Contexts for Learning: English Language Learners in a US Middle School

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Within the sociocultural theoretical framework that this paper adopts, learning, including second-language learning, is conceptualised as increasing participation in a community of practice. Thus it becomes of central importance to examine the nature of the community itself and the kinds of participatory opportunities that it supports or discourages. For it is through their engagement in the specific practices of their communities that students appropriate the knowledgeable skills that these practices involve. In this paper, based on the findings of an exploratory ethnographic study conducted in a US middle school, I examine the learning opportunities created for adolescent English language learners in three different classrooms and the ways in which these students took up these opportunities. I argue that, in addition to the particular subject matter to be taught, what appears to shape the kinds of learning opportunities afforded to English language learners is: (a) teachers' conceptualisation of the needs of second-language students; (b) the ways in which they perceive their own role in responding to these needs; and (c) the larger context of institutional practices.

In the past decades there has been growing recognition in the human sciences of the fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition. Paralleling this conceptual shift, in place of the prevailing term 'acquisition', the term 'participation' has come to be used to characterise learning in order to emphasise its social nature. If learning is considered as increasing participation in a community of practice, then it becomes of central importance to examine the nature of the community itself and the kinds of participatory opportunities it supports or discourages. For it is through their engagement in the specific practices of their communities that students appropriate the knowledgeable skills that these practices involve. In this paper, based on the findings of an exploratory ethnographic study conducted in a US middle school, I consider the learning opportunities created for English language learners (ELLs) in three different classrooms and the ways in which the students took up these opportunities.[1] I argue that, in addition to the particular subject matter to be taught, what appears to shape the kinds of learning opportunities afforded to English language learners is: (1) teachers' conceptualisation of the needs of second-language students; (2) the ways in

which they perceive their own role in responding to these needs; and (3) the larger context of institutional practices.

Theoretical Considerations

This study adopts a sociocultural perspective (e.g. Cole, 1996; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2005; Kozulin *et al.*, 2003; Wertsch, 1998), within which learning, including L2 learning, is considered to be an inseparable aspect of participation in community practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). So, to join a new discourse community is to have the potential to learn new language resources, new practices and new identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Through participation in joint activities in the context of schooling, students not only become socialised into the language practices of the classroom but equally into its social practices (e.g. Dagenais *et al.*, 2006; Gebhard, 2005; Hawkins, 2004). Indeed, language learning is dependent on access to the social practices through which learning and teaching are linguistically enacted. This highlights the importance of providing ELLs with appropriate participatory and learning opportunities in classrooms.

As a way of organising my discussion of the relevant L2 research on adolescent ELLs' learning, I draw on Rogoff's (1995) model of *three planes of analysis*, which correspond to personal, interpersonal and community processes. Rogoff (1995: 139) argues that an adequate understanding of human development requires a consideration of all three planes, even though each of the planes may be zoomed in on for a researcher's analytical purpose at any given time:

> These [the three planes] are inseparable, mutually constituting planes comprising activities that can become the focus of analysis at different times, but with the others necessarily remaining in the background of the analysis. (Rogoff, 1995: 139)

In this paper, I shall focus on the interpersonal plane, arguing that it is the activities in which teachers and students engage together that mediate between individual learners and the practices, knowledgeable skills and values of the wider society of which they are becoming members. However, in my review of research, I will also be concerned with the relationship between this plane and the other two.

The community plane refers to the cultural institutions within which activities are carried out, their historically developing practices and the relationship among the participants involved. At the local level, schools and school districts function as cultural institutions and what is critical in the context of this study is the sort of institutional support they provide – or fail to provide – in meeting the needs of ELLs in an equitable manner. Research on the institutional support of ELLs has only recently begun to be undertaken (cf. Gibson *et al.*, 2004; Mohan *et al.*, 2001). However, based on a meta-analysis of effective schooling studies for language minority students, Roessingh (2004) identified five 'interacting variables' that may have contributed to the strong academic outcomes of the ELLs that she and her colleagues investigated in one Canadian high school: administrative support, collaboration among colleagues, contact hours in ESL class, direct/explicit instruction with respect to language

learning objectives and a strong sense of advocacy for ELLs. Similarly, also in Canada, in her comparative case study of four secondary schools with less than 6% ELL enrolment but with a good reputation for the educational attainments of ELLs, Kouritzin (2004) revealed the importance of 'respectful inclusion', which is realised by strong, integrated school-wide support systems.

On the interpersonal plane, particularly critical are the classroom practices that are realised through teacher–student and student–student interactions. The research to date has identified several recurring themes that are particularly relevant to this study. The first concerns the finding that, in content area classes, adolescent ELLs have far fewer opportunities to use and interact in English than they do in ESL classes (Harklau, 1994a, 1999; Miller, 2003). This can be detrimental to the development of their English language proficiency and to their access to curriculum content. The second theme relates to the particular challenges that ELLs face in mainstream classes and the importance of appropriate guided participatory opportunities for them. Gibbons (2003), for example, argued for the importance of teacher scaffolding in oral interaction in order to help ELLs acquire academic lexis. Furthermore, focusing on high school ELLs in Canada, Duff (2001) showed that, in a social studies class that she studied, the difficulty the students experienced in participating in the discussion of current topics was partly caused by their lack of familiarity with Canadian popular culture. Duff's study thus suggests that mastery of language forms (grammar, lexis) alone does not guarantee successful participation, as many types of classroom discourse assume knowledge of the larger culture. The third theme addresses the negative consequences of tracking systems on secondary ELLs' educational opportunities. L2 studies by Harklau (1994a, 1999) and Lam (2000) reveal that adolescent ELLs, who are routinely placed in low-track mainstream classes, are fed a steady diet of undemanding tasks, which severely compromises their opportunities to learn English as well as the grade-appropriate subject matter. However, an alternative approach to meeting the needs of students 'at risk of educational failure', which includes ELLs, is offered by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) approach to learning and teaching, which, set out in terms of Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Tharp *et al*., 2000), will be elaborated on later. As these standards are considered equally appropriate for all students (Dalton & Tharp, 2002), they offer a useful perspective from which to evaluate the learning opportunities provided for the ELLs observed in the present study.

The personal plane has been a focus of much second language acquisition research. In general, this research treats the individual as the basic unit of analysis (e.g. acquisition of particular linguistic features, measurement of motivation and aptitude). Much research on ELLs, heavily skewed toward elementary school students, has also been carried out in similar ways, examining topics such as the relationship between students' L2 oral proficiency and their reading achievement in English (e.g. Carlisle *et al*., 1999; Garcia-Vázquez *et al*., 1997), vocabulary and the influence of L1 literacy on the development of L2 literacy (e.g. Lanauze & Snow, 1989; Reese *et al*., 2000).

While a focus on individuals' language acquisition is important, the problem with this approach is that it tends to separate the personal from the

other planes. However, within a sociocultural theoretical framework, individuals are always seen as situated within the larger context that is the focus of the interpersonal and community planes (Dagenais *et al.*, 2005; Gebhard, 2005; Toohey, 2000). For instance, Harklau's (1994b) ethnographic study of the educational experiences of Chinese secondary ELLs in California illustrates that, for an adequate understanding of students' learning trajectories to be achieved, all three planes must be taken into account. Harklau showed that requisite for these students to create successful academic trajectories for themselves (i.e. placement in high-track classes) was not only their L2 competence but also a sophisticated understanding of the school as a cultural system and of the interpersonal dynamics among school personnel who would influence their tracking placements. Thus, taken together, the research studies reviewed point to the interdependence between individual students' actions, classroom practices and the larger social milieu.

Research Questions, Data Base and Procedures

The current study, an exploratory ethnographic study, posed the following research questions: (1) to what extent were the learning opportunities provided in ESL and mainstream classes appropriate to the needs of the ELLs in the study? and (2) what factors appeared to be responsible for the observed differences in (1)?

The research site was a middle school in a Midwestern US city, which was considered to be one of the most multicultural schools in the city because of its high enrolment of ELLs of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds (ELLs constituted approximately 18% of the student population). What was unique about this school was that tracking was adopted at the level of departments, rather than across the school as a whole. In practice, this resulted in English and social studies being tracked, whereas the remaining subjects were non-tracked.

The research was conducted over one semester in the spring semester of 2004. My research assistant and I conducted twice-weekly observations in three different Grade 7 classes: ESL, non-tracked maths and low-track English. One researcher focused on classroom practices as a whole and the other on five Grade-7 ELLs. Because these students, who were from Russia, Iraq, Bosnia or Mexico, were deemed to be advanced English-proficient, they attended only one ESL class each day and studied in mainstream classes for the rest of the time. We wrote detailed field notes immediately following observations and analytical memos at regular intervals. The data sources consisted of field notes generated during the classroom observations, informal conversations with the students and the teachers, and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participating teachers. We jointly examined the data in the following manner. The field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using ethnographic techniques: (1) pattern matching (Fetterman, 1998); (2) open coding to develop conceptual categories and core themes and (3) focused coding to build up and elaborate analytically interesting themes (Emerson *et al.*, 1995). Additionally, representative literacy events for each classroom were identified through discussion and repeated readings of field notes. In order to

assess the extent to which the learning opportunities for ELLs were appropriate, these events were evaluated using the Standards for Effective Pedagogy.

The Standards for Effective Pedagogy

Based on extensive research, Tharp and his colleagues (2000) have identified five teaching standards, the Standards for Effective Pedagogy, which are critical for improving learning outcomes for all students, especially those at risk of academic failure due to cultural, linguistic or economic factors. The first standard is to facilitate learning through *joint productive activity*, in which teachers and students work together toward a common product or goal. The second standard is to develop *language and literacy across the curriculum* – competence in the genres of language and literacy of the academic disciplines through extended reading, writing and speaking activities. The third standard is *teaching in meaningful context*; that is, contextualising instruction in the experiences and skills of students' homes and communities. The fourth standard is *teaching complex skills* through challenging activities that require the application of content knowledge to achieve an academic goal, with clear outcomes in mind and systematic feedback on performance. The fifth standard is to teach dialogically, using planned, goal-directed *instructional conversation* between teacher and students, particularly in small groups (Saunders, 1999). Validation studies suggest that higher use of the standards by teachers reliably predicts student achievement gains and that teachers who use the standards at higher rates are more likely to use a variety of other effective teaching strategies (e.g. Doherty *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Echevarria *et al.*, 2006; Hilberg *et al.*, 2000).

My rationale for using the Standards was two-fold. First, the Standards are research-based and have also been validated by further empirical research. Second, they are grounded in a sociocultural perspective on learning with a focus on the interpersonal plane of classroom practices.

Findings

I report the findings in a hybrid manner, first through vignettes of the practices observed in the three classrooms, with a commentary on each that addresses the first research question, and then by describing the findings in the light of the second research question. Each vignette captures characteristic patterns within the literacy events that we observed on frequent occasions in each of the three classes. My commentary on each is made on the basis of the CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy, described above, and in the light of the semester-long observations made in each classroom.

The Observed Learning Opportunities for ELLs

Grade 7 ESL class

Ms Hill, who has seven years experience of teaching social studies and ESL, walks into the room with a three-shelved metal cart. She shuffles through

some papers on the top of the cart, finds an overhead transparency, walks to the front and puts it on the overhead projector. The bell rings. There are eight students in class doing a warm-up vocabulary exercise; they sit scattered across the room. Kassim asks whether they get 'any free time today', to which Ms Hill replies sharply, 'No. Free time was Tuesday when you went to the zoo'. Ernesto is slouching in his chair not writing. Ms Hill tells Ernesto, 'How many times do I need to tell you? Sit up, get out your notebook and begin doing the warm up.' Ernesto glares at her, sits up, opens his notebook and begins writing. Kassim asks again, 'So there is no free time today?'

Ms Hill walks to the front of the room and sits on the stool next to the overhead projector and begins going over the warm up with the students, repeating the following pattern: she asks 'What does the underlined word mean?'; a nominated student responds; and she evaluates the answer. When this activity is completed, she instructs them to take out their packets and turn to page 18. Several boys are rummaging nervously through their binders in order to locate the required page. Without waiting for them to organise their packets, she starts going over the homework assignment on the overhead. Ms Hill announces, 'Next Friday, we will have a test over these words, so you need to study them.'

She then instructs the students to get their literature books and to open them at Chapter 7. She starts with the section on pre-reading activities. She calls on several students to read the subsections about reading strategies, character traits and plot. She explains what a plot and reading strategies are and discusses different character traits. Jesus walks into the room quietly, gives Ms Hill a yellow slip from the office and sits in the back. Ms Hill explains the story that they are going to read and sets up the plot for the students. She then asks the class, 'What are we going to read about?' The students respond, mumbling in unison. Ms Hill turns on the overhead projector, which already has a transparency on it with a summary of the pre-reading section of the textbook in table format. After discussing the information on the transparency, she explains the different plot parts. Ernesto then exclaims, 'Hades! Is that like a Greek god?' Ms Hill responds, 'Something like that.' Ernesto complains, 'Man, why are we studying this? This is old – like last year we studied that!' Ms. Hill tells him, 'We are reading the story to learn character traits and plot.' A few other boys vigorously agree with Ernesto that they studied the story last year and that they don't want to study it again. A few conversations between the boys start up across the room about this. Ms Hill tells the students to read the story silently and fill in the page from their packet. The boys are still conversing among themselves. It takes a long while for the class to be on task. Ms Hill looks frustrated. Ernesto, for the third time, asks her whether he has to do the questions in the packet. 'Yes,' she says, glaring at him. She then walks around the room helping different students with their packets and tells other students not to talk to each other while doing their work.

Commentary on ESL class

There was very little evidence of any of the Standards in this class. In our observations, there were few opportunities for ELLs to use English

interactively. Their oral production was mostly at the level of word, phrase or short sentence, in response to teacher questions; student–student interaction was strongly discouraged. The teacher's instructions constituted the extent of 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1985) available in this class. Pair or group work never occurred throughout our semester-long observations; the emphasis was firmly on individual seatwork. Vocabulary exercises were one of the major activities, along with grammar exercises of various kinds. For Ms Hill, language teaching appeared to consist of the learning and teaching of discrete language forms. The classroom discourse predominantly took the form of the IRE exchange (teacher initiate–student respond–teacher evaluate) and dialogic interaction was rarely observed. The classroom instruction was neither connected to the students' experiences nor to their learning in other classes. The cognitive demands of the various tasks and types of questions posed by the teacher were generally unchallenging, mostly consisting of filling in blanks and supplying factual information. Consequently, in terms of language production, it was rare for the students to speak (or write) any connected sentences except when they were expressing uninvited opinions about the class itself.

Mainstream Grade 7 low-track English class

Mr Baker, an English teacher with 17 years of experience, starts his class by calling his students' attention to the day's agenda, written on the blackboard. Fifteen students, including four ELLs, sit in rows, all facing the front. Mr Baker announces, 'Please get your literature and spelling books out. We are going to go over spelling words number 11 through 20.' Sitting in front of the room on a tall teacher stool, he tells the students to open their spelling books at page 53. He explains that, after he says a word, they are to repeat after him in unison like 'the old echo'. He jokes with the students when someone is not in unison. He asks for the students to volunteer to say the list of 10 words. Kassim, a Bosnian ELL, volunteers to go first. Mr Baker compliments him, and other students take turns to read the list. He explains each word, inviting the students to guess the meaning and give example sentences.

Mr Baker then announces that they are moving to literature. He explains that the students will read a book called 'Old Yeller'. He asks the students to get a piece of paper and write 'Vocabulary for "Old Yeller"'. He writes on the blackboard, 'cur'. He asks if anyone knows what a 'cur' is. He writes, 'a mixed breed of dog', when no one answers. The next word he writs is 'scythe'. Brendon asks, 'Isn't it like a sword or something?' and makes a motion as if he were cutting something with a big sword. Mr Baker nods and explains that it is a long thin blade on a long handle. The next word is 'sulk'. He says, 'Some of you guys sulk in the class. What do you think "sulk" means?' The students volunteer answers loudly. Leila, an Iraqi ELL, answers, 'to yell out!' He explains that it means 'a pout; feel sorry for self'. The next word is 'hesitate'. Kassim guesses, 'to be scared.' Mr. Baker asks the students if they remember a story where people in a village hesitated before they killed a man who committed a crime. The students say that they remember it. He then relates the word to a basketball move when a player pauses and makes a movement with

their body as if they were going to make a shot, but dribbles the ball again. In response, one student guesses that it means to pause. Mr. Baker explains and writes on the board, 'reluctant; to stop, to start again'. The next word is 'frontier'. Johnny points to his ear and says, 'Yeah, here's the frontier'. Mr. Baker smiles at the joke and replies, 'Not the front of your ear!' The students break into laughter. He explains that the frontier is the farthest part of a settled country and that it is always moving further west. In this manner, Mr. Baker introduces 15 new words for the first chapter. He then discusses the characters in the story and writes descriptions of each main character, which the students copy. He explains the next day's agenda – a spelling test and reading of the first chapter of 'Old Yeller'.

Commentary on English class

Some of the Standards were observed in this class. Mr Baker was consistently successful in connecting the topic at hand to the students' experiences – *teaching in meaningful context*. In addition, *instructional conversation* in the sense of building on students' contributions did occur, but it seldom led to any substantive discussion of academic content. The class was teacher-centred, but the tenor of the class was collegial and relaxed. ELLs frequently volunteered answers. Compared with the ESL class, there was substantially more talk in this class. However, the overall cognitive challenge of the lessons was generally low. One third of the class was typically used for the rote learning of vocabulary and spelling, where the students pronounced new words, discussed the meanings and usage, and took a test on them at a later date. In the literature component, little substantive discussion of the stories took place. It was also rare to see Mr. Baker push the students to think critically; even when a student gave what appeared to be an inadequate answer, he tended to give an explanation himself. A typical sequence of the literature component was: with each new book introduced, he would spend a considerable amount of time explaining new vocabulary for each chapter, have them read each chapter and ask factual comprehension questions. Consequently, in our observations, the students neither engaged in critical reading and discussion of literacy texts nor produced extended spoken or written discourse.

Mainstream non-tracked maths class

Fifteen students, including four ELLs, are sitting on three sides of a square with an overhead projector in the middle of the fourth side. Ms Hasan, a maths teacher with two years of teaching experience, starts the class with a warm up about rates and ratios. On the overhead, she writes: 28 miles in 4 days; 6 wins to 10 losses. She goes over the warm up quickly and moves to a multiplication test, which is a staple in this class. After the test, Ms Hasan checks the homework questions with the students on the overhead and asks which questions they want to review. Kelly suggests a question about a train that travels 93 miles in 30 minutes. Ms Hasan writes the problem on the overhead: 93 miles, 30 min = 3.1 miles/min. She talks about fast trains and asks who lives about 3 miles from school, to which the students respond, 'John'. She asks

John if this is true (John nods) and says, 'Okay, this would be like going from the school to John's house in one minute'. The students seem to understand and comment that it was a really fast train. She tells the students that at one time she bought a bag with 6 pairs of socks for $8.94 and invites them to figure out how much each pair cost. Kristen interjects, 'That's not cheap. I can get some cheaper at the Dollar Store'. Ms Hasan asks the students to hand over their homework to Mariah, the helper of the day.

Ms Hasan then announces, 'I'm going to show you three ways to solve proportions', and writes on the overhead. Three ways: (1) equivalent ratios; (2) algebra; (3) trick. She explains, 'In the assignment, the instructions will tell you that you have to do a certain method for each one, but afterward, you can do any method you would like of these three to solve the problem.' She then asks the students if anybody knows what 'equivalent' meant. Eugene, a Russian ELL, raises his hand high with his right arm straight up and says that it means equal. She compliments him and moves into a discussion of equivalent ratios. She writes on the overhead, 'Proportion: an equation that states two ratios are equivalent'. She works a few problems with the students, including one that asks them to clarify how the equivalence method works: $3/5 = x/10 \rightarrow x = 6$. She next asks the students, 'How do we know they are equivalent?' Ernesto, a Mexican ELL, says, 'because of the equal signs'. She replies, 'Good job. Okay, now for the algebraic way to solve proportions, how do you think we will solve this one?' She writes the above problem on the overhead again and explains how to do it. At Ms Hasan's request, Jesus, another Mexican ELL, explains how to solve it by cross-multiplying. When Jesus finishes, Kristen announces that she could do both methods with her eyes closed.

Ms Hasan then asks the class, 'Okay, are you ready for the trick?' and moves to the third method. She tells the students that they are lucky, as not every teacher teaches this. She instructs several students to fetch calculators for the class. She then discusses how to do the trick with their calculators by multiplying numbers diagonally across from each other and then dividing by the left over number. She writes on the overhead: $300/900 = 150x \rightarrow 13500 = 300x \rightarrow x = 450$. Ernesto asks, 'What about little numbers?' 'Okay, let's do little numbers,' she responds and writes: $8/9 = 64/x$. She asks Ernesto to figure out the answer, using the trick. He punches the numbers into his calculator, pauses, and then exclaims, '72'. She compliments him.

Another student asks, 'What about decimals?' and Kristin replies, 'I don't think it's going to work.' Ms Hasan writes '$x/4.3 = 2.7/9.8$' on the board and then solves the problem on the overhead calculator, then has the students do it on their calculators as well. The result on the calculator screen comes to 1.184603878, which she tells them could be rounded to 1.2. She proceeds to write the homework on the overhead projector.

Commentary on math class

Throughout the semester-long observations, the students appeared to be highly engaged in the maths lessons; there were few discipline problems. All five standards were observed to a considerable degree. The teacher actively involved her students, including ELLs, in doing maths problems together; in

response, they freely contributed to the ongoing conversation without hesitation (*joint productive activity*). Ms Hasan helped them make connections between curricular content and their personal lives (e.g. using John as an example; *teaching in meaningful context*). She also utilised their contributions as a springboard for further examples and elaboration and helped them advance their understanding of the mathematical concepts at issue (*instructional conversation*). Unlike Mr Baker's class, what appeared to be casual exchanges between Ms Hasan and her students were usually tied back to a particular maths problem and concept. Further, the development of mathematical thinking was valued and the students were pushed to explain their maths reasoning verbally (e.g. Ernesto explaining how he used the algebraic method to solve a problem) (*teaching complex skills*). In terms of language learning, there was much verbal interaction in this class between the teacher and the students and among the students. ELLs stated that they had no difficulty following the class, although it was fast paced. While there was no explicit instruction on language *per se*, each maths term was introduced with plentiful examples until the students understood it (*language and literacy across the curriculum*).[2]

Factors Contributing to the Observed Differences

Two interrelated themes emerged as prominent with reference to the second research question. The first concerned the teacher's conceptualisation of the needs of L2 students and their perceived role in responding to these needs. This, in turn, was closely related to the second, that of the implementation of the tracking system.

Taking the view that all students were competent, Ms Hasan defined her job as providing students with contingently appropriate assistance and ensuring their overall social and academic growth. As a former ELL herself, she was a strong advocate of language minority students and of de-tracking. Together with several other teachers from the school, she obtained grant funding to offer tutoring services to students who needed additional academic help. Every morning before the school started, these dedicated teachers took turns to tutor students on all subjects. Ms Hasan came to know many ELLs through tutoring and became aware of their difficulties in different classes. She often used her prep time to visit the classes that posed challenges to the students so that she could help them further. Her visits were welcomed by some teachers but were resented by others. In her own classroom, she made efforts to create an equitable community where substantive academic learning occurred: 'All my students don't need the same thing, so my goal is to kind of find out what each student needs, what each student is motivated by, and how I can accomplish that goal.'

Ms Hasan's perspective on teaching was not necessarily shared by the other teachers. In our observations, although Mr Baker's classroom community was collegial, his low-track English class was markedly different from his other Grade 7 classes in terms of the cognitive demands of the tasks and materials. His regular and advanced English classes studied Greek mythology. His advanced class undertook projects involving critical thinking as well as

extended reading and writing. However, in his low-track class, the students studied an assortment of books that Mr Baker considered to be not too challenging for them, focusing on rote learning and factual reading comprehension. He explained that low-track students are generally low-performing and need to work at a slower pace and that, while he considered some ELLs competent, he felt that they needed to overcome their 'linguistic deficiency' to be included in his regular class.

Mr Baker assessed native English speaking students' competence based on their overall academic performance. However, in assessing ELLs' competence, his first criterion was the extent of their grasp of the formal aspects of English, demonstrated through writing. In this way he confounded their linguistic ability in English with their overall intellectual ability (Harklau, 1999). By contrast, Ms Hasan considered that providing individually tailored assistance – linguistic or otherwise – was her responsibility as a teacher and chose not to lower her standards. Not surprisingly, these two teachers took opposed views on the tracking system. Mr Baker endorsed it because he considered it to be an equitable way to educate students of different abilities, whereas Ms Hasan opposed it because of its tendency to perpetuate inequity. In this way, their classroom practices were tied to both their personal beliefs and to institutional practices.

Ms Hill, also a supporter of the tracking system, maintained that her job was to assist ELLs with English language acquisition because 'they need to learn English'. There was no reference to other needs that ELLs might have in order to be successful in a middle school in a new country. Further probing in the interview did not reveal any concrete vision of herself as an ESL teacher who could play an important role in her students' learning trajectories. She taught her lessons independently of what her students were studying in other classes and of what was happening in their lives. It appeared that underlying the support for the tracking system, shared by Mr Baker and Ms Hill, was the belief that ELL students' inability to express complex ideas in English is evidence of limited intellectual ability. Such a belief, which conflates language and thinking, is particularly inappropriate in the case of L2 learners, who may be well able to deal with complex issues in their first language. A more satisfactory alternative, that might be considered, would be to provide 'sheltered instruction' for ELLs in which challenging subject content is presented with accompanying attention to students' language needs through instructional conversation and other teaching strategies (e.g. Echevarria *et al.*, 2003).

In order to gain an overall perspective on ESL instruction at the research site, my research assistant and I made at least seven visits to all the ESL classes taught by three other teachers. It was found that two of the other teachers enacted similar instructional practices to those of Ms. Hill and shared comparable teaching trajectories. All three had become ESL teachers after teaching their specialist subjects; they completed an ESL endorsement programme at a local university while teaching ESL. What was striking was their limited understanding of language and language use, which they conceived largely in terms of language forms and vocabulary. Interestingly, however, the ESL coordinator, a veteran teacher, implemented

communication-oriented instruction. As a result, as a unit, the ESL progr-amme did not appear to operate with a shared vision regarding what it means to learn and teach a L2 and what role the teacher should play in the education of ELLs. Thus, the group as a whole did not appear to engage in critical discussion of substantive teaching issues, which might have led Ms Hill to develop a more sophisticated understanding of language teaching and the role she could play in empowering her students.

ELLs' learning experiences across classrooms

The five ELLs, three refugees and two immigrants, had diverse life experiences and cultural resources. Leila, an Iraqi refugee with an interrupted education, was determined to succeed academically in order to enter one of the professions, because education would give her some leverage to negotiate her future life with her family (see Sarroub, 2005). Every day after school, she went to an after-school centre and studied with her Iraqi girlfriends from across the city; bilingual practices for academic and social purposes were part of her life. While Leila created her own path of learning, the other two refugees, Eugene and Kassim, were trying hard to meet their parents' high expectations. Both were from educated families and were under enormous parental pressure to succeed academically. They usually went straight home after school and studied at home under their mothers' supervision; their mothers helped them, particularly with science and maths. In this way, they, too, engaged in bilingual practices, learning the curricular content first in English at school and then in their first languages at home. Two Mexican ELLs, Ernesto and Jesus, were from working class families that had migrated to the region en masse from Guadalajara for economic reasons. Each served as a translator/interpreter for their family, often dealing with adult transactions (e.g. letters from the school, visits to the doctor). This translator/interpreter role appeared to help them develop sophisticated social skills, in which English literacy and under-standing of particular social practices in their families were involved. Both expressed a strong desire to succeed academically.

As the students' life trajectories were diverse, so were their learning experiences across the three classes. They tended to characterise the differences they experienced in terms of 'caring'. According to them, Ms Hill was not caring, and they did not care about her or her class. In the ESL class, being a student was to engage in rote learning of grammar and vocabulary and perform 'procedural displays' (Bloome *et al.*, 1989) through IRE exchanges. Their assigned identity was that of learners of English. By contrast, in the English and maths classes, facilitated by a collegial atmo-sphere, they were active participants, frequently volunteering their responses. They stated that because these teachers cared about them, they were eager to do well in their classes. However, 'caring' was manifested differently in the two classes. In Mr Baker's, they had many opportunities to talk about their immigration experiences, and by narrating their experiences, they appeared to gain respect from their peers and to take on identities as individuals with rich life histories. In Ms Hasan's class, while their life experiences were not actively solicited, alternative ways of solving maths problems that ELLs proactively

suggested were capitalised on. Consequently, they assumed identities as bilinguals with valuable maths knowledge from previous educational experiences. Thus, depending on each teacher's interpretation of their bilingual and bicultural resources, the same ELLs were positioned very differently as particular types of students in the three classes.

In addition, the kind of social networks that the ELLs were able to establish in the different classrooms depended on the constitution of the class. In the low-track English class, some of the male ELLs emulated their male classmates' behaviours (e.g. deliberately giving wrong answers), distracting them from learning. By contrast, in the non-tracked maths class, the male ELLs, particularly Mexican ELLs, aligned themselves with American male peers who were both popular and academically high achieving; consequently, they not only gained social status in their peers' eyes but also engaged in substantive academic conversation with these peers. In sum, it can be said that in different classes, the ELLs' varied life experiences and cultural resources were drawn upon differentially, and they were also assigned different identities. Further, the kind of learning spaces that they could construct was influenced by the partial implementation of the tracking system.

Discussion

The classroom practices of the three teachers in this study cannot be treated as representative of those of teachers more generally. Nevertheless, they do raise some general issues concerning the relationships among classroom practices, teachers' conceptualisations about ELLs' needs and their perceived roles in responding to these needs, and the institutional contexts of the schools and school districts in which they are situated. As noted earlier, from a sociocultural perspective, learning is considered to occur on the interpersonal plane through joint activities with other people and with the cultural artefacts that are employed (Vygotsky, 1981). It is through participation in valued cultural activities that students encounter and appropriate the meaning-making practices of the culture and the language in which these meanings are made. For this reason, the nature and quality of the learning opportunities afforded in the classroom significantly influences what students are actually able to appropriate. It can thus be argued that the effectiveness of instruction should be judged, not in terms of the successful implementation of teaching strategies or techniques alone, but in terms of the overall ecology of the classroom as a context for learning (Hawkins, 2004; Toohey, 2000).

In the current paper, I have used the Standards for Effective Pedagogy as a heuristic to systematically assess, on the interpersonal plane, the appropriateness of the instruction for ELLs that was observed in the three classrooms. While it is not my intent to advocate the particular model of teaching encapsulated in these standards, they do constitute a valuable tool for identifying areas for improvement in teaching practices. From the perspective that the Standards provide, the three teachers observed created very different learning contexts for ELLs. Recall that the maths teacher, who most successfully enacted the five standards, created a community in which learning occurred through instructional conversation, the use of many language

functions and academically challenging tasks. This suggests, as Dalton and Tharp (2002) argue, that effective teaching involves all five standards in a synergistic way.

Additionally, one must take account of the unique situation of ELLs in that, unlike the general student population, they are learning school subjects in a new language that they are in the process of acquiring. This situation calls for providing ELLs with appropriate linguistic scaffolding. In this respect, as Mohan and Beckett (2001) argue, it is important to help L2 learners to make connections between language form and meaning through academically challenging tasks and contingently appropriate feedback. As the Standards suggest, it is crucial to provide language and literacy learning opportunities associated with academic disciplines through extended reading, writing and speaking activities with clear academic goals.

So far I have focused on the interpersonal plane. However, an adequate examination of classroom practices would not be complete without consideration of the other planes. On the personal plane, it should be recognised that while grouped under the same category, ELLs constitute a diverse group of students whose first languages, cultural backgrounds and life experiences differ in many significant ways. Correspondingly, teachers face a very considerable challenge in responding to this diversity and providing appropriate instruction for them. In this respect, teachers' knowledge about individual students, including their past and present lives and existing skills, is essential. Only with such knowledge can ELLs' strengths be identified and capitalised on in classroom practices. Some ELLs who struggle with school tasks in English may have highly literate lives outside school (Lam, 2000). As Orellana and her colleagues (2003) show, ELLs who serve as family translators/interpreters are already engaged in a wide range of language and literacy practices involving complex social, cultural, linguistic and cognitive skills (e.g. translation or interpreting practices that involve many types of text, domains, genres and social relations). Learning about what ELLs do outside school brings to the fore what they can do as opposed to what they are lacking.

On the community plane, the disparity in classroom practices at the school site studied raises the larger issue of the ethos of the school as a learning context for ELLs. At the time of this research, a new principal, who had been appointed by the school district in the previous summer, was struggling to establish rapport with his staff. There was not a school-wide programmatic effort with respect to ELLs. The decision as to whether to employ tracking was left to individual departments, and there was considerable animosity among the teachers because they were divided into two camps: supporters of the tracking system and advocates of detracking. However, opportunities to discuss issues of diversity and equity within the school appeared to be nonexistent. Although individual teachers appeared to be doing their best within what they considered to be good practice for their students, there was a critical lack of coherent vision in the school as an institution concerning the education of ELLs which, had it existed, could have helped shape individual classroom practices toward shared goals.

As shown in this study, middle school ELLs face an enormous task in navigating divergent classroom practices and negotiating assigned identities across classes. In one class, as competent bilinguals, they may be encouraged to contribute substantively and engage in scientific reasoning, and in another, as 'limited-English-proficient' students, they may be expected to respond to unchallenging questions only when they are nominated. In this paper, I have argued that the extent to which ELLs can appropriate valued cultural practices depends on what opportunities are made available in classroom practices, which are, in turn, influenced by individual teachers' beliefs and their perceived role as teachers as well as by institutional norms and expectations.

My analytical focus in the current paper has been on the interpersonal plane. It should be recognised that the relative neglect of the other two planes is a limitation of this paper. There may have been many factors that contributed to variable classroom practices beyond those I have described (e.g. cultural politics within math, English and ESL departments). What needs to be explored further in future research is the role of leadership in the school in providing institutional support to promote a school culture that nurtures the kind of effective pedagogy proposed by the five standards. The strong leadership at the school level, in turn, needs to be supported by the school district in terms of providing the resources necessary to support ELLs and guidance to enact equitable practices for all students. As well, on the personal plane, a profitable line of inquiry would involve a more in-depth exploration of how individual students choose to position themselves for a variety of reasons (e.g. peer social network, home circumstances).

To conclude, in line with the findings of previous research, this study points to the need for system-wide efforts to create an optimal learning context for ELLs (e.g. Kouritzin, 2004; Mohan *et al.*, 2001; Roessingh, 2004). Unless schools, as cultural institutions, make a sustained effort to offer programmatic support to ELLs, consistently high-quality instruction within and across different programs is unlikely to materialise. These system-wide efforts may include: teachers re-envisioning their role as advocates for their students; proactively sharing information about ELLs among ESL and mainstream teachers; adopting a research-based approach to learning and teaching such as CREDE's Standards for Effective Pedagogy; and developing a programme vision with reference to ELLs. However, unless teachers are willing to participate in such school-wide initiatives, a positive school ethos cannot be created. Change in school culture requires the long-term investment of all school staff, including administrators and teachers, as change has to come from within to be sustainable, not as a top-down measure (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2000). However, if a local initiative for change were to be undertaken, a key question to pursue would be how schools and classrooms can be transformed to better serve students. As Orellana and Gutiérrez (2006): 119 argue, the next step is to: 'push the question further, not by asking how people change to fit in the context, or how contexts change to fit people, but rather how change occurs both in the participants and the contexts of participation.' School staff need to be willing to examine their assumptions, take a critical look at their routinised practices, make changes if necessary, and be flexible enough to make further changes as the context of the school as an institution changes.

In transforming school practices, it is also important to learn about ELLs' existing knowledgeable skills that they developed outside school, with sufficient sensitivity to attending to variance within and across cultural groups (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

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Notes

1. ELLs are students who are in the process of mastering English as the language of instruction.
2. While the class focused on specific maths concepts and associated maths problems, there was not an extended project to utilise different maths concepts to consider a real-life issue: a practice that is highly recommended by some maths educators (e.g. Cobb & McCain, 2002).

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