

# Visiting Room 501

Middle-class Latino students in the United States negotiate life as transnational citizens, developing an identity and a culture that translate their contemporary, lived experiences and highlight within-group variances.

**By Margaret Saucedo Curwen**



If you are in trouble, if you need money, I will help you. You are my favorite cousin,” wrote Sammy as part of a “friendly letter” assignment in Room 501.

Why did Sammy, a 5th grader in an American elementary school, offer such support to his Mexican cousin? “People living in Mexico work hard and there is not very much money,” he explained.

Sammy was a student in Room 501, a classroom in an upwardly mobile middle-class Latino community in Southern California where students were primarily from Mexico but differed in generational status.

I spent more than two months observing Room 501 to learn how children with Latino ancestry tap into their lived experiences, history, background knowledge, and language skills — what Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) describe as cultural capital — while engaged in their classroom’s literacy activities.

Students in Room 501 were exploring and negotiating their lives as transnational citizens. In a globalized world of instantaneous information and communication, Latino students are shaping, morphing, and evolving into a new generation. This study highlights one group of students who were aspiring toward middle class, which is not the typical perception created when educators and policy makers identify Latino children as “at risk.” The tacit and explicit addressing of students’ culture through local school practices, curriculum, and pedagogy is intertwined with students’ identity and contributes to their academic expectations. This research highlights the educational importance of understanding within-group differences, as well as students’ contemporary experiences, to identify and access their strengths.

The vignette above illustrates two key points from my study. The first is the distinction that students, such as Sammy, make between their current middle-class neighborhood and their percep-

tions of life in Mexico. Now living in the United States, they consider themselves better off financially and therefore able to help relatives who remain in Mexico and whom they perceive as less fortunate.

Second, these students maintain relationships that cross geographic borders through literacy practices that incorporate cultural, social, economic, linguistic, and political domains. In this example, Sammy displays his newly constructed transnational identity, one which he seems to embrace with remarkable ease. He demonstrates not only geographical flexibility, but also an inclination to draw on multiple cultural codes that transcend his personal history and that of his parents.

A startling, and somewhat alarming, finding by sociologists triggered my initial interest in exploring the classroom interactions of young children: The education and economic gains made by first- and second-generation Latinos are not sustained in later generations. Stated another way, the prospects for economic, educational, health, and social viability for Latinos actually decreases by the third generation. This discovery compelled me to rethink my assumptions that Latino immigrants of the late 20th century would follow trajectories similar to those of 19th-century European immigrants. After all, this upward mobility was the “Great American Dream” and part of this country’s cultural narrative. My research needed to move beyond pedagogy and interactions between child and teacher. Clearly, there were other issues. Although I am a former classroom teacher and currently focused on research into children’s literacy development, my curiosity drew me to a much broader landscape of sociological and anthropological perspectives and readings into critical theory and public policy.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LATINO EXPERIENCE

In 2003, there were 37 million Latinos in the United States, making them the “largest minority group” (Darder and Torres 2004). Much has been said about this group’s educational achievement, language issues, and identity patterns. However, Latinos are not a monolithic group. As often happens with other ethnic groups, such as Asians and African Americans, a demographic umbrella descriptor subsumes the multifaceted groups within. For Latinos, these within-group variances include such distinguishing characteristics as occupation, place of residence, class, and educational attainment. For Latino immigrants, other contributing aspects include country of origin, reception in this country, availability of an existing support system, language of preference, and generational status (Orellana and Bowman 2003).

Two-thirds of the Latino population in this country have Mexican origins, and an increasing proportion is becoming middle class. However, research has shown that the academic achievement of U.S.-born, English-speaking Latinos lags behind those of their school peers. Of particular concern are U.S.-born Latinos whose home language is English. Because this group is native born and has acquired the necessary language skills, one might expect that they would logically find success in school. However, researchers

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Her dissertation was titled “The Nature of Middle-Class Latino/a Students’ Cultural Capital in a 5th-Grade Classroom’s Reading and Writing Activities.”

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Three other PDK members received “Recognition of Merit” for their excellent dissertations.

**Micheal J. Kessner** of Forney, Texas. Kessner’s Ed.D. in supervision, curriculum, and instruction is from Texas A & M University–Commerce. She is a member of that university’s PDK Chapter, #0101. Dissertation title: “How Does Implementation of Inquiry-Based Science Instruction in a High-Stakes Testing Environment Affect 5th-Grade Student Science Achievement?”

**Whitney E. Meissner** of Port Ludlow, Washington. She is in the 2008-09 class of PDK’s Emerging Leaders. She received her Ed.D. from Seattle Pacific University. She is a member of the Washington State Chapter, #1599. Dissertation title: “Teacher Perception, Lesson Study, and Science Achievement.”

**Jessica L. Pierson** of San Diego, California. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Texas–Austin. She is a Region A direct member. Dissertation title: “The Relationship Between Patterns of Classroom Discourse and Mathematics Learning.”

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point out that a disproportionate percentage of English-speaking Latino students is underachieving (Nieto 2001), as are third-generation children (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Though the high school dropout rate for Latinos is high and might be attributed to the process, difficulties, and complications inherent in immigrating to a new country, Latino immigrants account for only one-third of this group's dropout rate.

Systemic and institutional factors have contributed

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to the disenfranchisement of Latinos. These include differential school resources, *de facto* school segregation, school tracking into low-level courses, disproportionate numbers in school categorical groups, lack of culturally relevant texts, and reductionist reading programs. In addition, the discourse in the education literature on children from diverse backgrounds also can unintentionally create a negative perception. Education researcher Carol Lee (2003) notes that this happens when educators and policy makers identify Latino children or other children from diverse backgrounds as “minority,” “non-mainstream,” “marginalized,” and “at risk.” A tendency is to automatically position certain populations, such as Latinos, in a low niche without considering the experiences of other socioeconomic levels, notably working class and middle-class children.

Educators are focused on the academic success of all children. For some children from diverse backgrounds, this focus is on both their English language acquisition and concerns for those living in poverty. The stark reality is that children from diverse populations disproportionately experience poverty, discrimination, and low-quality education. Without question, these needs are real and need to be part of the conversation in developing policies and programs that will advance the educational achievement of all children. Yet, to fully understand the needs of today's learners, school reform efforts must recognize the particular context and respond to the perceptions and

adaptive responses of different groups.

Given this perplexing research on the academic trajectories of multigenerational, English-speaking Latinos, I began to wonder about the conversations that might occur in a well-functioning school in which a caring teacher invites children to display their cultural knowledge while engaged in reading and writing. The teacher in Room 501 was a skilled practitioner who built on students' strengths as learners. He recognized that every child had “little pieces of history.” Therefore, I was surprised to discover a mismatch between these students' interests and their teacher's attempts to tap into their experiences.

### **LOOKING THROUGH NEW EYES**

Learning is more than a solitary “in-the-head” activity. Learning occurs in social spaces where individuals interact in purposeful activity. In doing so, they're shaped by the cultural, historical, economic, and social contexts in which they live and participate (Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1987). Children have fully textured lives and move through a multitude of out-of-school social groups, e.g., family, neighborhoods, friends, and clubs, in which they participate and acquire particular ways of being. This social and cultural knowledge can be a resource for their intellectual growth.

I was eager to discover how children in Room 501 might share such resources in the instructional and social setting of their classroom. I was particularly interested in how children might strategically incorporate their cultural capital, like Sammy did, when they responded to reading school texts, in writing class assignments, and during peer collaboration. Because the children's talk revealed the ever-changing nature of their lives and the instantaneous influence of technology, I was prompted to explore more current perspectives into the adaptations of immigrant groups to this country's values and beliefs.

Sociologist Yossi Shain's view of immigrant groups adopting American creed was a helpful orientation (1999). Shain provides an alternative conception of immigration processes that transcends traditional assimilation and acculturation models. In these processes, the individual subsumes aspects of their identity, culture, and language to the new dominant culture. Shain recounts recent experiences of several ethnic groups who develop transnational identities. He contends that some ethnic diasporas, such as Latinos of Mexican descent, adopt American creed, that is, this country's values of freedom, democracy, equity, justice, and human rights. This distinctive no-

tion describes how ethnic groups simultaneously maintain an identity as a diasporic group member while espousing American values. While these aspects of immigrants' and subsequent generational differences are often explored in related fields of sociology, economics, and public policy, the literature on teaching and learning discusses these aspects less often. Thus, this broader conception of individuals as multifaceted helped provide a framework for Room 501 students' learning and negotiating in their classroom space.



## FIVE FINDINGS

I chose Room 501 as a case study site in part because of the teacher's progressive stance on including cultural and contemporary social issues in daily classroom life and his respect for students' diverse experiences, dual linguistic abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Constructivist literacy practices and multilingual and critical pedagogy were hallmarks of the teacher's instruction.

During the spring semester, the 5th graders in Room 501 read their language arts basal program, trade book literature, social studies, and science texts. Their writing projects were purposeful and authentic, and they included multiple genres. Students participated in the school's science fair and performed a class

play. The classroom teacher honored and embraced the 5th-grade students' Latino heritage. He sought to include students' cultural heritage in the curriculum through multicultural texts, incorporation of Spanish language, and literary discussions. Often, he initiated critical class discussions surrounding societal issues of poverty and discrimination. However, a mismatch

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arose between his instructional overtures and his middle-class students' lived experiences. Given the students' mixed responses, I considered it important to carefully examine the nature in which children engaged, remained silent, or shied away from discussions. These instances could lead to theoretical and practical insights for students' readiness to participate in such activities.

My study led me to five key findings:

*Adoption of the American creed.* Room 501 students were active participants in multiple communities shaping their identity. They wove in views and beliefs from their everyday interests and concerns. They participated in Little League and tuned into popular "texts," including movies, video games, and TV shows. They were more likely to be energized by pop rock groups, teen celebrities, and Disney movies than to declare affinity for the multicultural 1970s United Farm Workers' leader Cesar Chavez or such former national baseball players as Roberto Clemente. Their response was consistent with education scholar Frederick Erickson's assertions that individuals negotiate through a variety of microcultures every day (2004). This engagement and participation shaped students' interests and formed the basis for academic connections they made to their text readings. Furthermore, Shain (1999) asserts that ethnic diasporas want to transform their outsider status and become part of the American lifestyle. Room 501 students' mainstream knowledge and community participation served social goals of peer affiliation and societal inclusion.

*Homogeneity of neighborhood.* These 5th graders were influenced by the homogeneity of their community and its comfortable security. Students and their families held an ethnic majority status in their neighborhood. When the teacher focused on differences, students didn't seem compelled to differentiate them-

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selves from other racial and ethnic groups. The students' lack of engagement may have been their unwillingness to believe that being Latino could adversely affect their mainstream inclusion. Also, class discussions of contemporary discrimination and poverty, grounded in their basal program language arts and American history texts, were shadowed by a societal historical and current negative sentiment toward Mexican immigrants. Students would have had to publicly reveal exclusionary experiences that had the potential to be more personally humiliating than educationally illuminating.

### **They were adept and strategic about choosing which language to use and when.**

*Unidimensional portrayals of Latino culture.* Students seemed uninspired by the teacher's well-intentioned — albeit, one-dimensional — portrayal of Latino culture. Students and their families' backgrounds and experiences defied a simplified "one-size-fits-all" categorization, as the sociologist Rubén Rumbaut notes (2004, p. 1169). They had varied generational, socioeconomic, familial, and linguistic proficiencies and varying ties to other cultures and countries. While the classroom highlighted unquestionably rich multicultural literature, such as *Esperanza Rising* (Muñoz 2000) and *Lupita Mañana* (Beatty 1981), the texts didn't automatically serve as cultural touchstones for Room 501 students.

This was a particularly perplexing finding because multicultural literature plays a key role in fostering student identity and affiliation. Upon closer inspection, however, an explanation became clearer. Cultural images were frozen in time; contemporary reflections of students' lives were absent. These texts, as well as others used in the classroom, typically portrayed Mexicans as recent immigrants or migrant laborers. They were representations of only a single facet of the ethnic diaspora's experience. Such textual depictions didn't adequately capture the full range of this ethnic diaspora's subsequent generational economic gain, social mobility, educational attainment, varied employment, and interest in participating in American society. Room 501 students' experiences as middle-class with access to a multitude of technological resources underscores the need to refine perceptions of today's students.

In discussions about a social issue such as discrimination, Room 501 students were disinclined to publicly include personal experience. On the surface, students distanced themselves from the salience of discrimination in their lives. In their view, discrimination had been erased through the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks; two students even said aloud that these individuals "saved our lives and stopped discrimination." Another student noted, "Discrimination doesn't happen here." But in further discussions, children repeatedly cited instances of discrimination in popular movies and TV sitcoms. For example, several students described in detail a recent episode of the teen television show, *That's So Raven*, when a black character wasn't given an opportunity to apply for a job but then overcame the issue. It was problematic that the school's sanctioned texts consisted typically of historical — not contemporary — stories. In popular movies and TV shows, racial and ethnic struggles have been resolved, which helps shape a perception among students that racism and discrimination are merely archival events.

*Pursuit of upward mobility.* Students and their families were not consigned to one economic class but were aspiring upwards. This was evidenced by parents' and their children's expressed interest in higher education, material attainment, parental career orientations, and English-language acquisition. Children contrasted their single-family homes in their stable suburb to other Southern California communities where recent-entry immigrants live in dense areas of apartments. The lifestyle of these 5th graders and their families symbolized middle-class standing to them.

*Gravitating toward English language.* English was perceived as a high-status language and was a priority for parents and their children. Families knew about political pressures and societal negative sentiment toward the Spanish language. Since the late 1990s, legislation in California and Arizona, reverberating with a strong anti-immigrant sentiment, promulgated the authority of the English language and all but eliminated bilingual education. Parents in this school were increasingly choosing English-language instruction over bilingual instruction. This finding disrupts popular beliefs that members and children of the Mexican diaspora persist in maintaining their language at the expense of national unity. When these multigenerational children were asked about their interest in speaking Spanish, their responses varied: Evita relished the chance to share a phone conversation after school in Spanish, and Conner recounted translating

his school-assigned poems written in English for his Spanish-speaking grandmother. Other students expressed concern about losing their cultural language and “sounding weird” by speaking Spanish among their peers and in their home. Chloe lamented, “I don’t know how to pronounce the [Spanish] words anymore,” and Geraldo noted, “I can’t find the words.” They were adept and strategic about choosing which language to use and when. They were linguistically negotiating as transnational citizens as well as among microcultural communities of family, peers, and schools.

Of note were the generational tensions regarding the erosion of Spanish language competency. Parents expressed their desire for their children to be bilingual. This finding was consistent with the findings of anthropologist Sally Merry (2006), who described the contradictions and clashes between group members when some adopt new practices. When culture is recognized for its dynamic, fluid, and porous nature, the eruption of tensions, such as the one between parents and their offspring over language retention, can be expected.

In conclusion, these 5th-grade Latino students circulated in varied cultural worlds. This snapshot of social interaction in Room 501 captures a single point in time of one specific group. This exploration in a classroom, watching and listening closely to children talk, provides insight for educators. Similar to all ethnic diaspora groups, the students’ identities were fluid and shifting. In a time of instantaneous information and communication, students were continuously shaping their identity. However, as Michael Olneck contends, “schools rarely recognize the transnational aspects of their immigrant group’s identities and lives” (2004, p. 383). Modern conceptions of culture are analogous to a kaleidoscope: With each turn, culture is always shifting and changing.

The perception of culture guides institutional policy and reform efforts. Thus educators need a dynamic, fluid, and evolving conception of culture. Only then can the learning experiences of children of ethnic diasporas be understood and nurtured. ■

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