Dora’s Program: A Constructively Marginalized Paraeducator and Her Developmental Biliteracy Program

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This article discusses findings from a case study of one elementary bilingual paraeducator, highlighting how the recognition of situated cultural capital enabled her to move from traditional to constructive marginality. I argue that her actions, the actions of others, and conditions within the school enabled her to use culturally relevant funds of knowledge in working with language-minority children. I conclude that the resources paraeducators bring can be harnessed when stakeholders are committed to doing so. [paraeducators, cultural capital, constructive marginality, biliteracy, family literacy]

The number of language-minority children in our nation’s elementary schools has been rising steadily over the past few decades. This is especially true within the Latino and Asian populations. As such, schools are struggling to find ways to meet the academic and social needs of children whose home language and culture differ from that of the typical U.S. school. This struggle is made all the more difficult by the fact that the majority of teachers in our public schools are white—83.1 percent in 2003–04—and, thus, may not have the language skills or cultural background to connect with language-minority students (Snyder 2008).

One way that schools have attempted to address the needs of young language learners is by hiring bilingual paraeducators to assist them inside and outside the classroom (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Nittoli and Giloth 1997). Paraeducators play multifaceted and important roles in schools, yet there is a vast literature on how they are marginalized by their colleagues and positioned as peripheral to the central work of the school (Abbate-Vaughn 2007; Chopra et al. 2004; Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Monzó and Rueda 2003; Rueda and Monzó 2002; Rueda et al. 2004; Weiss 1994). Some researchers have suggested that this is because they primarily serve children who are themselves outside the mainstream—special needs students and English language learners (Creese 2002; Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996; Wenger et al. 2004). Also, districts provide little training, and most paraeducators do not have formal teaching credentials, so they are not respected as teachers and are infrequently consulted on matters of pedagogy. Bilingual paraeducators in particular are often racial and language minorities, and most are “women who work for little more than minimum wage . . . and who are the lowest paid in the school” (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006:62). Their low levels of cultural capital, thus, disadvantage them further.

However, there is also a growing literature on the potential of paraeducators to use their funds of knowledge to forge connections between families and schools (Abbate-Vaughn 2007; Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Galindo and Olguín 1996; Hones 1999; Moll 1992; Rueda et al. 2004; Weiss 1994). In the case of bilingual paraeducators, these funds of knowledge are culturally situated, so they may be unique within a school. Like teachers, their participation in pedagogical practice gives them inside knowledge of how schooling works, as well as access to a network of educators from whom to seek assistance. Unlike many teachers, however, they also have language and cultural skills that connect them to the language-minority community as well as an understanding of the experience of being
a minority, language or otherwise. They truly exist at the nexus of school and home communities, and as such learning more about the circumstances in which they effectively support students should be a priority for qualitative educational researchers (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Lareau 1987; Monzó and Rueda 2003). Such studies can help us recognize and value their contributions more fully.

This article is an account of a qualitative case study of one bilingual paraeducator and the supplemental biliteracy program she facilitated for Spanish-speaking kindergartners in an urban elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. Using cultural capital as a way to theorize the power imbalances that create marginality for paraeducators, as well as the ways in which it enables them to exercise agency, I attempt to understand how this paraeducator negotiated elements of her marginalized position to make use of her culturally relevant funds of knowledge. I explore the multifaceted nature of her marginality, highlighting the ways in which her position both enabled and constrained her use of funds of knowledge. Through this case, I begin to theorize how educators within school contexts can begin to break down power differentials through the recognition of situated cultural capital. I address the following research questions: (1) What combination of actions and conditions enabled a bilingual paraeducator to use her diverse funds of culturally relevant knowledge to better meet the academic and social needs of language-minority children? (2) How can the case of this paraeducator help us understand how others like her can be supported in contributing fully to their school communities?

Marginality and Cultural Capital

Marginality as a sociological construct was developed in the 1920s and 1930s to refer to individuals who left one social group but never successfully joined another, remaining on its margins instead. Although the original focus was on the psychological condition of such people, later anthropologists focused on the relationship between marginalized individuals and the social systems around them (Weiss 1994), asserting that they had difficulty participating effectively in any social group. However, over the past 30 years, researchers have begun to recognize the potential for innovation within these liminal spaces (Chopra et al. 2004; Wenger et al. 2004).

There can be little doubt that in contemporary times, paraeducators (both bilingual and not) often inhabit marginalized spaces in schools, in that they are rarely recognized as pedagogical experts despite the fact that they are instructional personnel. Further, they often retain primary allegiance to the families they serve but also represent the school within those communities. Ernst-Slavit and Wenger (2006) refer to bilingual paraeducators as “hidden teachers,” and, indeed, their marginality is exacerbated by official institutional discourses that create classifications such as administrator, teacher, and paraeducator (Bernstein 1991; Bourdieu 1986). These classifications constrain the roles and voices that individuals within schools can take on (Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996).

Although marginalized individuals may have a wealth of knowledge and participate in meaningful networks, they have low levels of societally valued “cultural capital.” Cultural capital was originally defined as knowledge, competencies, and practices that conferred power and status on individuals within given environments (Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In the 30 years since it was proposed, the theory of cultural capital has been used in a variety of ways and for a multitude of purposes (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Yosso and García 2007). In this article, I consider cultural capital to be the high status knowledge, skills, and practices that have value in a given context. This definition originates in the work of Bourdieu, but incorporates aspects that are also included in more recent conceptions as well.
A major component of both marginality and cultural capital is the potential for exclusion. Because dominant groups possess cultural capital that is more valued than that of subordinated groups, they determine which knowledge, skills, and credentials have legitimacy (deMarrais and LeCompte 1995; Lareau 1987). Some have argued that exclusion is one of the most important elements of cultural capital, because it is a primary mechanism through which power differentials are maintained (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Those who have access to cultural capital are able to exclude those who don’t socially, culturally, and even professionally (DeGraaf et al. 2000), although such exclusionary practices are often unconsciously promoted as neutral or free of cultural bias. Bilingual paraeducators are excluded from mainstream power not only by institutional credentials but also by their status as minority language speakers and their membership in cultures that differ from that of mainstream U.S. schools.

However, because cultural capital is not absolute, that which is not valued in one environment may be considered legitimate—even powerful—in another (Corbett 2004; DeGraaf et al. 2000; deMarrais and LeCompte 1995; Lamont and Lareau 1988). This is the idea of situated cultural capital. For example, standard English is clearly the legitimate language for school learning in the United States, but in schools located in ethnic communities that serve large numbers of language-minority children, minority languages may be highly valued, and those who speak them, thus, possess more cultural capital in those contexts than they do in the larger society. The situated nature of cultural capital is important in discussions about power and marginality in schools, because it leaves open the possibility that skills and knowledge not traditionally associated with the dominant group can nonetheless be valued in certain situations (DeGraaf et al. 2000). Thus, the theory of cultural capital is structural, yet also leaves room for individual and situational agency, at least as conceptualized by some theorists (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Additionally, although Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is transmitted generationally, others have viewed it more fluidly, asserting that it is possible for it to be acquired through the actions of one’s family (DeGraaf et al. 2000; Yosso 2005) or affiliation with institutions (Portes 1998). This article raises a slightly different possibility: that a marginalized educator whose funds of knowledge are recognized as cultural capital can be constructively marginalized through her actions, the actions of others, and conditions within a school, thus enabling her to use those funds of knowledge to support language-minority children both academically and socially.

**Bilingual Paraeducators and Their Funds of Knowledge**

Bilingual paraeducators play a critical role in linguistically diverse schools. They are often members of the local community as well as being part of the school staff. They share the language of their students, and use it to varying degrees to make content comprehensible to children who may not otherwise have access. Additionally, many (although by no means all) are people of color who have experienced immigration and second-language learning themselves, and, thus, may have the ability to connect with families and children in ways that teachers do not. This is especially true because the elementary teaching profession is largely staffed by white, middle-class women (Rueda and Monzó 2002; Weiss 1994).

Moll et al. (1992) and others (Yosso 2005; Yosso and García 2007) have argued that the culturally relevant practices that operate in low-income, minority communities—funds of knowledge—have historically been ignored, and in this article I extend his argument to contend that they have not been recognized as cultural capital. In Moll’s conception, families were considered the holders of cultural knowledge, but more recent work has
recognized this knowledge in teachers and bilingual paraeducators as well. Monzó and Rueda (2003) took a central tenet of Moll’s theory and expanded it: when people are part of mutually supportive networks—that is, when they share funds of knowledge—it is not necessary for one person to know everything. It is the sum of their combined knowledge that matters. Clearly, however, the mere existence of funds of knowledge is not enough. Recognizing, valuing, and connecting the different funds of knowledge held by teachers (e.g., pedagogical and academic knowledge) and bilingual paraeducators (e.g., language and experience) and supporting their use are important functions of schools.

To make such connections possible, schools need to recognize the funds of knowledge that bilingual paraeducators bring into the system. Despite their low educational status, they are usually mature, active community members who are experienced in working with challenging students (Rueda et al. 2004). They often have relationships with families that can make schools more welcoming and accountable, while at the same time challenging deficit thinking among school staff. In describing this dual role, Weiss says, “It is her (the paraeducator’s) personal involvement that legitimizes the school system and makes it answerable, as well as accessible, to community concerns” (1994:342). With the concepts of cultural capital and funds of knowledge in mind, this study investigated the combination of actions and conditions that positioned a bilingual paraeducator to accrue cultural capital and successfully use her funds of knowledge to meet the academic and social needs of the Spanish-speaking children she worked with. From a theoretical perspective, I wanted to better understand the multifaceted nature of marginality and explore how such an understanding can help us begin to break down the power differentials that are so pervasive in our nation’s public schools.

Methods

This was a qualitative case study of a bilingual paraeducator in one school. The case study methodology was appropriate for this study because of its descriptive and explanatory nature (Yin 2006), as well as its attention to the social and educational context in which this paraeducator worked. As with all case studies, this was an attempt to investigate a single phenomenon as it was enacted within a real-life context, and it involved direct observation in a natural setting (Dyson and Genishi 2005; Merriam 1998).

The need for qualitative studies that address the role of marginalized, yet effective, educators and the cultural resources they access in different contexts has been identified in the literature (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Lareau 1987). My choice to focus on one bilingual paraeducator was driven by Mitchell’s notion of a telling case (Mitchell 1984). As opposed to a typical case, a telling case takes into account the circumstances particular to a situation and uses them to make theoretical connections apparent. Thus, although this bilingual paraeducator, Dora, worked in a unique context, we can still learn a great deal about funds of knowledge and cultural capital from an in-depth exploration of her experiences. Galindo and Olguín (1996), for example, contend that mainstream teachers need to better understand the range of cultural resources available to minority educators, and Yosso maintains that documenting examples of funds of knowledge use among people of color empowers them to “utilize assets already abundant in their communities” (2005:82).

This study was conducted in a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest during the 2007–08 school year. Hurley Heights Elementary was located in a racially diverse neighborhood and had about 375 students, 25 percent of whom spoke Spanish as a first language. The school staff was concerned about the achievement of its language-minority students and had developed a number of programs in recent years to serve them. According to school staff, the supplemental Spanish–English kindergarten biliteracy program was
among the most successful. At the time of this study, “Dora’s program,” as it was called by nearly everyone in the school, had been in place for five years. Dora Chamorro, the bilingual paraeducator who created and taught the supplemental biliteracy program, described its creation in the following way:

Éste es un programa que lo comencé a trabajar cuando yo llegué a esta escuela y ví que los niños en kinder tenía tanta necesidad de ayuda. Entonces, mi trabajo era en el área de kinder y ayudar a un niño, a otro niño, a otro niño. Y me di cuenta de que en vez de ayudar a un niño, podía ayudar a todos los niños en un solo grupo. Les dije a los papás si querían traer a sus niños más temprano, que yo les podía ayudar. Y así comenzó el programa.

This is a program that I started when I arrived at this school and saw that kindergarten children needed a lot of help. At that time, my job was to work in kindergarten to help one student, then another student, then another. And I realized that instead of helping one at a time, I could help them all in one group. So I told the parents that if they wanted to bring their children (to school) early, I could help them. And that’s how the program started.

This quote illustrates how Dora began the program of her own initiative, without official approval or permission. It began as an informal family literacy class to help children improve their reading ability in English and teach parents how to support children’s reading at home. In later grant documents, the stated goal of the program was “to promote bilingualism, biliteracy, multicultural competence and academic achievement in non-English native speaking students.” As a supplemental program, the biliteracy class ran three mornings a week for an hour, extending into the first half hour of school instruction. The focus shifted from English to Spanish literacy development in 2004, and at the time of this study the class was conducted entirely in Spanish.

Nineteen of 20 Spanish-speaking kindergartners participated in the class, and on the eight occasions I observed there were an average of 16 kindergartners and five parents in attendance. Staff members (incl. the principal, ESL specialists, a Title I teacher, and the school counselor) often made informal appearances, stopping by to greet parents, read with students, or simply observe. There was also a bilingual community volunteer who helped Dora once a week, reading stories to children and offering one-on-one assistance as needed.

To more fully understand Dora’s position in relation to this program and the school, I collected data in a variety of ways. I conducted semistructured interviews with stakeholders from the classroom, departmental, and administrative levels who were involved either in supporting the program or who worked with Spanish-speaking kindergartners. This method of sample selection has been called purposeful sampling (Merriam 1998), in which participants were selected based on how much they could contribute to the outcome of the study. Participants in this study included:

Dora Chamorro, the bilingual paraeducator who created and taught the supplemental biliteracy program. Dora had been working at Hurley Heights Elementary for more than 15 years, and her two daughters had attended the school. She was a teacher in her native Nicaragua before moving to the United States in the early 1980s.

Maggie Scott, the principal, who attempted to formalize the program and secure financial and personnel resources to ensure its continuation. Dr. Scott began at Hurley Heights as a first-time principal in the fall of 2002.

Shizue Nelson, an ESL specialist and the certificated staff supervisor of the Latino parent committee and the biliteracy program. Shizue had been at Hurley Heights for over ten years and was one of the staff members who, along with Maggie, submitted an unsuccessful grant proposal to formalize the biliteracy program.

Carol Brekke, an ESL specialist who began at Hurley Heights in the fall of 2003. She previously worked at a newcomer center in the district, and at the time of the study worked with kindergarten and first-grade students and teachers.
Karen Matsumoto, a kindergarten teacher whose students were served by the program. Karen had been teaching kindergarten at Hurley Heights since before the biliteracy program began, and thus had many students who went through the program.

Each participant was interviewed once. Interviews were semistructured and lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. I used interview protocols, but in concert with the case study methodology I also engaged in ongoing analysis throughout the data collection period (Yin 2006). Therefore, I adjusted interview questions to address issues that arose. I left open the possibility of following up on certain points or raising additional questions based on my observations or conversations with other participants. I also had a number of informal conversations with participants, which were not audio-recorded but did constitute data.

My interview with Dora was conducted (and transcribed) in Spanish, as it is the language with which she felt most comfortable and the language we had always spoken together. I have left her quotes in the original Spanish alongside English translations in this article to give her own words equal weight as those whom I interviewed in English.

I conducted 16 hourlong observations of instruction as a non-participant-observer—eight in the supplemental biliteracy program and eight in Karen’s kindergarten class. I also attended two hourlong parent meetings that took place monthly before the biliteracy class. Decisions about what to focus on in the observations were driven by my conceptual framework of funds of knowledge and how Dora was positioned to use them. As such, in my observations of the biliteracy program, I paid special attention to Dora’s interactions with students and parents; the knowledge she drew on; and the connections she made to her own and children’s lives. All observations were recorded in the form of field notes.

Finally, I asked participants to provide me with documents throughout the data collection period. These helped me understand how Dora and her program were discussed and officially recognized (or not) and included: program and grant application materials, fliers sent home to parents, literacy assessment tools, and email correspondence among participants.

In addition to these multiple sources of data, I had a measure of insider status at this site. At the time of the study, I had been active in the Hurley Heights school community for six years: as a first-grade teacher for three years and subsequently as a classroom volunteer and researcher on this and another project. Dora started her biliteracy class at the beginning of my second teaching year, and therefore I had students in my class who had taken the biliteracy class as kindergartners. As one of the few Spanish-speaking staff members, I also worked closely with Dora and the Latino PTA in my time at Hurley Heights. Therefore, although the data collection period for this study was necessarily short, I had existing relationships with each of my participants and enough experience at the school to triangulate my findings and warrant the claims I make in this article.

As noted earlier, I engaged in preliminary data analysis during the data collection period, in addition to conducting a focused analysis on leaving the field. The first step in my analysis was open coding (Emerson et al. 1995). I then grouped codes from the transcripts, observation notes, field notes, and documents into categories. This allowed me to “understand a phenomenon better by grouping and then conceptualizing objects that have similar patterns or characteristics” (Miles and Huberman 1994:249). This analytic coding process (Glesne 2006; Merriam 1998) also enabled me to visually represent the themes that appeared most robust across data sources. Some of my initial codes were subsumed under others at this point, while others were renamed or reframed. Once I collapsed my codes, I created case order matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994) and drafted analytic memos to capture my hunches and early hypotheses.
Making Marginality Constructive

Like other paraeducators highlighted in the research, Dora was in some ways marginalized at Hurley Heights. She was one of only two native Spanish-speaking staff members (along with another bilingual paraeducator) and was herself an immigrant whose dominant language remained Spanish. In contrast to the middle- and upper-middle-class teachers in the school, Dora worked two days a week cleaning houses to supplement her paraeducator income. She didn’t have the institutional status enjoyed by teachers, and was at the mercy of administrative and teacher decisions about which language to use in her interactions with children. For example, it was determined that she would teach Spanish literacy in the supplemental program, but the language she focused on when she worked in classrooms during the day depended on individual teachers’ requests.

Importantly, because the biliteracy program was informal and unfunded, Dora ran it without compensation as an “extra” that was theoretically valued by the school community but not adequately supported (Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996). Her marginality was apparent in the fact that most of the teachers in the school had not seen or asked about what she did in the biliteracy program: “Nadie me preguntó que era lo que hacía, ni porque lo estaba haciendo, ni la directora, nunca me preguntaba por qué” [Nobody asked me what I was doing, nor why I was doing it, not even the principal, nobody asked me why]. This was especially important as it pertained to the kindergarten teachers, with whose students she worked directly. Although many of the methods she used in her class overlapped with those that I observed in Karen’s kindergarten class, Dora told me that “los de kinder nunca me han preguntado qué hago... ni tampoco han venido a darme sus opiniones... ni a observar qué es lo que hago” [those from kindergarten have never asked me what I do... nor have they come to give me their opinions... or to observe what it is I do]. Dora was excluded from kindergarten team meetings, and any collaboration that did happen (very little overall) was informal and initiated by Dora.

Maggie expressed concern that there was little communication between Dora and kindergarten teachers, saying: “I don’t think the kindergarten team sort-of knows what’s going on” with the biliteracy program. She later added that she thought teachers throughout the school considered it “Dora’s program.” This same belief was expressed by all of my participants, who referred to it freely as “Dora’s program,” and to the children as “Dora’s kids.” This had the effect of singling her out as the person responsible for their home language maintenance, a phenomenon that has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996). Dora herself said that when new Spanish-speaking students arrived at Hurley Heights, “lo primero que hace es ‘mandenlos a Dora’” [the first thing they do is “send them to Dora”].

The kind of marginality highlighted by these examples is typically assumed to be negative, and it certainly can be. As early as Park (1928), certain characteristic forms of behavior have been attributed to marginalized people, as they struggle to “live in two diverse cultural groups” (Park 1928:881). However, in some cases, bilingual paraeducators are able to “use the concepts of marginality—ambiguity, flexibility, and special knowledge—to reduce conflict and facilitate change,” thus creating constructive marginality (Weiss 1994:337). Those, like Dora, whose life experiences place them in multiple social, professional, and cultural groups are able to transcend the barriers that limited cultural capital places before them and function effectively both in schools and in communities. This is true because cultural capital can be negotiated differently in different contexts (Corbett 2004).

Thus, although Dora exhibited some of the classic signs of marginality and possessed cultural capital different from that valued in the U.S. mainstream, in other ways she was less marginalized than other paraeducators highlighted in the literature. For example, she
had been a teacher in her native Nicaragua before moving to the United States. in the early 1980s, and that experience was widely acknowledged and valued at Hurley Heights. This was ironic given teachers’ lack of knowledge about her program, and was likely driven by the academic and social benefits they noted for students who had taken the biliteracy class.

The ambiguity that was part of Dora’s job also afforded her flexibility in an otherwise structured and bureaucratic system (Wenger et al. 2004). For a variety of reasons, she was able to constructively use this ambiguity and flexibility. Table 1 shows the parallels between the marginality Dora experienced at Hurley Heights and the ways in which that marginality was made constructive through her actions, the actions of others, and conditions within the school.

As the table shows, there were at least six elements of Dora’s constructive marginality, each of which represented some aspect of ambiguity, flexibility, or special knowledge. It is

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<th>Marginality</th>
<th>Constructive Marginality</th>
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<td>1. Dora was an immigrant and one of only two native Spanish-speakers on staff.</td>
<td>She used her language skills and cultural knowledge to communicate with children and families in ways that classroom teachers were not able to. Shizue: “I think she does it (leads parents) in a culturally sensitive way that if I said the same thing, I couldn’t get away with it.”</td>
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<td>2. She was a paraeducator without the status of a teacher.</td>
<td>Because she was the only instructor in the biliteracy program, she set the goals and controlled the content and methods (although the principal determined the language of instruction) Dora: “No tengo ningun curriculum. Todo está aqui en mi mente. Me baso en la experiencia di mi trabajo como maestra en Nicaragua.” [I don’t have a curriculum. Everything is here in my head. I base it on my experience as a teacher in Nicaragua.]</td>
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<td>3. She faced conflicting pressures about what language to emphasize in literacy instruction.</td>
<td>She aligned herself with Shizue and Carol, two ESL specialists who shared her goal of biliteracy and were able to provide her with various kinds of institutional support. Maggie: “The ESL teachers have taken on as part of their responsibility making sure that Dora is supported.”</td>
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<td>4. She worked under the direct supervision of classroom teachers.</td>
<td>These teachers worked in concert with Dora, Maggie, and the ESL department to come to an agreement about what was acceptable for Dora to do while working with their students. Shizue: “Teachers are very, very protective of their time... so for all three kindergarten teachers to say ‘you can take my Latino kids for 30 minutes’... that action says more than anything that this class is perceived as very effective in the kids’ learning that they were willing to let go of the time.”</td>
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<td>5. The program lacked dedicated materials and physical space.</td>
<td>She enlisted parents to bring materials back from their home countries to donate to the program. Dora: “(Los materiales) vienen de Mexico, o de El Salvador, o de Guatemala, o sea, todos los papas se interesaban en comprar los libros, el material para enseñar a leer y me los traen.” [The materials come from Mexico, or El Salvador, or Guatemala. In other words, all of the parents became interested in buying books, the materials for teaching reading, and they bring them to me.]</td>
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<td>6. She felt that no one in the school really knew what she taught, partly due to language constraints and partly due to a lack of direct observation of the program.</td>
<td>Although she said repeatedly that colleagues rarely (if ever) asked about what she does, she acknowledged widespread support for her goals of biliteracy and Latino family involvement. Dora: “Ni una de ellas saben, pero ven los resultados. Tienen fe que lo que yo hago funciona.” [Not a single one of them knows, but they see the results. They have faith that what I do works.]</td>
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notable that the funds of knowledge Dora had—language proficiency, a teaching background, and strong personal and professional relationships—were valued as cultural capital in this context. It is possible that in an institution that was less concerned with educational equity issues, Dora’s special knowledge and relationships would not be recognized as cultural capital, and she would likely be marginalized in the traditional ways noted on the left side of the table, rather than constructively. This suggests that one way schools can minimize power imbalances and improve schooling for language-minority students is by creating conditions that value the funds of knowledge bilingual paraeducators bring.

The first element of Dora’s constructive marginality was perhaps the most obvious: her ability to speak Spanish and the relationships she built based on sharing that language with a number of children and families at Hurley Heights. Minority languages in the United States are rarely recognized as cultural capital, but in this context it was one of Dora’s greatest contributions. In my observations, I saw Dora using her knowledge of both Spanish and English pedagogically in a variety of ways, which I discuss more in depth in the next section. This knowledge was not limited to language—there was also evidence of Dora’s culturally sensitive approach to involving families in the education of their children. For example, she used the Spanish language and Latino cultural norms to empower parents to raise concerns about their children’s academic needs and to share their own experiences in working with their children. Spanish-speaking parents of kindergartners were invited to monthly meetings that took place before the biliteracy class. Written invitations were sent home that emphasized the value of parent contributions and feedback, as this example illustrates:

Ven y comparte tus ideas con otros padres Latinos. Aprende ideas nuevas de padres expertos, maestros, y especialistas. Ésta es una magnífica oportunidad para saber acerca del programa de Lectura en Español que ofrece nuestra escuela. No pierdas esta oportunidad de aprender los unos de los otros.

[Come and share your ideas with other parents. Learn new ideas from expert parents, teachers, and specialists. This is a magnificent opportunity to learn about the Reading in Spanish program our school offers. Don’t miss this opportunity to learn from one another.]

Indeed, at the two parent meetings I observed, Dora created structures for parents to share as well as positioning individual parents as “experts” to help facilitate the discussions. At one meeting, those experts modeled a conversation about their experiences and questions related to writing at home with their children. At the other meeting, the expert parents taught others how to play specific math games with their children. Dora’s proficiency in Spanish also enabled her to be the sole instructor in the biliteracy program. This related to the second element in terms of the level of independence her position and special knowledge afforded her. She was the undisputed “teacher” of the biliteracy program and was recognized as such by children, parents, and colleagues—she was in a sense considered “credentialed” despite the fact that she didn’t have a U.S. teaching certificate. Her expertise and experience were recognized as situated cultural capital that compensated for the lack of institutional certification and enabled her to be included in the education of language-minority children. At least two factors combined to make this possible for Dora. First, her own initiative in starting and maintaining such a program proved to the school staff that she could do it on her own. Second, the staff had been exploring biliteracy instruction in recent years in an effort to meet the needs of their large ESL population and were largely open to the use of home languages in the classroom. As Maggie noted in our interview:

“Every time we...talked about the international school as a direction that made sense, Dora’s program was mentioned as one of the examples of what we’re already doing that’s part of the fabric of the school.”
This quote refers to the fact that at the time of this study Hurley Heights was undergoing a transformation into an international school. The following year (2008–09), it received that official designation and launched a Spanish dual language strand in kindergarten, to move up one grade every year. Although Dora was ostensibly the foremost expert on Spanish language instruction at the school, she was not involved in the hiring of the Spanish-medium teacher, and later expressed to me her discontent with the choice. In the two years that the dual language program has been operating, Dora has not worked in Spanish-medium classrooms, although she continues to run her supplementary class. Thus, in a very real way, she is excluded from the mainstream education those children receive. Ironically, then, the school’s commitment to the education of language-minority children helped the staff position Dora as someone who possessed special knowledge and the right amount of flexibility to make good use of it, but only to a certain extent and on the small scale of her supplemental biliteracy class.

The third element of Dora’s constructive marginality shows how Dora was positioned between groups with different goals or visions. Language of literacy instruction was a contentious issue among those who served kindergarteners, more or less so depending on who I talked to. Although, as I noted earlier, the program began as a way of facilitating English reading ability, the focus shifted to Spanish literacy four years before this study began. This was a shift Dora welcomed, because she valued bilingualism and biliteracy not only as academic endeavors but also to keep communication within immigrant families strong. Maggie became an enthusiastic proponent of native language literacy after participating in workshops and conferences focused on dual language immersion. ESL specialists Shizue and Carol also expressed strong support for native language literacy, but kindergarten teacher Karen preferred Dora’s original model of instruction—teaching English literacy in Spanish—and lamented the fact that Maggie had “mandated” that Dora teach exclusively in Spanish in recent years.

In her position as a paraeducator, then, Dora had to answer to several different groups: the parents, who wanted their children to learn to read in both languages; the kindergarten teachers, who wanted her to emphasize English literacy; and Maggie, who made the ultimate decision and supported biliteracy. In our interview, Dora addressed this issue:

Las maestras de los salones de clase piensan que los niños tienen que leer en inglés… Entonces, ya no están contentas. Yo les dije, pues, “si ustedes creen que quieren este apoyo en inglés, pues tienen que hablar con la directora.”
[The classroom teachers think that the students have to read in English. So now they’re not happy. I told them, “If you think they (the parents) want this support in English, then you have to talk to the principal.”]

This quote shows the difficult position Dora was in. Individual teachers had raised the issue of language of instruction in the supplemental program with her, but she wasn’t the one who made the decision to teach in Spanish. It is telling to note here that although Dora’s ability to teach in Spanish was recognized as cultural capital in this context, it was only so because members of the school community who had institutional and linguistic power decided that it was so. In line with the theory of cultural capital, it was the dominant group who decided which cultural norms were legitimate, not Dora herself.

There were ways, however, that Dora used the ambiguity of her constructively marginalized position to further her own goal of biliteracy. As I’ve shown in the fourth element, she worked directly under teachers. However, she was also part of the ESL department, so there was some ambiguity about whose goals she needed to meet. By aligning herself and working closely with ESL specialists Shizue and Carol, she gained both institutional support and access to resources she might not otherwise have.
Ironically, perhaps, others in the school weren’t always aware of Dora’s strong feelings about home language literacy and assumed she was continuing to teach in Spanish only because of Maggie’s decision. The following bit of conversation with Maggie shows this:

Interviewer: And she [Dora] will continue to teach Spanish reading in Spanish this year?
Maggie: Mm-hmm. Except when she gets really nervous, and then she starts trying to teach them to read in English, because she gets so anxious.

However, Dora expressed no such reservations, saying:

Yo no tengo miedo que no pasen allí en inglés. No tengo miedo por la prueba, la prueba concreta que tenemos.
[I don’t have any fear that they won’t pass into English. I have no fear because of the proof, the concrete proof we have.]

It appears, then, that there was some lack of communication, or lack of understanding, among staff members about the issue of language of instruction, once again illustrating the complexity of Dora’s position within the school: she was respected enough that no one intervened in her supplemental instruction, but she was not respected enough that anyone sought her opinion about what was best for children. Rather, they made decisions about practice and trusted that she would carry them out.

Reinforcing the idea of trust, the kindergarten teachers agreed to let Dora keep the students half an hour into the school day three mornings a week. This willingness to give up valuable English instructional time would seem to counter my assertion that Dora was marginalized at all at Hurley Heights. However, during one of my observations, a kindergarten teacher came into the biliteracy class at 9:00 and pulled her students out without warning or explanation, thus reminding both me and Dora that her time was not protected but, rather, granted at the whim of the kindergarten teachers.

The fifth element refers to the spatial and material marginality of Dora. Because paraeducators work in teachers’ classrooms, the spaces in which they work are often “leftover” (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006). In this, Dora was no exception, and in the grant proposal Maggie and Shizue unsuccessfully submitted in 2006, Maggie described the children and their families as “crammed into tight little spaces.” The biliteracy program had moved several times since it began, so Dora had no permanent space. Because the empty classroom she used at the time of the study was also used by various other groups throughout the day, she didn’t feel comfortable leaving the limited number of age-appropriate Spanish materials she had there. She was deeply concerned about losing them or having them stolen. This was especially true of the books she asked parents to bring back from their trips back to Mexico and Central America, which were highly valued by her and the students. In an unconventional and rather resourceful way, Dora networked with parents to build a communal library, thus creating a rich literacy experience for the children she served by exposing them to authentic literature from their home countries and reinforcing the value of their own cultural knowledge and experiences. Nonetheless, a lack of permanent place for the books meant that she and the children couldn’t readily access them, making them a less powerful resource than they could have been.

The spatial marginality discussed in the fifth element appeared as pedagogical isolation in the sixth. It is frequently noted in the literature that the work of paraeducators is viewed as “extra” and not part of the main instruction that happens in a school (Chopra et al. 2004; Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006; Wenger et al. 2004). In the case of Dora, attitudes were conflicting. On one hand, teachers largely stayed out of the program, leaving Dora on her own to do as she saw fit. However, there was schoolwide investment in the goals and outcomes of the program. Other staff members (although notably, not teachers) made
occasional visits to the program, and everyone I spoke with expressed respect for Dora and the work she did. Because the staff was largely English monolingual, however, those who visited the program had little idea of what Dora was actually teaching, and even Maggie was ill positioned to evaluate her instruction. Dora was able to capitalize on the faith of her colleagues to provide what she considered quality instruction.

It is important to reiterate that in each of these six areas, Dora was positioned constructively not only by her own actions but also by the actions of those around her and the circumstances in which she worked. As Bourdieu noted in his discussion of cultural capital, “the structure of the field . . . is the source of the specific effects of capital” (Bourdieu 1986:246), and it would be impossible for Dora to use her funds of knowledge as effectively as she did if she were traditionally marginalized. Marginality is a systemic problem and those at all levels are implicated (Monzó and Rueda 2003), but educators can work to capitalize on the ambiguity and flexibility of a paraeducator’s position, allowing her to draw on funds of knowledge. The ways in which this happened at Hurley Heights are the focus of the next section.

**Drawing on Funds of Knowledge**

The concept of funds of knowledge has become central to educational research, thanks largely to the work of Luís Moll and his colleagues (Moll 1992; Moll et al. 1992). Moll defined funds of knowledge as “the strategic application of cultural resources in instruction as an important way to organize change in children’s academic performance” (1992:1). Monzó and Rueda (2003) expanded this definition to include all experiences that individuals gain through participation in various communities. Because paraeducators participate in multiple communities, they have overlapping funds of knowledge that others who are solidly grounded in only one community do not—their liminality becomes a benefit, rather than a drawback.

In the case of Hurley Heights, my data show that Dora drew on her social and professional networks as well as her personal experience as an immigrant and a learner of English as a second language to meet the goals of the biliteracy program. In some settings, these relationships and experiences might not be recognized as cultural capital, but at Hurley Heights Maggie and others determined that they were legitimate and valuable, and, thus, Dora was well positioned to harness her resources and use them constructively. Because of this position and her alignment with the larger goals of the school, Dora was able to navigate contradictory situations and foster biliteracy for kindergarten children.

She did so in part by drawing on relationships she had built over time within the school and community. Researchers have found that there is generally little meaningful collaboration between teachers and paraeducators (Monzó and Rueda 2003), but this was not the case for Dora, who had at least one strong and mutually supportive relationship with one member of the ESL department, Shizue. Both women called this a partnership, and their respect for one another’s professional expertise was apparent. Thus, Dora was not marginalized in the way most paraeducators are; nonetheless, her relationships with classroom teachers were much more typical in that there was no evidence of meaningful collaboration with them. Instead, any overlap in instructional practice or content was either incidental or the result of Dora’s taking cues from kindergarten teachers, because she knew what was happening in kindergarten classrooms, but teachers did not know what she did in her biliteracy program. Interestingly, Dora was not in Karen’s classroom during literacy, and I never saw her in the class during my observations there.

Because Dora lacked the institutional power and cultural capital that Shizue had, Shizue’s involvement undoubtedly contributed to the success of the biliteracy program. From a funds of knowledge perspective, it was their combined expertise that mattered—
Dora had cultural and linguistic knowledge that Shizue did not, whereas Shizue was an expert in language development and pedagogy. Their relationship was such that Dora seemed to feel comfortable going to Shizue with concerns that she did not take directly to Maggie:

Maggie: “Dora feels very comfortable speaking to some of the ESL teachers, so she’ll say to them something she wouldn’t say to me . . . and I’ll say, ‘why didn’t she talk to me?’ But, you know, I’m the head honcho.”

This quote suggests that Shizue acted as a buffer between Dora and Maggie, even though by all accounts Maggie was supportive of Dora’s work.

In terms of relationships within the community, Dora nurtured a family atmosphere among the Latino families at Hurley Heights. This is comparable to what Galdino and Olguín call a “cultural metaphor”—“the transposition of a concept of context from the home or community to the school” (1996:38). Dora was able to do this because of her cultural and linguistic knowledge as well as her long history of advocating on behalf of the immigrant Latino parents whose children attended Hurley Heights.

Dora built on her relationships with parents by scaffolding them to work with their own children (Galindo and Olguín 1996). Twice during my observations of the biliteracy class, she had parents conduct read-alouds, coaching them as they modeled making predictions and asking children questions. On another occasion, she told me that she was very interested in differentiating instruction within the biliteracy program and was training parents to take small groups so that she could devote more time to struggling students. All of these are examples of how Dora fused her knowledge with the relationships she had built to improve schooling for language-minority children at Hurley Heights.

Dora also drew on her experience as an immigrant to help families:

Pienso que lo que a mí me mueve trabajar con los niños es el hecho de ser un inmigrante, y venirte de un país tan pobre . . . Y tengo mucha pasión por que los padres y los niños se den cuenta de que allí están las oportunidades, que las aprovechemos.

[I think what really makes me want to work with the children is the fact that I was an immigrant, and to come from such a poor country . . . and I have a lot of passion for the parents and the children to realize that there are so many opportunities, that we should take advantage of them.]

What is particularly interesting about this quote is the way in which Dora clearly aligned herself with immigrant parents. She used we, rather than they when talking about the need to take advantage of opportunities in this country. It was common for Dora to refer to herself this way, as an immigrant first and a paraeducator second. This suggests that she maintained a “dual frame of reference,” as Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) call the ability to compare conditions in the home country to those in the receiving country. For example, she explained to me that “nosotros venimos de países pobres” [we come from poor countries]. She also transmitted to families what Yosso called aspirational capital, “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (2005:77). This dual frame of reference and aspirational capital allowed her to relate to families who had recently emigrated from Mexico or Central America, while at the same time buttressing their involvement in their children’s schooling.

Dora also often stressed the importance of parents sharing their own funds of knowledge with children—especially their memories of home or discussions about how things were different there. In some instances, her use of these funds of knowledge was strictly motivational (Abbate-Vaughn 2007; Chopra et al. 2004), whereas at other times it was with the specific goal of facilitating literacy learning. For example, once when she was reading a book about a vegetable garden aloud, she prompted the parents in attendance to share
the different words they used in their home regions to name the vegetables. There were a variety of names offered for the same vegetables, and Dora used it as an opportunity to help kids understand the flexibility of language as well as the importance of learning new vocabulary—“Oh, es una palabra nueva!” [Oh, it’s a new word!]. This example also showcases her linguistic capital (Yosso 2005)—a type of cultural capital—in that she was able to make use of her experience with multiple dialects, a skill that native speakers of a language are more likely to have than non-native speakers. On this and other occasions, Dora used her constructively marginalized position and her funds of knowledge to help children and their parents make connections between home and school as well as between Spanish and English and among dialects of Spanish.

This discussion of bilingual paraeducators’ culturally relevant funds of knowledge raises questions about how they are recognized and applied in the instruction of children. Research has shown that paraeducators rarely access their funds of knowledge in direct work with children, and when they do it is for nonacademic motivational or affective reasons (Abbate-Vaughn 2007; Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996; Monzó and Rueda 2003; Weiss 1994), and it is even less common for culturally relevant knowledge to be considered cultural capital. Yet there was evidence that Dora used her funds of knowledge to support literacy. She consistently highlighted similarities and differences between Spanish and English pronunciation, spelling, and grammar, but she also adeptly supported the literacy strategies I saw children learning in Karen’s classroom: making predictions, inferring from text, and using context to read unknown words, among others. I argue that she was able to use her funds of knowledge academically in part because she was supported in doing so by those with more institutional power.

Some researchers have problematized a lack in paraeducators’ use of instructional funds of knowledge, while others have argued that what should change are our expectations about the ways in which paraeducators use their funds of knowledge. After all, they often serve as the first point of contact for marginalized families, connecting them to services both within and outside the school (Chopra et al. 2004; Hones 1999). Their concern is often with the well-being of an entire family, rather than just the school-aged child.

There is a fine balance between the two kinds of support we expect paraeducators to provide: academic and social. Researchers are divided on the relative importance of each type of support, but this case study of Dora has elucidated the ways in which paraeducators can potentially use their multifaceted funds of knowledge to meet both goals, if their situated cultural capital is recognized and allowed to accrue. Given what we know about the importance of healthy families and the academic difficulties many immigrant and low-income children face, these contributions cannot be underestimated.

Conclusions and Implications

I have presented a telling case (Mitchell 1984) of Dora, who used the ambiguity of her position to align herself with those who shared her educational values, using her funds of knowledge as cultural capital. This was made possible by her own agency, the support of those with more institutional power, and the specific school context in which she worked. She made use of the flexibility she had to pursue her own goals in the supplemental program and to support mainstream instruction. Others in the school placed value on the funds of knowledge she brought to Hurley Heights and supported her use of them in various ways through their actions and the structuring of the school day, even though there were times when her goals were subverted to meet the needs of teachers.

Bilingual paraeducators like Dora inhabit the middle ground between classrooms and communities. In many ways, they are limited in their ability to participate fully because of
the low levels of cultural capital they possess. As minority language speakers, their contributions may not be recognized as legitimate in larger conversations about education. Practically, they are excluded from pedagogical decision making and frequently have little control over the content they teach or how they teach it (Monzó and Rueda 2003; Rueda and Monzó 2002). To some extent all of this was true in this case as well. However, I have shown that marginality can be constructive if actors within a context recognize the funds of knowledge paraeducators bring as situated cultural capital. If conditions are right, paraeducators may be able to take advantage of the ambiguity and flexibility their position offers (Weiss 1994).

Monzó and Rueda point out that although the funds of knowledge of teachers and paraeducators should never be adopted uncritically, “the experiences, beliefs, values and knowledge that diverse teachers bring to the teaching context are important resources for teaching and learning” (2003:89). Although it is dangerous to assume that all paraeducators (bilingual or otherwise) have access to local knowledge, or that they can accurately represent the needs of the community, it is reasonable to expect schools and teachers to invite paraeducators to share what they know as part of an overall plan to make schools more accessible to the families they serve.

For example, Dora shared with Latino families the experience of being an immigrant, an English learner, and a parent of language-minority children. She maintained strong culturally appropriate relationships with parents, children, and colleagues, on which she continually built. In U.S. society as a whole, these personal characteristics do not constitute cultural capital. Yet at Hurley Heights, they were recognized as such. Through my examination of her practice and positioning, I have begun to theorize how individual actors within school environments can break down power differentials through the recognition of funds of knowledge as situated cultural capital. Understanding these dynamics on a larger scale can help schools support paraeducators to be even more effective in the work they already do.

This study has shown that bilingual paraeducators can accomplish amazing things when their cultural capital is recognized and they are supported in accessing their varied funds of knowledge for the academic and social benefit of language-minority children. However, given my findings, there are two important areas for future research. First, this study suggests that strong relationships with other staff members are critical for paraeducators. Although there was clear evidence of at least one such relationship at Hurley Heights, this study did not provide an in-depth examination of how such relationships can be developed in the first place. As such, future research should explore the ways in which constructive relationships between paraeducators and other school staff can be facilitated in the service of meeting the needs of language-minority students. Building on the present study as well as previous research (Monzó and Rueda 2003; Rueda and Monzó 2002), scholars need to consider not only the resources paraeducators possess but also the ways in which they participate (or do not) in professional networks. The institutionalized nature of school relationships is heavily implicated in this, given the reality of power differentials and marginality in schools. Dora was perhaps unusual in the amount of educational training and expertise she had, but from a funds of knowledge perspective, the people and resources she accessed mattered just as much, and the recognition of her situated cultural capital by those in positions of power are what made her work possible. As was apparent at Hurley Heights, conditions within a school have a great effect on the ability of paraeducators to use their funds of knowledge both socially and academically.

Second, supportive leadership around issues of bilingualism and biliteracy also contributed to this paraeducator’s ability to use her funds of knowledge. It is important to recognize that Dora’s alignment with the goals of the principal and ESL specialists overrode her responsibility to kindergarten teachers. Although it is undoubtedly true that a
more positive relationship between Dora and the kindergarten team would have been good for the children in the program, her relationships with those in leadership positions contributed to her funds of knowledge use in ways that relationship with teachers alone could not have. Thus, further research needs to pay attention to institutional marginalization and the role of school-level leadership around issues of language diversity.²

Notes

Acknowledgments. I would like to extend my gratitude to Tom Stritikus, Manka Varghese, Mike Knapp, and Sheila Valencia for their thoughtful comments and support for this work. I’d also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for pushing me to deepen my thinking and push my writing to a higher level. Of course, my deepest thanks go to Dora and the others at Hurley Heights who made this study possible. They are doing wonderful work for children.

1. This and all other names are pseudonyms.
2. For one of the biliteracy program parent meetings, Dora asked me to make a short presentation to the parents about writing with their children at home, so I did. It was the only occasion on which I actively participated in the class.
3. This study had one major limitation: Spanish-speaking families were an integral part of the kindergarten biliteracy program at Hurley Heights, and I was not able to interview any of them. Therefore, this article leaves out the voices of some of the most important stakeholders, and their perspectives would have enriched this study immeasurably. The omission of family perspectives from qualitative research on bilingual education and issues of educational equity is common, and should be addressed on a broad scale, especially in discussions of marginality and funds of knowledge use.

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