of the study. A familiarity with ELL students' home languages and range of cultural experiences enabled bilingual paraprofessionals to bring students' worlds into their instruction in the content areas by using student interests, bringing in multicultural materials, and using a more open interactional style which reflects talk patterns in the larger community.

**Table 3  
Overview of Bilingual Paraprofessionals'  
Effective Culturally Responsive Practices**

<b>Culturally Responsive Practice</b>	<b>Examples (how practice is enacted by bilingual paraprofessionals)</b>
I. Using students' cultural knowledge to create meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Tap student interest and knowledge in daily work</li> <li>B. Expand/offer multicultural materials</li> <li>C. Change/adapt incentives</li> <li>D. Use open teaching style; mirror student talk patterns</li> </ul>
II. Promoting academic, social, and cultural success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Share high expectations explicitly and frequently</li> <li>B. Design lessons which invite talk and collaboration</li> <li>C. Plan for, offer assistance outside school</li> <li>D. Provide access to essential services, learning tools, and caring school and community members</li> </ul>
III. Empowering students and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Find ways to strengthen parent/teacher relationships and communication</li> <li>B. Help students and parents critically examine assignments and curriculum</li> <li>C. Act as educational role model, “critical consumer”</li> <li>D. Use community resources in L1 to help students learn secondary content prior to assessment in L2</li> </ul>

*Using student interests.* Bilingual paraprofessionals always tried to tap into students' knowledge during instruction. For example, Maria noticed that the regular classroom teacher was teaching her lesson about parts of speech by referring to classroom objects in order to help students recognize nouns. When Maria's small group of ELL students were unable to complete a worksheet which required them to identify nouns in different sentences, Maria used a different approach. Rather than referring to classroom objects (e.g., a door), Maria asked her students to stop worrying about the nouns on the worksheet and to start thinking about:

What do you use when you go out to a party? What is the first thing you put on when you get dressed? I went through that route. They said, "my boots, mi cintura [my belt]..." and I would go, "do you know that you just gave me all nouns?" In that conversation, they didn't think they were learning anything, but they actually gave me what their teacher wanted. And they just looked at me like, "Oh, THOSE are nouns!"

*Expanding multicultural materials in the curriculum.* Like Maria's students, most of Talia's ELL students are of Mexican descent. She has her own growing library of books in Spanish and in English and multicultural materials. She looks for books which cover topics of interest to secondary school readers whose tastes are those of teen readers, but whose control over new language is limited (bilingual books about motorcycle racing, for example, are popular with her middle schoolers). Talia has also worked with the school librarian to offer "Accelerated Reader" points for quality multicultural books which are not currently part of the program, so her students have more incentive to read books which feature characters and authors from minority language backgrounds: "Otherwise, they don't want to read those books, because they don't get points for them... But that's been an uphill battle with the school system, to change the Accelerated Reader program that way."

*Using an open interactional style in teaching.* The ways in which teachers talk with students in schools has been documented as an important part of culturally responsive pedagogy (Monzo & Rueda, 2000). Data in this study suggest that the discursive practices used by bilingual paraprofessionals with ELL students diverged from the "normal," mostly-teacher-controlled interaction patterns used by regular school faculty. One example from Talia's work with junior high students in the third year of the study to illustrate this typical open instructional style.<sup>3</sup>

One day, eight of Talia's ELL middle-school students (all low-level English language beginners, ranging in age from 12 to 16) chose to read a story about a clever fox escaping from a hungry wolf for their weekly group reading lesson. As part of a spontaneous, seventeen-minute pre-reading discussion, Talia and the students collaboratively developed a definition of the English word *trick*, a concept which would be central to the story. Students discussed many possible meanings: the idea of "Trick or Treat"; the phrase one student had heard, "He trick [*sic*] me!";

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and the Spanish word *trampiza* as a possible cognate. Students vehemently protested when Talia said “Okay, let’s move the discussion along...lemme give you an example.” Finally, however, Talia made up a silly anecdote about two girls in her ELL class who tricked a friend by exchanging clothes. Over laughter from the girls, the class decided that a trick might be a bad or scary thing to do to someone else, and the stage was set for them to read about a deceitful wolf who is tricked by a clever fox.

Analysis of this transcript suggests that Talia’s interactional style in the classroom had positive consequences for her students’ use of their developing English skills. During the collaborative definition process, which was fast-paced and highly conversational, Talia accepted nearly all student utterances which were conceptually appropriate as worthy of her (and other students’) attention, no matter which language was used. Similar discursive practices have been shown to be a hallmark of culturally sensitive and effective second language instruction in multicultural settings (Ernst-Slavit, 1997; Wenger & Ernst-Slavit, 1999).

Certainly it would have taken Talia less time to just give the students the meaning of the word *trick*, or to offer a Spanish equivalent right off the bat. However, such a practice would have cut off much fruitful discussion; it would have cast her in the role of expert language user; it would have cast her students in the passive role of unknowing, inexpert users of English — a role which they played throughout the rest of the school day. In contrast, Talia’s open style afforded students the opportunity to make more personal connections to new vocabulary in English. It also allowed her to gain important information about their cognitive schemas for English grammar.

While Talia was the undisputed discussion leader during work with students, her students were often very noisy. There was very little of the “declined talk and empty bidding” (Malcom, 1982) which effectively served to silence ELL students in other instructional settings in their secondary schools. Both Talia and her students appeared to be able to follow — and respond to — several related conversations at once with ease. When Talia sent her students home with tape recorders as part of a language assignment, she noted that “lots of conversations at the same time” was a common occurrence in her students’ households. In short, Talia’s ways of talking in school seemed to match more closely the ways in which her ELL students talked in conversational settings in their community.

#### ***Promoting Academic Success Through Social and Cultural Success***

A second important aspect of the culturally responsive pedagogy practiced by bilingual paraprofessionals in this study involved their abilities to link academic success to students’ social and cultural success. They enacted this agenda in their consistently high expectations for second language learners, by developing lessons which encouraged social interaction, and by planning for academic success and social well-being inside and outside of school.

*High expectations of ELL students.* All the paraprofessionals in this study expected their students to learn English and to graduate. Each day, Talia and Maria, who both worked in communities where prejudice against linguistic minority students was high, faced the knowledge that their students were not expected to perform in other teachers' classes. It came as shock to some ELL students, therefore, that their bilingual paraprofessionals were not prepared to let them opt out of classroom discussions or homework assignments.

During one class period, Talia kept pushing for a response from one of her male students, even though his body language clearly suggested that he wasn't about to participate (head pushed down into his chest, arms crossed, a sullen expression on his face). After a full two minutes of her repeated requests for his interpretation of a point made in the ongoing class discussion (which seemed like an eternity to the classroom researcher observing this event), he muttered a response in Spanish which prompted an outburst from fellow class members. Engaged (and possibly enraged), he sat up to defend his position, with Talia scaffolding his responses in English when necessary. After class, when he asked Talia to translate some materials from another class from Spanish to English, Talia grinned at him and said, "No, my friend, that's something you have to do yourself. You bring me a draft – and THEN I'll help you." Muttering angrily, he left the classroom. But a few days later, he returned with a page of English writing for her to look over.

Maria's expectations extended beyond students' classroom performance to their behavior outside school. "They want the guidance and feedback. Some of them would come up to me and tell me, 'Oh I got busted the other day...'" and I would just lecture to them, a massive chew-out. I was just really upset. I tell them, 'How can you do that, I expect so much more out of you, how dare you come up to me and tell me?' But still they let me know...It's like they want me to chew them out, to push them."

*Lessons which encourage social interaction and help from friends.* Bilingual paraprofessionals routinely employed a variety of collaborative teaching methods, in which ELL students must talk through new concepts together, sharing advice and helping each other.

In a lesson about spelling words with *ing* endings, for example, Talia had individual students draw a slip of paper with a target word on it out of a hat. As the individual mimed the word for the class, pairs of students seated at their desks shouted out ideas for what the word might be. Pair members were allowed to repeat a given word to each other, but not to help with the spelling of the word itself. Students rotated around the room and located drawings of the actions represented to place on the front bulletin board. These pictures were labeled by class members with the correct spellings, as students checked their word lists at the end of the period against a master list shown on an overhead projector.

The room buzzed with noise during the time it took to act out, write, locate, and finally label the 20 targeted spelling words. However, the "motion and commotion"

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were conducive to learning, because students were all talking about the enacted words, their pronunciations, and the *ing* pattern (rather than merely copying spellings from each other or the board). This activity — which served as a pretest for spelling words required in the students' mainstream English classes — was much more engaging exercise for students than simply listening to Talia read a list of spelling words. In addition, it incorporated aspects of Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977), multiple representations of new vocabulary (pictures of words, acting out words, written words), and ample opportunity for students to discuss the *ing* pattern as part of the present progressive tense. All of these strategies have been shown to be important for students engaged in mastering grade-level curriculum while learning a second language in school (Faltis, 2001).

*Planning for academic and social success inside and outside of school.* Ileana's work in the large Vintage school district is a clear illustration of cultural mediation for academic and cultural success. "Students come to Ileana for many things," noted another teacher. "For help with homework, sure, but most often for advice on just how to get along in school, on survival issues — how they and their families can figure out what to do to get along in this place." For example, three sisters came to Ileana when their family decided to purchase a home computer. Ileana worked with the girls and their mother at home to set it up, install software, and showed them how it could help in their schoolwork.

Ileana's school days were filled with teaching and assisting students all over her building. But her nights and weekends were often filled with assisting and teaching families of ELL students as they negotiated entry into a new culture and country. A school week in December was typical as Ileana

... included three Latino kids in the district's homeless program; also arranged an eye exam for one Latino child and interpreted during the visit; drove one Latino boy to the hospital after he fractured his foot during a school assembly; coordinated a meeting for Hispanic students and school faculty about the students as guest speakers in a Hispanic seminar; contacted social services to arrange gifts for a Hispanic family in extreme need over the holidays (they all got something!); met with a Hispanic father concerned about his son's and daughter's graduation...

In her large district, Sarah's workload is similar. Her "extra" duties often come as she covers the school's ELL Room, which she described as "a haven for the ELL students." There, they drop in to ask everything that they don't understand about school, from "how to get an absence excused to how to deal with racist comments...they trust me to deal with any and all of these problems with equal ease."

### *Empowering Students and Families*

An important final component of the paraprofessionals' culturally responsive pedagogy became the empowerment of students and their families to critically examine and support their children's schooling. Talia, Maria, Sarah, and Ileana

helped parents and teachers strengthen their relationships, helped students examine their own curriculum, and helped students and their English-speaking teachers find ways to access grade-level curriculum in ways that made sense to students.

*Helping parents meet English-speaking teachers on common ground.* Maria's district is tiny, but feelings of resentment about the "ELL problem" run deep in many school buildings. Over half of all the students in the district speak English as a second language, but only a handful of teachers have had the experience themselves of what it takes to learn another language in school.

To combat resentful and biased attitudes in her district, Maria carried her student and family advocacy into the political arena. In the second year of the study, she was elected to her town Migrant Political Action Committee. She has since lobbied for improved summer migrant education programs and better school outreach to Hispanic parents. Now, her proposed after-school parent room is open at the elementary school. Maria explained: "This room is just a place where parents know they can come and talk to a teacher, and find out how they can really help their child. And they do come. They don't have to make a big appointment or anything, and they ask questions and talk about this and that. They sit there with their kids and talk about school. For so many parents, it was hard to build a relationship with an Anglo teacher."

A kindergarten teacher across from the parent room noted that "there are parents in there nearly all the time. We are still sometimes unsure what to do with them — they make center materials for us, they want to help...we are all still learning."

*Helping students examine curriculum.* Maria knew how disengaged many ELL students felt about their school curriculum. One night, she went home and wrote a poem about how she felt in her own school experiences, including some college courses she was taking for her certification which included these lines: "Through other people's eyes/My outer structure is viewed and criticized...Through other people's eyes/My culture and thoughts are threats . . . Through other people's eyes/My accent may cause concern or contempt . . . Through other people's eyes/I am not seen as what I am . . . a gift from God!"

When she shared her writing with students, it prompted a long discussion about how they felt about school in Westville, what they planned to do when they graduated, and why their writing assignments for English classes seemed so "stupid." This discussion "cleared the air a little" said Maria. "Then some of them were able to get back to it [completing required English assignments]. It helped them to see that I was going through some of the same things in the college courses I was taking with mostly Anglo students at the same time." While we note that culturally responsive teachers try to work with students to question curriculum, and not just "get them to do it," Maria herself is seen by students as an important role model for empowerment. One student said, "I know she didn't like what we always had to do, so she went to get her teacher license so she could come back and change it."

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*Helping students access content area material in ways that make sense for them.* In the second year of the study, Talia fielded a request from a student which was unusual for the district: he wanted to read his health unit in Spanish, since he had read it in English and failed the unit test repeatedly. Talia went to the health teacher and told her where to get the health materials in Spanish. She reassured the health teacher that Eduardo would still have to take notes in class in English and take all his tests in English. She also insisted that Eduardo try most of the translation of the Spanish text to English by himself, if he needed it. Eduardo passed his next two health tests in English. Of Eduardo's "turnaround," his health teacher said, "Now I'm thinking maybe I can get through to him after all."

## Discussion

### *Linguistic and Cultural Specialists with Little Cultural Capital*

In the second year of the study, Sarah wrote, "I do my best to serve them well because I feel if I don't do it, who will?" The work of these bilingual paraprofessionals is clearly exemplary. In spite of differences in their own language histories, teaching backgrounds, and life experiences, their work with ELL students in ideologically conservative secondary schools had encouraged them to construct themselves as culturally responsive educators in similar ways. Their commitment to ELL learners helped them mediate home-school differences for students, teach more effectively, and respond to parents and community members in supportive ways.

Each paraprofessional had numerous responsibilities fit into fragmented and complicated schedules over the course of one school day and, often, in several school buildings. These duties were many: identification, testing, and tracking of ELL students; making home visits and acting as parent-school coordinator; translation of class materials and parent letters; on-the-spot translation when necessary between school personnel and family members; creating and adapting subject area materials; taking recess, lunch and bus duty; teaching students within their mainstream classes; teaching content-area subjects such as computer science, and teaching students in ELL pullout-type situations (with a certified teacher listed as the "teacher of record").

Although these paraprofessionals' official job descriptions required that they work with certified teachers at all times, the bilingual paraprofessionals actually had a high degree of independence and autonomy with regard to decision-making about materials, methods, and interaction procedures with students. Rarely were they allotted preparation time for teaching, materials preparation, or training for some of their more specialized language testing and evaluation tasks. Their work experiences mirror those of paraprofessionals studied by Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000), who detailed the challenges and training needs of aides working with children with disabilities in general education classrooms.

The difference between bilingual paraprofessionals and other paraprofessionals hired in school districts to assist a selected student population, of course, is that

bilingual paraprofessionals are hired precisely because they have skills which most classroom teachers lack: linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge which enable them to understand students who are acquiring a second language. In this sense they are specialists, yet in the four districts in this study they were not given any monetary or institutional support for their skills so long as they worked with the title of paraprofessional. Indeed, most other faculty in their districts expressed little knowledge or understanding of the work they were doing beyond the feeling that the bilingual paraprofessionals were there to “get these kids up to speed in English.” Put another way, the low status of the paraprofessionals within the teaching hierarchy of the school system seemed to reinforce the idea that linguistic minority students and non-English language users possessed very limited cultural capital within the school setting.

All the women realized early in their paraprofessional careers that the schools needed to recognize the linguistic skills and cultural expertise they — just like their students — brought to the school culture. In Bourdieu’s terms, they began to work to increase their own, and their students’, cultural capital. In effect, each realized that within their ideologically colonial school districts, the status their students were afforded as learners was dependent on the status that they, their most effective teachers, were afforded. The same phenomenon has been noted by French and Chopra (1999) vis-à-vis students served by paraprofessionals.

It is small wonder, then, that the four women in this study eventually chose to abandon the paraprofessional role for the role of “real teacher” as they worked toward certification. As Maria put it,

It was that I felt I had a natural knack for it ... I could actually teach these kids. I figured I’m teaching anyway, I’m only getting paid 8 dollars an hour, and I’m doing everything: running copies, doing this, preparing that, I’m translating here and there and running around ragged, I’m simplifying when they don’t understand, I’m walking around trying to help them see if they can comprehend in some way what they are supposed to be learning. And I just thought, sheesh, I should probably be doing the real thing!

### ***Confronting Ideological Colonialism***

All of the bilingual paraprofessionals in this study viewed certification as a means to improve their own ability to work effectively with students within the school setting. As paraprofessionals they felt they were treated as hidden teachers, reflecting their low status onto the nearly invisible ELL students. Having the status afforded to real teachers meant that they would have an easier time providing the kinds of materials and classes ESL students needed. However, this decision wasn’t an easy one. Maria’s interviews indicated that she really did not want to buy into a school system which is so unfair to “her” kids. “I guess overall I’m glad I’m getting certified, because now I have insurance and my job is more secure. But ...there is so much more here that has to change.”

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But for Maria and Talia, who were both certified in the last year of the study, the benefits to their students seem to have largely justified their hard work in obtaining certification. By becoming certified teachers on a footing with all other teachers in their districts, the bilingual paraprofessionals challenged the idea that ELL students were “somebody else’s problem,” easy to ignore, or to pass off to an aide for language “remediation” while they struggled to complete content-area assignments.

After she was hired with the title of *teacher*, Talia noted that her own cultural capital in the school culture had increased significantly. She explained that other teachers acted on advice or tips she offered about how to teach and learn with ELL students, but they had not done so when she was a paraprofessional: “It’s made a difference, the other faculty knowing I’m a teacher now. This year, they’re actually coming to me. It’s like they see now that our ELL students are a significant portion of our student body.”

### *Challenging Students, Changing the School Culture*

From Baker’s (1995) perspective, recognition from regular faculty of ELL students and their needs is indeed an important step in overcoming ideological colonialism in their schools and districts. However, envisioning how best to achieve that recognition while creating an appreciation for the cultural and linguistic knowledge which students possess was a process fraught with tension for the women in this study.

Nearly everything these bilingual paraprofessionals did with students in schools served to expose and to challenge the ideologically colonial attitudes and practices traditionally used in “dealing with” ELL students. Their work was demanding, often frustrating, and frequently misunderstood by regular faculty and students. Yet they were challenging secondary ELL students to succeed, and in the process, changing their schools into more inclusive places.

Usually, “the only talk the school values is the talk the school controls,” Piper (2001, p. 21) notes. But the critical analysis of bilingual paraprofessionals’ interaction in classrooms with students in this study suggests that, in terms of learning a new language while in school, a little less control on the part of the teacher and a more free-flowing interactional style go a long way in helping students learn both another language and learn ways to use that language as they learn new subjects. Talia’s ability — and that of the other bilingual paraprofessionals in the study — to foster talk in English by using familiar home conversational patterns supports Lipka’s (1996) observation that successful teaching of minority students involves validation of students’ ways of talking, no matter the cultural background of the teacher: “Ethnicity does not appear to be the key variable; it is the actual interactional style and relationship between students and their teacher” (p. 207).

As they work with other teachers to help ELL students gain access to content-area material in a second language by means of their home languages, bilingual

paraprofessionals challenge accepted wisdom about what language students must use to study content area material. When their lessons so naturally bring in the worlds of the students, as do Maria's, when their advocacy in the community with Hispanic families demonstrates *cariño* in the way that Ileana and Sarah's work so clearly does, they challenge the Eurocentric culture of the school: ideas concerning "the way we do education here" are shifted and expanded. Students who worked with these women came to expect to find ways to take ownership of second language learning on their own terms, and very often in their own terms.

Data in this study suggest that the long-term work of exemplary bilingual paraprofessionals in secondary schools can change those schools into places where previously invisible students are made visible. Outside their classrooms, these bilingual school faculty educated and assisted other teachers in ways to help ELL students access content area material and participate in school activities. They continued to advocate for students and for parents, pushing hard to change schools into places where linguistic minority students' needs are met in all classes.

### **Some Conclusions and Implications**

First, we can and should recognize the effective practices of bilingual paraprofessionals in districts with large linguistic minority student populations. Their work clearly demonstrates that the knowledge of students' native languages is not enough to guarantee successful second language instruction for linguistic minority student. Rather, data in this study suggest that bilingual paraprofessionals reach ELL students because they know them intimately, live in the same communities with their families, and have strong connections to their students both in and out of school; this work supports the findings of Monzo & Rueda (2000) in their investigation of Latino paraprofessionals in inner-city schools.

It is perhaps particularly heartening to note that these four bilingual adults from diverse cultural backgrounds have been able to positively influence and effectively teach ELL students from many language backgrounds in the districts studied. Data in this study indicate that it is these paraprofessionals' commitment to providing quality instruction for second language learners, coupled with strong ties to the linguistic minority members of their own communities, that enables them to become true cultural mediators for their students. They do not claim to have better or more linguistic and cultural expertise than their students do. Rather, in their culturally responsive teaching, they demonstrate that they understand what it takes to learn a second language, and they are invested in using students' own knowledge to help them create new understandings in school. This may be inspirational to mainstream teachers who only speak English, persuading them that it is indeed possible — and worth the effort — to learn more about ELL students' unique funds of knowledge as a starting point for their own pedagogy.

Second, this investigation of exemplary bilingual paraprofessionals provides

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support for the establishment of so-called “grow your own” and “career ladder” professional development programs by colleges of education together with public schools. Such programs, often targeted specifically at minority group members, encourage adults from minority language and cultural backgrounds to enter the teaching profession and to serve as teachers in their own communities. Often, state or federal grant money in such programs is used to assist paraprofessionals in paying for teacher education or professional development courses.

Third, it cannot be denied that at least one of the reasons that the bilingual paraprofessionals in this study do such a good job of connecting with their students is that, quite simply, most other teaching faculty in the schools are not doing enough. The regular teachers in schools in this study — and certainly, many colleges of education — are not meeting the needs of the growing ELL student population in public schools. Bilingual paraprofessionals are poised to reach these students in part because other teachers and staff are unable (or unwilling) to do so.

Teacher educators must realize that we are implicated in the poor preparation of our teaching force in teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students. Research has suggested that “what teachers know or believe about learners (and their differences) structures pedagogical relationships and shapes differences in the classroom,” often to the detriment of linguistic minority students (Mercado, 2001, p. 669). Yet we have not equipped teachers to learn what they need to know about new students and families. Because most teachers are not used to “being students of their students” in substantive ways, they cannot use students’ experiences as the center of their pedagogy. Indeed, many future teachers are advised not to attempt to make home visits, or to show an interest in students’ lives outside of the tightly structured activities sponsored by the school. It appears that even practicum and student teaching placements in multicultural settings (in teacher preparation programs which actually provide these placements) are not enough to prepare future teachers for the complexities of work with students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Grant, 2002).

Most public schools do not provide time or support for certified teachers to advocate for students and families as the bilingual paraprofessionals in this study have been able to do. There is little institutional support for most secondary teachers who wish to use school time to actively explore students’ community experiences. Yet, as Wink and Putney (2002) write: “The interchange of funds of knowledge often begins when teachers and families share authentic experiences together. By far, the most meaningful experiences will take place in the community of families, in the neighborhood, in the barrio, in the migrant camp, in the suburbs, in the housing development” (p. 100). These authors encourage all school faculty to “understand through experience” (p. 100).

More research is needed in the development of courses and field experiences which effectively prepare future teachers to recognize and question inequitable school practices and policies. More work is needed in preparing future teachers to

bring their students' ways of interacting and cultural expertise into the classroom, and to recognize and function within the ambiguities which intercultural exchanges in the classroom engender. Moreover, as Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) write, "Anyone who sincerely seeks to be culturally responsive as a teacher simultaneously embraces two challenges: to create with learners a genuine community and to promote justice and equity in the society at large" (p. 61). The culturally responsive paraprofessionals in this study often clashed with long-established, ideologically colonial attitudes held by major stakeholders in public education. It can be draining to go against the grain in schools, yet it is our hope that all teachers might learn to teach in ways that are more culturally relevant to linguistic minority students.

Finally, a collaborative, multi-site, multi-year ethnographic study such as this one inevitably raises more questions than it answers. Just a few of the questions which have arisen include: Can "typical" future teachers (mostly white, middle-class females) learn to adopt these paraprofessionals' interactional styles and pedagogical practices without investing years in second language study themselves? What kinds of teacher preparation experiences encourage future teachers to implement culturally responsive pedagogy? In schools with more truly inclusive approaches to education, are bilingual paraprofessionals making the same kinds of connections to students as the women in this study have? What changes in school districts with large numbers of ELL students seem to mitigate the effects of ideological colonialism? Clearly, there is more work to be done.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of ideological colonialism in Oregon and Idaho school districts examined in this study, see Wenger, Lubbes, Ernst-Slavit, Lazo, Azcarraga, & Dinsmore, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Names of paraprofessionals, their schools, students, and communities have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of this lesson and others from the same transcription series, see Wenger et al, 2002; Lubbes & Wenger, 2002.

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