

# Spatial Mobility and Cultural Capital: Latino Students at Emma Elementary

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Using participant-observer methodology, I studied Latino students at a Buncombe County, NC, elementary school in the months of February through April 2007, looking for qualities of relationship formation and interaction as mediated by three principles – spatial mobility, cultural capital, and social proximity. These three dynamics were used to analyze the distinct environments of the classroom, lunch, and recess and explain motives as well as tendencies in the students' interactions. The amount of social proximity and the necessity for cultural capital were found to be in an inverse relationship with the amount of spatial mobility available. The varying levels of these dynamics in the different environments dictated with whom fifth grade Latino boys engaged in interactions. The interactions were highly stylized and demonstrated power, as well as linguistic, dynamics. However, significant demonstrations of racial prejudice were not expressed.

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On my first visit to Emma Elementary, I stood at the head of the joint cafeteria/auditorium at the beginning of lunch, overwhelmed and dumbfounded at the perplexing, free movement of the kids. Groups swirled about, formed and separated faster than I could keep track of. My mind raced and my sense of equilibrium was disturbed— how am I going to make sense of this? Everything I had expected was topsy-turvy: the children showed no clear preference for interaction besides whoever was around them; there was no sense of ethnic, gender, or racial difference and thus no visible social inequalities. Even in seating, I didn't see any clear predilection by ethnic or gender lines – everyone was talking to each other, and loudly. I didn't even know exactly *what* I was looking for.

Thus began my introduction into ethnography. I had made, what felt like at the time, a disastrous choice to study children. All I could see were a bunch of kids acting like atomic particles bouncing off each other, and almost at the same speed. Over time, however, I grew not only to appreciate them, but also to understand them (or so I think). While hanging out with them during class, lunch, and recess, I got an insider's view at what actual rules and principles defined their experiences.

As a participant-observer, I behaved myself according to the way the kids were expected to act. In the classroom, I sat quietly and listened; at lunch, I sat down and stayed, not talking until the kids were allowed to; and at recess, sometimes I played, sometimes I just sat apart and watched. Through my seemingly innocuous research, I found that there are three coordinating axes of meaning that these children used to decide where to sit, what to say, and how to act. Several dynamics emerged, such as cultural capital – the ability to have common knowledge and to know how to use it. Spatial mobility, the freedom of movement available to them, was also important. Lastly, social proximity – the level of diversity the children are faced with in their interactions – is an important factor in understanding their interaction.

I have focused primarily on Latino<sup>1</sup> students, because they have a very particular relation with themselves, their peers, and their heritage. They are young and in-between. Their parents hail from a Latino culture and may not speak English. The Latino students' peers have presumably been raised in America, and only know English. The Latino students are liminal: they are both their parents' heritage(s) and their American socialization, and yet they are neither fully in one or the other. I have noticed in my research, more times than I can count, Latino students in the American school atmosphere striving to be accepted while still defining themselves as "Latino." The explosion of the Latino population in the US, particularly NC, means that this generation of children is going to definitively shape Asheville's future. To that end, I have sought to determine what factors come into play in relationship formation, interaction, and self-identification. My theory centers on how linguistic and cultural knowledge mediate these concepts through perceived options and company present.

I am investigating directly how the constructed environments of the classroom, lunch, and recess facilitate certain types of interaction among and across groups. I reason that the more the schools incorporate these Latino students, the better equipped these and all other students will be at interacting and functioning in a multi-cultural world. I am also indirectly looking at the style of education, which will determine how included Latino students feel, how much confidence they will have in the promise of a better life through education, and the variety of life choices they will have.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "Latino" and "Latino" share as perilous and insult-laden history as the terms "Negro" and "Black." Much like the latter two, the former have come in and out of favor throughout the years, but more so than the latter, the debate is still strong. Latino focuses on the long and continuing history of racial, ethnic, and cultural blending, as well as contemporary identity. Hispanic, on the other hand, connotes one's ties to the Spanish that conquered and colonized South and Central America. It emphasizes the language of the colonizer, the presence of Spanish culture, and for some, implies the painful history of domination. As the main "Latino" identifier I am using is speaking Spanish, I at the same time wish to distance myself from this debate because it is not immediately relevant to my topic, as I want to take a side because identity is something that will be very important in the lives of the children I have been studying. Thus I have chosen to use "Latino" out of respect, although I am not trying to make an argument that homogenizes culture or language.

## **Contexts**

Whereas Asheville is 76 percent White, 18 percent Black, and 4 percent Latino out of a population of nearly 69,000, Emma Elementary is 58 percent White, 19 percent Black, and 22 percent Latino. Emma Elementary is markedly situated in an area with a concentration of Latinos. In the 2000 Census, North Carolina was listed as the state with the fastest growing Latino population, at nearly 400 percent over the previous ten years, while White growth was 14 percent and Black growth was 19 percent. Much of this growth has been fueled by new manufacturing and service sector growth and has attracted mostly young, unmarried Latino immigrants with little education from Mexico. Meanwhile, the poverty rate grew from 19 to 25 percent and the average annual earnings of an illegal worker were \$16,000.

Emma school is situated in West Asheville on Louisiana road. It is an old school, having undergone many transitions, the latest additions being a large brick wing and two trailer classrooms out back. Near it are several trailer parks and subsidized housing neighborhoods, including the Woodridge apartment complex where I did my tutoring. Suffice it to say, the area is poor. According to Chad Upton, the Vice Principal at Emma Elementary, 75 percent of the students are on the Free/Reduced Price Lunch Plan, which is demonstrative of their low economic status. The school teaches Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade and has about 500 students with an average of 80 students per grade. The class size is typically 20 students, and as I demonstrated earlier, there is a concentration of Latino immigrants in the area, leading to a 19 percent enrollment rate at Emma. ESL students are pulled out of class for half an hour several times a week and given an individual appointment with an ESL teacher. However, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders are at a disadvantage, having a shortage of teacher's assistants to aid the teachers. The main identifier I used to describe someone as "Latino" was hearing them demonstrate a proficiency in spoken Spanish. To maintain privacy and anonymity, all students' names in this paper have been replaced with pseudonyms.

The teacher whose classroom I observed was Ms. Sherie Ryan-Bailey. Although she has only been teaching for five years, last year she was voted Best Teacher at Emma. I e-mailed her asking questions about the administrative approach to achieving equal education for Latino kids, and she responded:

The administration is very sensitive to the needs of the Latino community – all correspondence is written in Spanish as well as English--interpreters are available all day long to communicate with parents for short visits or conferences. We treat all students as people who can learn and students are immersed in content and in class activities. We scaffold learning with tutors and with pull out ESL instruction. Teaching is impacted because we are required to have extensive training in dealing with children who do not have English as their first language. Language goals as well as content goals guide each lesson that we teach. We use many strategies to help kids understand

content – particularly we rely on visuals which are more prevalent in our classrooms due to the need to bridge the language gap. We also rely heavily on hands on activities – experiences that have more meaning for kids learning the language.

Ms. Ryan-Bailey is a wonderful teacher and teaches beyond all my expectations of what's required of elementary school teachers. Her enthusiasm is infectious and her zeal for educating the students is apparent in her abundant energy, compassionate joke-telling and discipline, and the amount of time she spends with individual students. She is an enchanting teacher, keeping the kids occupied with 5-10 minute activities, always moving onto something new and infusing each new project with mystery and excitement. I've seen her progress from a writing assignment to a spatial-drawing activity to a multiplication blitz, and the kids are electric and beautiful. I remember once not being to help being drawn in to the challenge of memorizing a strange geometric shape and then drawing it from memory. I chuckled to myself with glee at the communal "ohhhh" of recognition the second time she flashed the geometric shape on the overhead projector – these kids were so absorbed, so involved!

### Terms

I use three terms to describe the relations of Latinos amongst themselves and to other children. First, *social proximity*. This is how much diversity the children encounter in each arena and is determined by their amount of *spatial mobility*. Spatial mobility is how much freedom the students have to move about at will. *Cultural capital* is what defines relations between any given number of individuals. Here, it is the knowledge of culture, language, norms, or any skill set, which can be used to one's advantage. Particularly important also is the knowledge of how to use one's cultural capital, especially in dominant-subordinate relations. A related definition would be that of "social capital," as defined by Robert Putnam, "social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." (Putnam 2000:19) Although I do not follow that definition strictly, the ability to use cultural capital effectively does make possible and lead to relationship formation.

Tied in with cultural capital is the highly relevant dynamic of linguistic competence. As I will demonstrate, linguistic competence can be used in relations of power as an inclusionary/exclusionary mechanism which defines not only available discourse and courses of action, but who one can effectively associate with. Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital is relevant here (Bourdieu 1977:40,81,85,187). Cultural capital, as Bourdieu uses it, is the series of habits and dispositions that comprise a resource which the individual can use to gain profit, whether socially, academically, or economically. Bourdieu emphasizes the "success" component of having and using capital, but I will also study available options according to the amount of cultural capital one has as well as ways of

dealing with having less capital than those around. Cultural capital is divided into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital is understood as a “skill” taking time to learn. Objectified cultural capital is an object such as a book about pirates which necessitates a certain amount of embodied capital to understand it. Institutionalized cultural capital is when, say, Ms. Ryan-Bailey recognizes Carlos’ hard work and gives him an “A,” a grade and type of capital which is external and distinct from the individual. (Weininger & Lareau, 2008)

In this paper, I also use the terms “insider group” and “outsider group.” By this I do not mean any kind of political statement about dominant society. Rather, I mean by these terms the relationship of individuals to one another – if they associate in the same clearly, even if only briefly, defined group, then they are insiders to each other. If the individuals interact across group lines, then they are outsiders to each other. Cultural exclusiveness plays a role in shaping the composition and nature of interactions within and between groups. In this way, identity determines who is considered an insider and who an outsider. As the kids interact, the cultural boundaries as well as intersections of a symbolic order become clear. George Ritzer writes, “the symbolic order is a supra-personal structure of preexisting social determinations. It is the sphere of culture and language. We are born into it, and it gives us our name and tells us what race, class, gender, and other social categories we are.” (Ritzer 1997:134) I would add to this that this order is not fixed; these children are discovering themselves, and will continue to be, especially in middle and high school. I argue that they will, to some extent, redefine their social categories as well as what it means to be part of them.

### **The Classroom**

The basic structure of class, lunch, and recess provide different levels of spatial mobility – for example, in *class*, spatial mobility is low and the children have to do what the teacher says; spontaneous interaction is at a minimum due to behavior constraints. In Ms. Ryan-Bailey’s classroom, I have observed many hours of general classroom instruction, but for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the reading group that Carlos is a part of. I will write about how his cultural and linguistic aptitude constructs his available options for discourse and action. I seek to elucidate my earlier theorizing on the power of language as an inclusionary/exclusionary mechanism which defines who one can effectively associate with as well as available discourse and courses of action.

Carlos wears glasses and his hair is cut in a crew cut. He usually wears a Gap hoodie and his fingernails are cut short. His skin is the color of a buttery pecan and he reads very well, carefully and clearly enunciating, “horrified astonishment.” He reads consistently and conscientiously, but is not as smooth as a native speaker. Carlos is very studious and pays a lot of attention, but it seems to me that he has to process what Ms. Ryan-Bailey is teaching linguistically before he can conceptually. Thus, one time when he was called upon to answer, he seemed on the verge of

saying something, but then meekly passed on it. I couldn't tell if he knew what she was asking, was afraid to give the wrong answer, or is simply shy.

Oftentimes, when I arrive in the classroom, the kids are set up in their reading groups. These usually consist of 4-5 kids sitting together at a table reading a book together. Different groups read different books, presumably at different levels, but the groups are composed of the same individuals class to class. This particular group is composed of Carlos, the Latino kid with the innocent and attentive demeanor; Eddie, a White red-head who is soft-spoken but sarcastic, and not immediately willing to smile or express interest; Laura, a light-skinned African-American girl who is very proper and clean-cut, and Susie, a very shy and mousy White girl, who usually has to be prompted to speak.

### **Where Spinach is “Loathsome.”**

On one particular occasion, I sat down near Carlos' reading group and watched them interact just before Ms. Ryan-Bailey sat down. Carlos was talking anticipatorily with Laura and Susie about the book on pirates and the climactic scene they left at last time – the fragile female protagonist was bravely climbing a 180' mast. When Ms. Ryan-Bailey showed up, she praised the kids for doing such a good job listening and responding to each other, answering questions, and specifically mentioned Carlos for catching some important detail in the book that she had missed herself. This, too, was framed in the reality of the EOG, “If you understand the EOG like you do this book, *you're going to be on fire.*” Ms. Ryan-Bailey is able to focus entirely on this group because there are three other teacher assistants in the classroom reading with other groups. Throughout the 45 minutes of reading and comprehension, Ms. Ryan-Bailey regularly stops and asks the students in the group what a certain word means or about the significance of what's going on.

Carlos, being functionally bilingual, though not as comfortable as a native speaker, reserves his speech for when he is confident in his answer. For example, Ms. Ryan-Bailey asked the group what “loathsome” meant – while other students offered definitions approximating the disagreeable nature of the adjective, Carlos offered “mad” with a smile. Clearly, he feels encouraged and comfortable; Ms. Ryan-Bailey nearly always makes sure to prompt him for his opinion on the question. He even made a joke about spinach being “loathsome.” Other times, it seems he can't think of an answer that demonstrates comprehension of the story. When Ms. Ryan-Bailey asked the students in the reading group what the rough and tough pirates on the ship would do to determine whether the pitiful woman could stay, Carlos reiterated someone else's answer, “They'll give her a test to see if she's worthy enough.” Although it wasn't exactly an original opinion, this answer still demonstrates comprehension of consensus, though maybe not of American norms of how to measure a person's worth. Carlos also understood “rigging” as a place, though couldn't say specifically what it is.

*Analysis.* This style of working in small groups, whether it intentionally mixes ethnicities or not, encourages discourse and communal work on comprehension. The kids, even if not explicitly friends, come to know each other intimately by hearing each other's ideas, playing together, and getting momentarily involved in the liquid flux of groups and their conversations.

What I have noticed in observing this specific reading group is that Carlos tends to take a slight backseat to the other students, exhibiting more humility than confidence. Sometimes, I see that he's excited when offering his answer, and it seems to be because he's happy to feel like he knows what answer is expected. That is when he feels as much of a "normal" student as everyone else; at other times, all the novel facets of this culture and his own linguistic outsidership behoove him to sit, watch, and try to figure out what is going on. However, given his comfort with the language (embodied cultural capital) and Ms. Ryan-Bailey consistently encouraging his participation, he is incorporated into the classroom education and social atmosphere. He explores the new vocabulary words and the reading comprehension, using his English proficiency as a tool to figure out what the other students think and what the right answers are.

Carlos is successful at interpreting a text about pirates, an instance of objectified cultural capital, because of his *skill* at the English language. His is a case where a Latino student has managed to function successfully in a monolingual classroom. He has bypassed the linguistic power dynamic by becoming proficient in the dominant language, although he still lacks proficiency in knowledge of the dominant culture. As an individual, without the crutch or support of other Latino students, he has circumvented his own cultural and linguistic handicap and functions quite productively as an outsider-cum-insider.

### Lunch

At *lunch*, spatial mobility is at "medium", given the children can sit with any other students, even from different classes, as long as they're in the same grade. My experience has paralleled Barrie Thorne's, who studied gender relations among elementary school students, "I found that students generally separate first by gender, and then, if at all, by race or ethnicity." (Thorne 1993:33) Boys and girls would sit in gender-exclusive groups next to each other, and I rarely recorded an instance where the 5th graders sat completely mixed, as if without regard to gender. Lunch is held in the cafeteria, which is also the auditorium. On one side of the room is the stage; on the other the line feeding behind the wall where food is served. Parallel to the stage, along the two side walls, are five tables twenty feet long that seat about twenty kids. The tables are set close enough that the children are in very close proximity to each other. Strung on the walls are flags from a variety of countries as well as a reminder to wash hands.

Once students have sat down, they are expected not to get back up, not to interact any more than surreptitiously across tables, and to behave according to the dictates of the colored cups. The first ten minutes, the yellow cup is face down,

which means, “No talking, eat your food quietly.” After that time has passed, a teacher informs the students they can switch the yellow cup with the red one underneath it. The red cup symbolizes twenty minutes of verbal play until recess. As individual seating selection proceeds, children get organized in ways they might not organize themselves. Different groups of kids happen to sit at the same table because that’s where their friends are. But, the limited mobility of lunch behooves them to stay where they’ve sat, which fosters an open space for communication across group, ethnic, and gender boundaries.

Here two kinds of social capital, bridging and bonding, will be demonstrative (Putnam 2000:22-23). Bridging social capital is inclusive, involves making connections outside of one’s group, and leads to broader identities and reciprocity. Bonding social capital, on the other hand, is exclusive, inward looking, and tends to reinforce “exclusive identities and homogenous groups.” (Putnam 2000:22) I will speak of cultural isolation and how that plays out in the formation and interaction of groups of 5<sup>th</sup> graders at lunch.

Another lunch one temperate day in April, I went through the lunch line, grabbing fried chicken (which my teeth later discovered was more “fried” than “chicken”), salad, corn on the cob, and a chocolate milk. Chocolate milk has been a standard for me ever since I was a little kid, and I remember looking forward to it at lunch (some things never change). After paying, I scanned the cafeteria/auditorium quickly, intending to decide quickly where to sit so as to best observe and interact with Latino kids. I did not want to be seen by the kids scrutinizing where to sit lest my deliberate decision offend someone. The group of three Latino boys that I had witnessed sitting together another day were only two now, but were sitting next to a group of two White boys. I sat down next to both groups, in the middle, but not exactly between them (interaction across tables is normal and frequent). Soon after I sat down, the other Latino boy of the, in my mind, infamous trio sat down next to me and another White boy sat down on the other side. At this point, the kids were in two groups, two Latino boys to my left and one across and to the left, two White boys, one across from me and another across and to my right, and the last to my right. A diagram follows:

**Figure 1**  
Lunch Table

Me: X  
Latino boy: O  
White boy: W



To be honest, I was a little intimidated by the Latino boys – I desperately wanted their approval and feared being shunned, ignored, or simply disregarded. I also knew I might offend some other kids whom I had sat with before – however, I did not want to become set friends with any one particular group, and thus be divisive. Either way, the group of people I had sat with last time was mixed up and dispersed among the tables. Throughout lunch, I mostly observed and laughed at the White and Latino kids’ antics at my table – they were such cute little hellions.

### The Fried Chicken Fiasco

For the first ten minutes, we sat all together, eating our lunch quietly, because the yellow cup of silence was plainly visible on the table. Once informed by the patrolling teacher that we could switch it to the red cup, we were allowed to talk and interact. However, when I sat down, the Latino boys were already talking in Spanish to each other and one of the White boys was trying to bargain to get another's fried chicken for his own sloppy joe. The boys sat together, but apart. They were at the same table, interacting, but in very specific ways – in ways that they wouldn't communicate with others in their own group. For instance, the one White boy, we'll call him Calvin, tried briefly and noncommittally to get one of his White friends' chicken, who then gave some sort of final “no,” at which point Calvin turned to Julio, a chubby and gossipy Latino kid. He pestered Julio, but only in ways that to me seemed noncompetitive, friendly, and self-teasing desperation. After saying, “no” and laughing with Calvin so as to discourage hard feelings, Julio offered the White boy next to me his chicken for the White boy's sloppy joe. Calvin, dismayed and playfully shocked, snatched the chicken en route and only barely tried to keep it from Julio's reach. This could have been for several reasons – either he, too, wanted to make friends rather than enemies, respected Julio and his Latino boys group, or understood rules of fairness and was kind and smart enough to know that he wasn't in the right and acted accordingly.

Calvin returned the chicken after a couple warning grabs from Julio (Julio later informed me that he had licked the piece of fried chicken that he had traded for the other's sloppy joe). Then Calvin said, “Hey! Watch this, I'm going to go to the next table (a parallel table) and try to get their chicken!” Carlos, one of the Latino kids I'm observing in the classroom, said, “Tell them you're a starving orphan!” to which Calvin responded in joking desperation, his eyes on the other table, “But they wouldn't believe me!” All of the White boys, myself, and the Latino boys laughed at that. I was so elated to watch the two groups interact in a form of intimacy that, although not existing on such close terms as chosen friends, was borne of daily proximity to, and interaction with, each other. Calvin went, was reprimanded by a teacher, and returned to our friendly, comradely laughter. I argue here that the two distinct groups of boys were *bridging* gaps by communicating on common lines (trading chicken) while still remaining within their groups, reaffirming their identities and *bonding*. When the Latino and White boys weren't interacting across groups, they were speaking amongst themselves in Spanish and English, respectively.

### On the Outside

However, interactions also took on a manipulative tinge. After Calvin repeatedly failed to trade his sloppy joe for a piece of fried chicken, including from myself, (I disassociated myself from responsibility, “I am so hungry, I'm going to eat everything on my plate.”), he proceeded to try to get a girl's attention the table

parallel to ours that Calvin, sitting across from me, was facing. It was the table behind me. He essentially ordered Eugelio, who was sitting to my left, to get the girl's attention. Eugelio did, but the girl only paid the briefest attention to Calvin's horseplay, who was trying to lean so far back that he disappeared from view. Calvin told Eugelio to do it again, which he did, but another girl said loudly and clearly, "Leave her alone!"

Eugelio, an otherwise prideful and self-confident boy, was complicit in the demands, and sheepishly did what Calvin commanded. It seemed he deferred to Calvin, the White boy, because he wanted to be friends, he wanted to interact and be accepted by the out-group. I remember being that submissive and feeling outside the regular group when I was their age, but I guess I must be aware of and beware the bias of assuming my experience is theirs. Either way, in this and other interactions, I argue that language as cultural capital is instrumental in power relations – who gets ordered about, who lets themselves be ordered about, and who can effectively represent and affirm themselves. "To possess the capital of authority necessary to impose a definition of the situation.. is to be able to mobilize the group by.. officializing.. a private incident." (Bourdieu 1977:40) Knowledge of the "other's" topics of interest and how to use one's capital are secondary to the requisite of speaking the tongue.

In this instance, Eugelio, apparently not knowing what Calvin was up to more than joking about, deferred to Calvin because not to would have been rendering Calvin's antics powerless – they required a reaction from the girl whose attention he was trying to get. Furthermore, notice that it was Eugelio Calvin turned to, not just for his proximity (sitting next to me and closest to the opposite table), but his handicap in not being as proficient in English as Julio and Carlos, the other Latino boys at the table. Not having the requisite embodied cultural capital to communicate effectively, Eugelio chose to submit to the "insider" language, that spoken at the school and society here, as well by his two Latino friends who speak English proficiently. Calvin first tried to get Julio to get the girl's attention, but Julio responded in Spanish in a quick mutter. Calvin retorted, "What?! I don't understand you!" Quickly, Carlos smiled and responded, "He's speaking Japanese." Calvin retorted again, "I don't speak Pokemon!" drawing laughter from all the boys present, except Eugelio, who looked like he was trying to figure their interaction out.

### **Claiming the Outside**

Although he responded in Spanish, all at the table knew Julio spoke English well and clearly, and I suggest that his decision to respond in Spanish illustrates another power dynamic – establishing Calvin as a linguistic outsider. What is also interesting is that Julio seems to be much less assertive than Eugelio. However, Julio has the advantage of social as well as cultural capital – Julio can speak English and can interact across groups whereas Eugelio cannot, albeit through the

awkwardness of an interpreter. The second time Eugelio tried to get the girl's attention and another girl said, "Leave her alone!" Calvin snorted and chastised Eugelio, saying, "Eugelio, you ticked her off!" Eugelio, not understanding, played along and mimicked Calvin's gestures, raising his arms in mock frustration. Afterwards, Carlos explained to Eugelio in Spanish what Calvin had said.

Eugelio's lack of response was shocking to me – it seemed he was going back through the previous five minutes with the new explanation in mind. And yet, even after being informed of how Calvin had treated him, he still didn't show any distaste in his eyes or attempt to offer a rebuttal. The situation had already passed and his inability to operate smoothly in English had prevented him from giving a retort or challenge when Calvin was bossing him around. Additionally, given Eugelio's tied tongue, Calvin was able to renounce responsibility – he blamed Eugelio for pissing off the girl even though he himself was the one telling him to get her attention, and he also got Eugelio to perform all the punishable crimes – reaching and talking across tables.

*Analysis.* Thus, the ability to communicate effectively is a tool of influence, if not power, and in places where social interaction is so crucial, can be wielded and used to take advantage of others with a language handicap. However, what works for one can work for another – Calvin also suffered a language handicap – the Latino boys could interact and communicate with each other distinctly and secretly. They could form a coherent, focused group, even if any one of them couldn't operate in the society's dominant language. This is an example of how the two way street of cultural capital counteracts the dominant-subordinate relations among the fifth graders. Although the Latino students didn't have enough mobility to exclude themselves from the other-cultured students, they had enough mobility to form a cohesive group. Thus their own cultural capital fortified them despite their otherwise isolating cultural "otherness".

Yet, not all relations take on an oppositional nature: in an environment such as Emma Elementary, the kids are in such close proximity to each other that they form relationships even across linguistic barriers, encountering and transcending difference. The kids always interacted on friendly joking terms while I was there. I have yet to see a verbal, let alone physical, fight. Suffice to say, the overall mood is intentional cooperation as expressed through playfulness. That said, the amount of intimacy and respect shared varies from in group to out group relations. Eugelio could only be assertive among his Latino friends because he could convey himself in words convincing. When interacting with Calvin, of society's "in group," Eugelio deferred, perhaps because he wanted acceptance, but also because he couldn't facilely challenge Calvin. How much the kids get to express who they are (Carlos' joking about the "poor orphan" and Eugelio's assertiveness deferring to respect) and their available courses of action (Julio refusing to do Calvin's bidding and Eugelio's submission) are directly bounded by their ability to interact competently with each other.

## **Recess**

*Recess* has essential total mobility. The children are free to go anywhere on the playground they wish, which has sufficient space that, if desired, a group of kids can isolate themselves without normally coming across another group of kids. The children are allowed to go anywhere on the playground that they please, which consists of a jungle gym and swing set apart from the soccer field, baseball field, and open space (typically used for football/tag/etc.), which essentially share the same space.

Here the kids can interact with who they please, and on the part of the Latino boys, ethnic identity takes precedence. While Latino girls spend equal amounts of time in both strictly Latina girl- and mixed ethnicity-groups, the boys immediately congregate by one of the soccer goals after the two or three full classes do their compulsory laps around the field. The only times I have observed the White and African-American boys playing football mix with the Latino boys were the first time I witnessed recess, where soccer had gained a brief popularity and the day I myself switched from playing football to soccer in the middle of a game. Otherwise, the five to eight Latino boys associate together by a single goal, only loosely playing a soccer game, mostly talking and sporadically engaging in one-on-one competition. In this way, the Latino boys focus on bonding social capital, reinforcing their exclusive identities.

More than a couple times, I played on the playground with the kids. On one occasion, I at first played football because I had promised I would to the kids I sat with at lunch. However, I felt like I was missing important opportunities for research while running around with the African-Americans and Whites playing football, so after fifteen minutes, went to play soccer with the kids who were all Latino except for one White girl playing as goalie (who did really well – she had guts). Electing to play defense on both teams, sticking close to the goal, I admired their handy footwork and tried to play in an as agile and gentle way as they did, but couldn't for my rough and slower movements. After ten minutes of that, the kids I had been playing football with came over, to my delight, but very noticeably stuck to the outskirts, playing together and not daring to enter the skilled Latino soccer players' territory. Perhaps also they didn't want to be shown to be inadequate to their friends and to the outsider-group. What sticks out in my memory were the unique compositions of the groups playing each sport. Whereas the soccer players were all-except-one Latino males about twelve years old, the football players were composed of one African-American boy, one African-American/White girl, one obese White boy on crutches, a couple other White boys, and a boy who claimed he had Cherokee/Irish/African-American ancestry.

## **When Play Begins**

This distinction by ethnicity is only apparent once the playtime part of recess has begun – when the kids are hurriedly walking to the playground from the lunchroom or walking their laps, they interact and laugh together, joking and

playing, seemingly without any inhibition or preference for comrade. But after they have fulfilled their necessitated sharing of the same space, they segregate themselves consistently by play. The larger groups made possible by recess don't do as much cross group interaction, I theorize, because they are not stuck in one place, nor forced to share a space such that they would be interacting regardless of whether they intended to or not. The children are allowed to be more mobile and can elect what to do with themselves.

Effectively, they are given space, both physical and social, to create their own interactive environment. That they do not constantly interact across groups doesn't mean that they would rather not to. I argue that they simply take advantage of this "free time" to engage in freedoms they are otherwise prevented from appreciating. Beverly Tatum writes:

We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. The problem is that our young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural stereotypes. (Tatum 1997:3)

Although Tatum specifically mentions Black students, this theory works for Latino students as well. But, rather than because of racism (which is less deterministic at twelve years of age), social comfort and common understanding explain why the Latino boys hang out together at recess. The Latino boys segregate themselves because there they feel safe to share themselves and can do so naturally, without the impediment of linguistic or cultural deficiency. Girls, on the other hand, are more social, maybe because of mutual cultural norms encouraging interaction. While the White and African-American boys also segregate themselves away from the girls and the Latino boys, they will also sometimes divide themselves along ethnic boundaries.

*Analysis.* The abundance of space both provides for and fosters purposeful group formation, and while it doesn't impede intergroup interaction, it certainly doesn't force it. Thus, the kids' natural proclivities become apparent and facily realized. The playground offers the children free reign on where they go and who they play with – distinctions and alliances express themselves freely and automatically, albeit mostly in physical form. There is not so much verbal interaction and even chastisement across groups, but where kids place themselves on the map of the playground expresses in a physical way who they feel most comfortable with, who they're willing to play with, and who they have no interest in playing with.

## **Conclusions**

I theorize that these different arenas, with their different levels of *spatial mobility*, dictate how much importance cultural capital plays in stylizing interactions. *Social proximity* plays a role in determining where kids move and/

or what kind of cultural capital they will need to use. *Cultural capital* is a form of competence here, where knowledge of language, culture, and interaction norms is a valuable tool to gain friendship, social acceptance, and respect. In situations where individuals had little cultural capital, and therefore competence, I witnessed Latino as well as White kids being manipulated, excluded, and teased. The style of teaching and treating Latino kids directly affects how much cultural capital they are encouraged, and need, to have. Thus, education plays a direct role in how Latino kids form relationships, are treated, and to what extent they are acculturated to White and African-American norms, and vice versa. Putnam writes that “the level of *informal* social capital in the state is a stronger predictor of student achievement than is the level of *formal* institutionalized social capital.” (Putnam 2000:300) Putnam argues that the level of “social trust” and the frequency with which people connect informally is even more closely correlated with educational performance than time spent at church or meetings.

While the Latino students need a lot of cultural capital to succeed, function, and interact in a classroom where the dominant language and culture is English, they can choose to isolate themselves at recess because they don't have to function in the dominant cultural mode. Lunch is an interesting meeting point between the two where groupings based on ethnicity and cultural heritage are apparent, but groups still interact in a kind of social play. The kids from different cultures explore each other, picking out what is good and funny to say while they interact in very particular ways. There is a clear differentiation between “us” and “they,” but rather than in an oppositional way (which these kids have yet to develop), it manifests itself in modes of discourse as dictated by comfort level. The children's interactions range from kind and playful, when their comfort level is reasonably high, to dismissive when they are uncomfortable. Of course, this is also mediated by the size of different groups, if either group has a member with the cultural capital of the outsider group, and what subject matter is being discussed.

The different arenas necessitate different levels of cultural capital to succeed depending on how much *proximity* to each other there is and how much spatial mobility is available. In areas of high spatial mobility and low intergroup proximity such as recess, one only needs enough cultural capital to interact with one group, while in areas of low spatial mobility and high proximity to those of a different cultural heritage, such as the classroom, cultural capital is a necessary requisite to success in academics as well as social relations. However, only a certain amount and certain kinds of cultural capital are necessary; a student can still retain his/her individuality while performing cross-cultural interaction. Giroux argues that students must become *border crossers*, meaning that they engage in border studies, those “points of intersection, where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.” (Giroux 1992:29)

While talk of football may be restricted to the White and African-American kids, trying to trade one's sloppy joe for another's piece of fried chicken is cross-cultural – it is common to all groups. These meeting grounds are where growth

and spontaneous interaction occur. While on the playground the Latino boys play soccer, the White and African-American boys play football, and the girls of various ethnicities move from single ethnicity groups to pluralistic groups, the lunch room puts all the students in a healthy proximity to each other that encourages exploration and interaction. The kind of interaction there is usually among *groups* of cultural similars, whereas in the classroom it is more often between individuals. Thus, there exists a higher need in the classroom for students to have English-speaking, American cultural capital so that they can function socially and succeed academically. In addition to that, supportive teachers are crucial: much of Carlos' exuberance can be traced to Ms. Sherrie Ryan-Bailey's success at teaching as well as incorporating him.

The varying levels of available mobility bring about and allow certain kinds of interaction, as mediated by linguistic and cultural aptitude. The Latino children's level of competence and comfort in the dominant culture and language both prohibits and allows interaction across social boundaries. Linguistic ability does not necessarily signify cultural aptitude, and even linguistically apt students such as Carlos can be excluded for their cultural deficiency while students such as Eugelio, who are unable to speak English, are cut out almost entirely from respectful and purposeful interaction. The available mobility of recess allows these hindrances to be transcended and rendered ineffective, although the classroom attempts to teach English competency and encourage inter-ethnic association. This, however, does not necessarily result in ethnic identity taking a back seat to selective relationship formation, mode and style of interaction, and budding self-identity. Where the Latino kids exist on the continuum of cultural and linguistic proficiency indicates (1) their available options to interact with, and succeed in, the various environments and (2) their various levels of necessitated submission to cultural and linguistic dominance.

Furthermore, the more successful the school is at fostering cross-cultural interaction, the more the Latino kids and their culture will be accepted, understood, and serve as a meeting ground for other cross-cultural interaction. Tatum writes, "We educators must begin by asking what images are being reflected in the mirror of our institutions. Does that reflection affirm the identities of all our students or just a few?" (Tatum 1999:551) Ideally, the atmosphere would be one of "open minds" and fluid communication: children learning from each other, moving away from society's current one-way street. I am glad, for one, to have witnessed many steps being taken in that direction at Emma Elementary. Through an equality of education we can finally achieve not just the equality in society that we seek, but a sense of common understanding and productive coexistence.

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