

*Repositioning Biliteracy as Capital for Learning*  
*Lessons from Teacher Preparation at the U.S.-Mexico Border*

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### Abstract

This study explores biliteracy as understood and practiced in school and community contexts in a particular region of the U.S. – Mexico borderlands, the Rio Grande Valley of southeast Texas. Drawing on capital theory, we contrast the ambivalent perceptions of Spanish/English biliteracy held by local pre-service and in-service educators with biliterate practices that are highly visible in the border communities where they live and teach. One objective of the study is to describe the diglossic nature of bilingualism and biliteracy in the Valley as a context for learning and teaching. We highlight patterns of overlap and difference in the ways that biliteracy is positioned in and out of school in this remarkably bilingual region, and we apply theories of capital to interpret these patterns. A second objective is to share pedagogies for repositioning biliteracy through teacher education and to suggest directions for further research in this area.

### Authors' Biographical Note

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“My parents’ language (Spanish) had no value in school. The school made my parents feel that they had nothing to contribute to my siblings’ and my education.”

## **Introduction**

Our epigraph, written by a young woman who recently completed her studies to become a literacy teacher in border schools, reminds us that curriculum, educational materials, and other elements of education policy do not always acknowledge or represent the multiple languages in learners’ home lives and linguistic repertoires. As proposed by Ruiz (1984), school orientations toward non-dominant and immigrant languages include treating them as “problems” to be (re)mediated through schooling or ignored; a feature of learners’ “rights to their own language” (Smitherman 2003); and/or as “resources” that, through creative and thoughtful pedagogy, can be harnessed to the benefit of all learners (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005).

Biliteracy—defined here broadly as the practice of producing and interpreting texts in multiple languages—can also be treated as a problem, right, or resource. When reflected and enacted in educational policy and practice, these orientations towards minority languages have important consequences for biliteracy development in U.S. schools. For example, literacy teachers working with bilingual learners may view students’ literate abilities in Spanish as detracting from their development of English language literacy (Macias and Kephart 2009; Palmer and Lynch 2008). Similarly, teachers in bilingual education programs that use Spanish as the language of initial literacy instruction may feel that cultivating learners’ English knowledge detracts from an early focus on Spanish (Dworin 2003). Grounded in prescriptivist assumptions about

language purity and naïve views of bilingual first language acquisition, many bilingual programs attempt a strict separation of languages during instruction (García and Kleigen 2010). The school language policy depicted in Figure 1 suggests that even well intentioned educators who view bilingual education favorably may reinforce idealized views of monolingual discourse as the legitimate language of school (Palmer, Cancino Johnson, and Chávez 2006).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

For children growing up in homes and communities with two or more languages, these views are problematic because they may lead educators to regard biliteracy as unimportant, or to believe that biliteracy development is unitary, static, and universal in nature rather than complex, inherently in flux, and situated in specific local contexts of use. From a learning perspective, harm is done when educators design and implement curriculum that limits the abilities of bilingual students to develop academic competence in both languages. With some notable exceptions (see Freeman 1998; Smith et al. 2002), relatively few U.S. schools are able to forge the autonomy needed to create and sustain a climate and practice supportive of biliteracy. Historians of education and language policy have observed that restrictions on the use of Spanish and other immigrant languages in schools often coincide with large increases in the numbers of immigrants (Crawford 1992; García 2009), and the present climate is no exception (Rong and Preissle 2009). Access to home language education and biliteracy has become further restricted in the decade since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and the impetus that this federal legislation has provided for state- and district-level policies aiming to promote English literacy development at all costs, including opportunities for emergent bilinguals

to develop biliteracy in a home or heritage language (Gándara and Rumberger 2009; Valenzuela 2005).

This article is organized as follows. First, we examine biliteracy from the perspective of capital theory, positing ways that the practice of reading and writing in more than one language interacts with and potentially supports the development of forms of human capital. We then describe the context of our study, the lower Rio Grande Valley in Southeast Texas, as a site for research on teaching at the U.S.-Mexico border, before describing the qualitative methods of data collection and analytical procedures we used. Next, we present our findings and discuss them in terms of the forms of capital presented in our theoretical framework. We conclude with implications for practice and directions for further research.

### **Theoretical framework: Positioning biliteracy as human capital**

Human capital theory provides a lens for understanding how bilingual learners are positioned in and out of border schools and for how they might be differently positioned in order to increase their opportunities for learning and educational success. By human capital, we mean the aggregate of the actual or potential resources available to individuals and groups of people. As we will see, these are multiple and take many different forms. Capital is simultaneously material, as in the case of land or houses one can own or rent, and symbolic, as in the perceived social value of renting or owning a home in a particular local, and also academic degrees and teacher certification (Monkman et al. 2005). Capital has a private face and a public face, in the sense that an individual's capital resources impact his or her community (Putnam 2000) and collectively held forms of capital can be allocated to ensure that some groups benefit from them more than others (Bourdieu

1986, 1991). Forms of capital are embedded in and contribute to particular social networks, and it is through these social networks that capital is also exchanged (Lin 1999). A key assumption underlying models of human capital theory is that forms of capital may be converted into other forms, including wealth or economic capital. How such conversions take place and how they are enacted are questions that education researchers are engaging in (Kao 2007; Luke 2008). In this study we are interested in Spanish/English biliteracy in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and how it is linked to other forms of capital. Figure 2 depicts the elements of capital that we consider in this study.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The elements or forms of human capital we considered in this study were affective, cognitive, academic, social, intercultural, and economic. As we show in Figure 2, we are interested in biliteracy as it relates to these various and interconnected forms of capital, and its role in the development and the conversion or exchange of other forms. A full description of each of these forms and a satisfying account of the complex interrelationships among them is beyond the scope of this study, although we hope that our findings may focus attention on what these forms look like and how they interact in this region of the border. Scholars have commented on the lack of common definitions of several of these elements, particularly that of social capital (Fine 2010; Kao 2007). Dika and Singh (2002, p. 44) consider the implications of this problem in the field of education, claiming that “the designation of social capital as a catch-all for the positive effects of sociability has clouded the intersection of race, class, and gender in schools and

society.” At the risk of engaging in the “proliferation of capitals” (Fine 2010, p. 32), in the following section we briefly define each of the forms of capital we considered, and provide an example of how biliteracy might play a role in their development and exchange.

*Affective capital.* We use this term to stand for a person’s feelings and emotional resources, principally feeling positive about oneself and confident in one’s dealings with others. Although affect is an important dimension of learning at any age (Pavlenko 2006), we believe that experiences in infancy and early childhood are especially important in the development of affective capital (Murillo and Smith 2011). Biliteracy is potentially related to a person’s affective capital because the foundational relationships we develop in families and friendships take place in a particular language(s), and using that language can signal intimacy, solidarity, and in-group status. Like other forms of human capital, children develop affective capital through spending time with family parents and family members (Kao 2004). In these interactions, language connects family members across generations, and the loss of home language has been found to hinder communication between immigrant youth and their grandparents (Fishman 2001; Wong Fillmore 1991). Prohibitions on speaking Spanish in border schools, including “Spanish detention” and other punishments are recalled as incidents of emotional violence and long-lasting feelings of shame (Anzaldúa 1987; Guerra 2007; Rippberger and Staudt 2003), reminding us that forms of capital are not only positive.

*Cognitive capital* stands for the intellectual resources of individuals and groups. There are at least two elements here worth considering in terms of biliteracy. From a learning



perspective, an ability to comprehend oral and written information in Spanish and English or any other two codes, offers greater opportunities for learning, surely an important aspect of cognitive development in emergent bilingual children.

Developmental psychologists studying emergent biliteracy are intrigued by apparent advantages for early bilinguals on certain measures of verbal reasoning, including greater recognition of words as arbitrary labels for objects and concepts that are named differently in multiple languages (Bialystok 2010). In academic settings, cognitive capital is often measured in the form of test scores or intelligence tests that may or may not take place in the students' primary language. Tests that fail to capture what students know, regardless of the language they use to express that knowledge, may lead educators to underestimate the cognitive capital that learners have already developed. Collectively, school districts, states, and even national governments convert these test scores and passing rates into data for ranking themselves and their competitors, creating academic capital.

By *social capital* we mean the networks of relations individuals draw upon to pursue their goals (Lin 1999). Of the six forms of capital we consider, social capital is perhaps the most widely investigated and cited by education researchers. Some of those best known for their work in this area have been sociologists, including Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Putnam, and James Coleman. Putnam's (1999) notion of "bonding capital" among members of one's closest group and "bridging capital" between/among other groups is widely cited in studies of education, but may not hold for transnational communities on the border, where religion or legal status can be more salient markers of difference than ethnicity or bilingualism. Similarly, as scholars have noted, earlier theories of social

capital may not account for the rapidly emerging on-line social networks and practices of youth who are heavily engaged in digital literacies (Leander and McKim 2003; Lin 1999), or the differential distribution of access to the technologies they require (Selfe and Hawisher 2004). Coleman's emphasis on reciprocity and mutual obligation as necessary for accessing social capital has also been very influential. As we noted earlier, critiques of social capital point to disagreements over its definition and measurement within the disciplines and raise doubts about its validity as a construct or fixed category in the inherently multidisciplinary field of education (see Fine 2010; Dika and Singh, 2002). Examples of social capital in the education of emergent bilinguals include parents' level of formal schooling (for example, first generation high school and college graduates); friendships or relationships with highly educated mentors (Portés 2009); and participation in civic or community-oriented activities (Nuñez 2009; Stanton-Salazar 1997). Biliteracy might be important in maintaining and sharing this form of capital in the case of religious literacy practices that involve reading the Bible or studying in catechism or *doctrina* classes in Spanish, a practice known as *Escuela Dominical* [Sunday School] in the RGV.

*Cultural capital* refers to the "store of experience and life knowledge individuals acquire throughout life, influenced by family background and sociocultural experiences" (Marsh 2006, p. 164). Cultural capital is analogous to the concept of *funds of knowledge* in which teachers study the forms of knowledge developed and practiced in Mexican-American and language minority children households and reposition them as resources for curriculum and instruction (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). In emphasizing the importance of "local social capital," Gonzáles and Moll (2002, p. 637) call for students

and teachers “to approach community practices with an anthropological lens.” The local social capital of the Rio Grande Valley is uniquely shaped by immigration; the availability of human labor, products and services originating in other nations; and the instantaneous transmission of popular culture through digital media originating from both sides of the border. To account for the borderless dimensions of cultural capital and biliteracy we use the term *intercultural capital* in this study. Nuñez (2009) defines intercultural capital as the affiliations within and across one’s own racial and ethnic group that “enable students to recognize their own identity in relation to others, perceive cultural similarities and differences, treat one another with respect, build constructive cross-cultural relationships, and challenge stereotypes or exclusion” (p. 27). Examples of intercultural cultural capital as relates to biliteracy might include the knowledge parents and students develop in operating a home or family business, particularly if children observe or engage with adults and older siblings in reading and writing for purposes related to their daily routines, including work, leisure, and religious observance.

Forms of *academic capital* include grades, test scores, graduation rates, letters of recommendation, scholarships, degrees earned, publications, etc.), with distinct implications for individuals and groups (Monkman et al. 2009). Biliteracy is directly related to academic capital because definitions of academic success are, in many cases, judgments of one’s ability to read and write in academic settings. The common practice of conducting literacy assessments with bilingual students primarily or only in English reflects the association of academic capital with English. In the case of teacher education programs on the border, the decision to “allow” students to write course papers and

theses and dissertations in English or Spanish (or Spanglish) is another example of how biliteracy can be related to the development of academic capital.

*Economic Capital* refers to the material and financial resources that actors hold or can easily access. Examples of economic capital include wages and salaries, exchanges of services and labor in the informal economy, and also income from properties or businesses owned. Models of the relations of capital conceptualize wealth as a result or outcome of the accumulation of forms of capital, which are then converted into economic capital. Wealth is viewed as “the most liquid capital” (O’Brien and Ó Fathaigh 2004, p. 8), and a key to acquiring other forms of capital. With respect to biliteracy, these might include the demand for bilingual teachers in many areas of the U.S., and the practice of paying higher salaries, stipends, and signing bonuses to attract certified bilingual teachers. Outside the field of education, some jobs in the Rio Grande Valley require or give preference to candidates with bilingual abilities, including nursing and other jobs in the health care field; social workers; store clerks and restaurant workers; telemarketers; the legal field, and law enforcement and jobs with the U.S. Border Patrol and Customs and Immigration.

Bourdieu’s theories of human capital are particularly relevant for studies of biliteracy. Although his work focuses on social capital, more than other theorists, Bourdieu’s writings reflect a concern for the place of language in social relations, for example in the claim that utterances are “signs of wealth” and “...the whole social structure is present in each [linguistic] interaction ....” (Bourdieu 1991). Although other models of human capital may underline most educational research (Kao 2004),

qualitative researchers are paying close attention to Bourdieu's theories of capital for conceptualizing research in specific sites with non-dominant and immigrant populations (Luke 2004; O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh 2004; Nuñez 2009). Alan Luke describes the potential of literacy education to "enable the equitable conversion of embodied capital (e.g., skill, disposition) into material capital (e.g., cognitive artifacts for translation into institutional capital (e.g., credentials, diplomas, degrees) (Luke 2004, p. 3). As Luke observes, forms of capital "have no necessary or intrinsic salience and purchase unless there are enabling conditions and other available forms of capital ... in those adjacent and overlapping social fields where student/literates live and practice (2004, p. 2). Luke urges literacy researchers to use ethnographic methods to explore the material consequences of literacy.

In this study of teacher preparation at the U.S.-Mexico border, we also drew on Bourdieu's concept of *field*, a set of "objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 7). Thinking of education as a field helped us see schools as distinct institutions that are simultaneously and inherently bound to other institutions. The notion of education as field was useful for understanding biliteracy in our particular research context because it allowed us to consider ideas about literacy and biliteracy practices that transnationals living in the RGV bring with them from life and school experiences in Mexico, as well as those they encounter in the U.S. Bourdieu's claim that "social capital only exists and produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced" (Bourdieu 1979/1984, p. 113) raises the issue of how biliteracy is involved in the conversion and exchange of forms of capital across fields including education and advertising.

These theoretical perspectives led us to formulate the questions that guided our study of the positioning of biliteracy at the border:

- (1) How do prospective and practicing teachers in the Rio Grande Valley view biliteracy in and out of school; and how do these views position biliteracy?
- (2) How is biliteracy portrayed and positioned in locally displayed advertisements?
- (3) What can we learn from considering these patterns of language use and biliteracy from the perspective of human capital theory?

Ultimately, our goal was to contribute to pedagogy and research aimed at repositioning Spanish and Spanish/English biliteracy as legitimate and desirable resources for teaching and learning at the border.

### **Context of the study**

We conducted our study in the lower Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in Southeast Texas, one of the most bilingual regions in the U.S. and also one of the poorest (Murillo 2010). In the 2000 U.S. Census, nearly 80 percent of the residents of Hidalgo and Cameron counties in the RGV report speaking Spanish at home, and most also reported speaking English well or very well. These border communities are simultaneously highly localized (because surprisingly few students have traveled outside the state of Texas or even the region) and globalized (because migrants from Mexico and other countries pass through, and because there is a long tradition of Valley residents working for part of the year as migrant laborers in other states. Schools here have long been “minority-majority,” with Mexican-origin students typically comprising 90 percent or more of the school population (Maril 1989). Teaching, along with health care and law enforcement

(specifically the U.S. Border Patrol) are among the most sought after jobs in the region. In communities where the high school dropout rates approach 40 percent (Alliance for Excellent Education 2009) and military recruiters have offices in local strip malls next to mobile phone shops and video game stores, students may view military service as a more realistic career option than a university education.

Despite high levels of bilingualism, Spanish is often unwelcome in local schools. It is ironic that one of the most bilingual regions of the country is also a place where students feel embarrassed or ashamed that they speak Spanish and of their immigrant heritage. Anzaldúa (1987) makes this point very clearly. One pre-service teacher told us that, after moving to the Valley from Veracruz, Mexico at the age of five, she tried to “pass” as a monolingual speaker of English to avoid being ridiculed by teachers and classmates. Despite Texas state law that provides for bilingual education in Spanish and English (Palmer and Lynch 2008), resistance to the use of Spanish as an academic language is strong here. In a qualitative study of Spanish language use in a border community, Díaz (2011) shared reports by Spanish-speaking children in local elementary schools who were told by teachers that school is only for talking English. Although school districts accept funding designated to educate bilingually in the early grades, many elementary school learners receive instruction aimed at fostering English monolingualism rather than at the development of academic skills in two languages. Ironically, Spanish is then offered as an academic subject in high school and college, where it is treated essentially as a foreign language. A pre-service teacher noted the irony in this situation, observing, “We are scolded in elementary school for speaking Spanish and then in high school we are scolded because we do not know how to read, write, and speak it.”

Such paradoxes characterize the education of Mexican-origin students in Valley schools. Many bilingual educators and reading teachers learning to teach in the Rio Grande Valley have experienced these and other forms of linguistic discrimination. A pattern of excluding and marginalizing Spanish literacy in RGV schools is reflected in recent survey and interview studies of in-service teachers' attitudes about teaching in Spanish (Mejías, Anderson-Mejías, and Carlson 2003; Sutterby, Ayala, and Murillo-Sutterby 2005). Given the long history of linguisticism against Spanish speakers in the region (Anzaldua 1987; Murillo 2010; Richardson 1999) and persistent structural barriers to the use of Spanish as a language of instruction, the remarkable funds of linguistic knowledge held by local educators are unlikely to be employed in classrooms without an explicit repositioning of biliteracy. We turn now to a description of the qualitative research methods we used in the study.

### **Methodology**

Our data come from our work with pre-service and practicing educators studying bilingual education and reading education at two public universities in Texas located on the U.S.-Mexico border. As teacher educators, we collected autobiographical writings by undergraduate and masters students studying to become bilingual education and reading. Between 2006-2009, we asked prospective and practicing teachers each semester to recount their own histories of language and literacy in and out of school. By "narrating the self" (Chase 2009), students reflected on how Spanish, English, and other languages were used at home and in school during their own childhoods and adult lives, and on the place of biliteracy in their academic trajectories.



In addition, students created final projects on the topic of language and literacy used in schools based on their interviews with relatives and others who had been students and teachers in local schools. The purpose of these interviews was to document and understand the ways family members and close friends use reading and writing in their daily lives. (See Appendix A for guidelines students used to conduct the family interviews). Finally, we collected complementary data in the form of numerous informal conversations with educators, parents, and students during visits to local homes, schools, and small businesses. While less structured than the autobiographical writings and interviews, these conversations were critical for contextualizing the concepts and issues raised in students' writing. They also helped us understand how biliteracy is practiced locally in and outside schools.

A second source of data was a corpus of digital photographs of bilingual advertisements and other publicly displayed texts collected between 2006 and 2010. The photographs discussed in this study were taken by students in and around their homes and the neighborhoods and communities where they lived, and near the schools where they are interning or teaching. For example, the hand-painted wooden sign announcing the schedule of Catholic mass—in Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex—in Figure 3, was brought to class by a student who used this example to show that Spanish was welcome in church but not at school.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

We focused on publicly displayed and locally produced advertisements as a specific genre of literacy because they stand out as a site for the study of written language, including biliteracy and other hybrid forms (Canclini 2005). These written bilingual signs have a materiality and durability unlike spoken language advertisements (Manning 2006), meaning that they are more freely available for analysis. They are examples of what Bloom and Clark (2006, p. 235) have called “discourse-in-use”:

Discourse-in-use is material and requires geography. The words, prosody, non-verbal behavior, and manipulation of objects are all material; they have substance. So, too, the bodies of those engaged in interaction. Consequently, discourse-in-use is subject to all those processes associated with material production, distribution and consumption.”

In addition, the intended commercial appeal and promise of advertisements make them likely sites for representation of economic capital and exchange with other forms.

Manning (2006) describes advertisements as intermediaries between language and goods and services. In his view, advertisements are “acts of translation” between economic exchanges and linguistic exchanges (Manning 2006, 272-74). He also points out that dominant theories of language and wealth, including those of Adam Smith, are based on conceptions of wealth that were more fixed than they are today.

Brandt and Clinton claim that “writing is moving from an ability to persuade an audience to an ability to attract an audience, to an ability, at its most powerful, to attract a market” (Brandt and Clinton 2006, p.258). In this way, these texts can be seen as local bids to compete for bilingual clients in a globalizing market. The linguist M.A.K. Halliday described authors of such texts as “creators of meaning,” and contrasted them

with “consumers of the meanings of others” (Martin 2007, p. 172). The notion of sign makers and those who commission them as “creators of meaning” is interesting to us because it suggests agency of local writers. Finally, because we agree that “all print is educative” (Nelson 2010, p. 3), we were also interested in knowing how these publicly displayed texts position biliteracy at the border and how this positionality differs from the ways biliteracy is viewed and practiced in Valley schools.

To organize and conceptualize our visual data, we use the notion of linguistic landscape, “the study of writing on display in the public sphere” (Coulmas 2009, p. 14). Developed as an index of language vitality in multilingual neighborhoods in Canada (Landry and Bourhis 1997), linguistic landscape is becoming an area of applied linguistics in its own right (Cenoz and Gorter 2008). Recent studies have used theories of linguistic landscape for understanding additional language learning (Sayer 2010; Shohamy and Gorter 2009), mapping linguistic diversity and language ideologies in multilingual cities (Lanza and Woldemariam 2009), and indexing attitudes of native-born members of a multilingual community towards immigrants (Collins and Slembrouck 2007). Here we are interested in knowing more about the presence of biliteracy in out-of-school spaces. By having our students photograph, share, and discuss examples of bilingual advertisements in the Rio Grande Valley, we brought the linguistic landscape of the region into our classrooms for collective analysis.

## **Findings**

In this section, we present the results of this qualitative study of the repositioning of biliteracy in Rio Grande Valley. The questions we sought to answer were

- (1) How do prospective and practicing teachers in the Rio Grande Valley view biliteracy in and out of school; and how do these views position biliteracy?
- (2) How is biliteracy portrayed and positioned on locally displayed advertisements?
- (3) What can we learn from considering these patterns of language use and biliteracy from the perspective of human capital theory?

We take up each question in turn, and provide examples from the oral, written and photographic texts participants shared with us. Following the theoretical framework that informed our research, we discuss the results in terms of what they tell us about the role biliteracy plays in the development and exchange of other forms of capital.

### **How do prospective and practicing teachers in the Rio Grande Valley view biliteracy in and out of school?**

Through participants' writing and in the class discussions that result from them, we identified some of the ways these future teachers had learned to view themselves negatively as Spanish speakers. Many wrote about language discrimination they had experienced, and how hurtful actions by teachers and classmates had negatively influenced their perceptions of themselves as learners. For example, a high school math teacher recently returned to school to begin her masters degree described her experiences as a first grader in a local school in the 1980s:

[It] was very tough since my first language was Spanish. At the time I entered the first grade, teachers would still slap your hands if you spoke Spanish at school. That meant I had to learn the English language no

matter what. I went through first, second, and third grade having a very quiet, low self-confident attitude since I spoke English “funny.”

Although most of the student teachers we worked with speak and understand oral Spanish very well, we found that school practices that labeled Spanish as a “foreign” rather than a home language. For example, a veteran middle school English teacher told us during a parent night that she had never had a “foreign student” succeed in her advanced placement class. Months later, the teacher graciously conceded she had been mistaken in her assessment of a particular “foreign” students’ ability, a young man who was born in Colombia, has studied in English and Spanish in Colombia, Mexico, and the U.S., and is waiting to hear about the results of his college applications before taking the next step towards his dream of becoming a bio-geneticist. This example suggests that educators’ views of Spanish and students from other countries as “foreign” can prevent them from recognizing that transnational students can also possess and develop the qualities and knowledge needed to succeed in academically challenging work. The framing of Spanish and transnational stories as “foreign” was visibly attested in Figure 3, a sign we found in one of the largest bookstores in the RGV.

#### INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Our findings suggest that teachers in the RGV regard biliteracy differently in and out of school and school-related contexts. Many local pre-service teachers expressed limited support for biliteracy development in school, perhaps as a result of their own English monolingual schooling. This general finding of linguistic insecurity and

ambivalence about Spanish is consistent with other studies of (future) bilingual teachers' attitudes towards Spanish in the Rio Grande Valley (Murillo 2010; Sutterby, Ayala, and Sutterby-Murillo 2005; Rodríguez 2006), and elsewhere on the border (Rippberger and Staudt, 2003) and in Texas (Guerrero 2003). Although aware of the economic advantages of strong biliteracy abilities for local teachers, participants expressed uncertainty about their ability to teach in Spanish. Some also questioned the potential value of advanced biliteracy for their future students. Teachers noted the stronger presence of Spanish and biliteracy used in local bilingual advertisements, businesses, and in church.

### **How is biliteracy portrayed and positioned on locally displayed advertisements?**

Students collected examples of the linguistic landscape (Shohamy and Gorter 2009) outside schools that provided ample evidence of the strong presence of biliteracy in the region. On advertisements and other publicly displayed texts, local writers are using Spanish and English to communicate with potential clients. Although most students had lived in the Valley for all or most of their lives, some expressed surprise at the amount of Spanish used in these local texts. One student commented enthusiastically, “*!Es verdad! Donde quiera que uno va en el Valle siempre va a encontrar anuncios en inglés, español y tex-mex.*” [It’s true! Everywhere you go in the Valley you’ll always find advertisements in English, Spanish, and Tex-Mex]. Other students were very familiar with such texts, and some worked or had family members who worked with such texts in a family owned business.

By interviewing the proprietors of locally owned businesses, students also learned about the production and function of the texts created or commissioned to advertise the

businesses. After reading Henry Trueba's (2004) descriptions of the hybrid literacies in *pulgas* [flea markets] common in the Rio Grande Valley, a group of students visited the Alamo *pulga*, one of the most popular in the region. At "Yoko's Café", they found bilingual signs and a menu printed in Spanish and English versions. Yoko's staff regularly use both languages to communicate with the bilingual clientele, as well as the math literacies needed for calculating bills and making correct change.

By analyzing the linguistic elements of bilingual signs, students observed that some texts were intended for a bilingual audience. Figure 5 announces some of the types of snacks sold at Yoko's Café, presented in English words without Spanish translation (cheese, cherry); as a phrases in Spanish without an English translation ("y más sabores"[and other flavors]); and others provided in both Spanish and English ("sno cones"/"raspas").

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Another group of students interviewed the owners of the family owned *pinatería* whose strict return policy is featured in Figure 6. Joanna, who is also a student at a local university, runs the shop with her mother. Both use Spanish and English to communicate with clients and math literacies to keep records of sales and expenses in a notebook. Joana often does her college homework at the *piñatería* when business is slow.

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

The physical positioning of English and Spanish in this text is typical of the bilingual texts students collected; in Figure 6, the English text is on top, with a line dividing it from the Spanish text underneath. Another common formation observed in handmade signs was the same text posted in two monolingual versions side-by-side. This particular text contains elements of non-conventional language use in (spelling, punctuation) in both English and Spanish that might lead prescriptivist teachers to characterize it as bi-illiterate, that is, well written in neither language (Escamilla 2006). Several participating teachers expressed similar views when we discussed signs like Figure 6, which led to a closer analysis of the text and to in-situ discussions of about which elements were “well written”, and which elements students felt it was important to change. We will return to this point when we discuss implications of this research. In addition to form, our viewing of this situated text allowed us to consider the intended functions of such signs. The *piñatería* was full of “warning” signs; with variations of “Not Responsible in Case of Accidents/No Somos Responsables en Caso de Accidentes” posted on several walls. Because members of the class were very familiar with piñatas and aware of their fragility, they understood the economic rationale behind this explicitly stated no-returns policy.

To summarize our response to this question, we would say that biliteracy is positioned in these locally produced examples in the field of advertising than it is in the field of education. Writing in Spanish is much more visible in the linguistic landscape of local businesses than in schools. The presence of biliterate texts in which both languages are present or which a person needs to be able to read both English and Spanish to understand the complete message, was more evident outside school. We noted that



regulations on the separation of languages were found in bilingual education programs (Figure 1) and religious observance (Figure 3). Class discussions of these texts made helped us understand the role of Spanish and English literacy in the economy and daily life of people in the RGV.

We turn to the final question that guided this study, that is, *what can we learn about the positioning of biliteracy in the Rio Grande Valley from the perspective of human capital theory?* In the following section we consider how biliteracy is involved in the production of and exchange between forms of social capital (Figure 2). Rather than breaking the data down into elements that correspond to one or more of our six categories, we present them in the form of two vignettes or stories involving various forms of capital and connections to biliteracy that we note as they appear in the data.

*“...It would come to haunt me.”*

A young woman who is studying to become a bilingual teacher recalled how her desire to learn English led others to call her as a poor speaker of Spanish, and to her abrupt decision to stop speaking that language:

I remember the teachers saying that because we were in the United States it was more important for us to learn English. When I was in the third grade I was made fun of a lot by this one girl because of my broken Spanish, so I vowed never to speak it again. Little did I know that nine years later when I started college it would come to haunt me.

This future teacher describes being “haunted” by the need to demonstrate academic biliteracy (now required for bilingual teacher certification in Texas). Years after she

abandoned Spanish, she is confronted with a literacy test in that language, a test that could have a substantial impact on her personal economy and career as a teacher. To (re)gain the Spanish literacy skills she needs to become a certified bilingual teacher, this teacher was required to take Spanish language courses, costing approximately \$800 per three-credit course. Because biliteracy is a major advantage for teachers seeking employment in Valley schools, and in other areas of Texas and the country, her story illustrates some of the temporal and economic consequences of monolingual English schooling for emergent bilinguals and future teachers.

The marginalization of Spanish also included a rejection of things learned in Spanish, including, most notably for studies of biliteracy, children's previous school experiences. An undergraduate student who attended Valley schools in the 1990s recalled

Because my first language is Spanish, the elementary school decided to drop me down two grades and I was placed in kinder[garten].... From then on, I knew I had to overcome the obstacle of language. I learned English quick and now I think I've forgotten much of my Spanish."

Several students reported that they or a family member had lost or been obligated to repeat years of schooling. Students also wrote about how their identity as Spanish speakers led them to experience inferior curriculum and a lower quality education when they were placed in grade levels they had already completed in Mexico, and discouraged from taking academically challenging courses. Although biliteracy should not be viewed as a panacea or a guarantor of equal access to forms of capital, it seems that a repositioning of biliteracy might have avoided or mitigated some of the difficulties that emergent bilinguals face in monolingual schools.

*“Maybe we could have a bake sale...”*

School language policies in the Rio Grande Valley that position Spanish as a less than legitimate language discourage students from developing biliteracy. One example of such policies regards the purchase of books and other literacy forms of literacy that are only in English even though students also speak Spanish and may be better able to read and express themselves in that language. At a local middle school with a student population that is approximately 95 percent Mexican American, we visited a library that had an impressive collection of print and digital literacies in English, but a very small Spanish language by comparison. Perhaps 100 books in all, the entire Spanish collection fit on a small bookcase. Most titles were Spanish translations of books written in English and featuring aspects of U.S./European cultures. Most were sturdily bound hardcovers aimed at younger readers (*El Gato Ensombrerado* [*The Cat in the Hat* and other titles by Dr. Seuss]; few seemed age-appropriate or of particular interest to middle school students. Certainly none of these books would have been suitable reading material for the pre-Advanced Placement Spanish classes taught at the school. We asked the Librarian why there were not more books in Spanish, and found her comments very telling:

In our school, we really focus more on kids learning to read in English.

That’s why we don’t have many Spanish books in our library. I guess if we needed more books in Spanish, we could have a bake sale or something to raise money.

The Librarian’s statement that school funds are not allotted for the purchase of Spanish books stands out for its candor rather than because we are surprised that a school library

would have fewer books in Spanish. News of low budgets for school libraries is not surprising to educators on the border. Researchers have reported a similar imbalance in the number of English and Spanish reading materials in public and school libraries. (Amrein and Peña 2000; Krashen and Shin 2004; Pucci 2002). Unfortunately for school libraries serving emergent bilinguals and immigrant populations, funding for English language literacy programs through NCLB and Reading First has tilted the balance further in favor of English. Krashen (in press) argues that a lack of access to books in poor communities is a primary factor in the difficulties Latino children and other immigrant and non-dominant groups experience on school measures of reading. In this particular school, purchasing more Spanish language or bilingual books, and more written at levels and about topics that are cognitively challenging and interesting to middle school students would presumably support students studying for the Spanish Pre-AP exam.

### **Implications for practice**

How might educators and teacher educators working with emergent bilinguals at the border apply findings from this research into their practice? This study raises issues that could be explored by educators at different levels. In bilingual K-12 classrooms, we think analysis of texts like the one shown in Figure 6 can serve as an occasion for scaffolding from the abbreviated language of the handwritten sign to a longer text with conventional (school) expectations for spelling and punctuation. Teachers could address Texas standards for middle-school English Language Arts for viewing and presenting texts in different formats and genres by having students re-write the text of message in the form of a text message, an e-mail sent to clients, or a legal contract, and discuss the

differences among these forms. Jiménez, Smith and Teague (2009) describe other means of using transnational texts with adolescent readers.

In terms of teacher preparation, there are clear implications for examining the economic and human resource costs associated with teacher certification exams. Do advanced biliterates who achieve passing scores on the English and Spanish portions of the exams save time and money as opposed to students who fail them repeatedly and must re-take (and re-pay for) the exams multiple times before they pass or give up? A recent longitudinal study of the academic outcomes of English language learners in a rural school district on the border found that students schooled bilingually outperformed peers who were educated monolingually in English on key measures of academic achievement (Dow 2008). In these times of tight budgets and accountability regimes, education policy makers could calculate the costs and potential benefits of fostering biliteracy throughout a child's education (by offering additive bilingual programs at all levels of schooling, for example) vs the costs and benefits of having individuals repeatedly fail tests they have not been adequately prepared for.

We also found implications for practitioners who wish to engage with students in frank discussions of biliteracy and bilingualism. Students routinely told us that the issues we discussed in class were new for them. In many cases, the activities, readings, and discussions in class encouraged students to examine and question deeply held feelings about language in school. One student wrote to Luz to voice her initial frustration at having to consider new ideas about language and literacy that contradicted the way she had been socialized to view Spanish: "At the beginning of this class I was very upset at you. Most of my life I have been mistreated because I spoke Spanish and Tex-Mex and

now you say that it is fine, that we have linguistic rights, but you're right, I want my son to be bilingual! We think this statement illustrates the feelings of injustice and ambivalence many teachers on the border associate with teaching and learning in Spanish. It raises points that are important to consider in bilingual teacher preparation programs and other programs aimed at serving emerging bilinguals.

### **Directions for research**

This study raises possibilities for researching biliteracy, particularly as it is practiced at other sites along the U.S.-Mexico border. One set of results—the linguistic insecurity and ambivalence towards Spanish that many participants reported—suggests a need for studies that follow newly certified bilingual teachers back into their classrooms after graduation, in order to document how their teaching practices support students' reading and writing in two languages and the development of biliteracy. What are the issues that bilingual teachers face when they teach to promote biliteracy using local literacies? Classroom-studies that documented the specific ways that skilled and experienced bilingual teachers incorporate local literacies in their teaching could inform teacher preparation programs and could provide evidence for educating principals and families to recognize and accept local literacies as legitimate resources for learning in school.

Another area for biliteracy research concerns the implicit or explicit language policies (Hall, Smith and Wicaksono 2011) that are articulated and reinforced in libraries. Public budgets are or should be public information, and studies that examine funding for Spanish and English books in border libraries would be illuminating, as would content

analyses of library collections. Díaz (2011) notes that the library at an after-school tutoring program, while not formally connected to public school curriculum, followed and reinforced monolingual policies in force at school. In these conditions, it would be interesting to know what is happening when school librarians and public librarians interact with children choosing a book to sign out. Do they steer emergent bilinguals to books in English or Spanish as per a school curriculum? What are the messages about Spanish and biliteracy that emergent bilinguals hear around book choices in libraries?

Finally, the study also raises questions for researchers interested in the juxtaposition of human capital and biliteracy. Without privileging a particular form of capital, we have tried to show how biliteracy illuminates and in some cases appears to facilitate exchanges and conversions between them. To do this we have proposed a framework for understanding biliteracy and social capital that could be used and modified in future studies. We believe that this framework will be especially useful for ethnographic and qualitative researchers who work with children and families whose languages and literacies are not neatly divided by borders.

## **Conclusion**

The study has sought to contribute to knowledge of learning at the border by examining Spanish/English biliteracy as perceived and practiced in a highly bilingual region. This knowledge may serve literacy educators who work with the growing number of emergent bilinguals on the border and in U.S. schools in other rapidly forming transnational communities such as the New South (Odem and Lacy 2009). By examining biliteracy in this unique context through the lens of human capital theory, we have also raised questions about how well theories of capital or aspects of capital (e.g., social capital),

grounded in the local practices of non-border communities borders can account for the multilingual, transnational literacies being practiced in the RGV.

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## Appendix A. Family Literacy Interview \*

In this assignment you will explore family literacy practices. Identify your participants: parents, grandparents, etc. Come up with a list of questions that will help you understand how your participants view and use literacy in their daily lives. Keep notes as you do your interview (you may want to record it).

### **Possible Questions:**

1. Do you like to read? Why or why not?
2. How much time do you spend reading and writing every day?
3. What sorts of things do you read in your work? In the household? In the community? (Textbooks, novels, poetry, magazines, newspapers, Internet, text messages, email, notes from friends, short stories, nonfiction, advertisement, checks, the Bible, etc.)
4. Did you go to school?
5. What languages do you speak? At home? At school? With your friends?
6. Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not?
7. How much time do you spend writing in your work? At home?
8. What sorts of things do you write in your work? At home? Reports, essays, short stories, poetry, lab reports, journals, music lyrics, text messages, emails, notes to friends, letters, lists, etc.
9. Did you see your parents reading at home? What sorts of things did they read?
10. Do you remember how did you learn to read?
11. What kinds of reading do you do in different subjects?

After the interview with your family, write up your findings in a 2-3 page reflection. You will turn in your interview notes (they can be hand written) **and** your reflection, which should answer the following question: **How do the readings relate to, support, and/or contradict what your interviewee(s) told you?**

### **Organization of the Reflection: You should follow these three steps:**

1. Introduction to the participants: age, gender, home/family background, participants' occupation, education history, and any other relevant details;
2. Findings: What do the readings say and what does the participant say about literacy? How do the readings relate to, support, and/or contradict what your interviewees told you?

3. Your thoughts: What did you learn? What questions do you still have?  
Be ready to discuss what you have learned. We will discuss our findings and reflections in class.

\*Based on an activity developed by Janine Schall.

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