



Unpacking capital: Promoting English learner success and learning to ‘do school’

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This study examines the educational trajectories, critical life events, variations and commonalities of four Dominican women who, despite being non-English speakers and working class immigrants, were academically and professionally successful in the United States. Criteria for case study participants included being first generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic who had earned an advanced degree in education, were currently working in the educational arena in Georgia, and had joined the ranks of the American middle class. Four Dominican women were participants in the study. Data collection included multiple in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, one-on-one, as well as focus group interviews. The themes that emerged are related to various types of capital, which include aspirational, linguistic, familial, navigational, and resistant. Findings suggest that the women’s own academic expectations and cultural capital, coupled with high levels of academic and emotional support, were key factors in their educational and career success. This study contributes to an expanded understanding of the concept of cultural capital and its application in education.

Keywords: taxonomy of capital, Community Cultural Wealth, Latina/o achievement, English Learners, Dominican immigrants, lived experience

The examination of these women's stories has been cathartic for me in terms of understanding my own journey of success through education. I have often wondered how I made it into college; when, after a battery of tests, my own high school counselor called me into the office and said words that still make me cry: "You're not college material." At the time, I had no idea what she meant by me not being college material. All I knew was that she was reinforcing the message that I could not 'do school', which reinforced the messages that I often heard in other, more subtle ways. (co-author, Maria Montalvo-Balbed)

Capital and Why It Matters

Students bring the entirety of their life experiences to school each day. These experiences involve a great deal of what we refer to as capital. However, schools traditionally honor and leverage capital differently for different groups of students. Students whose background experience, language, and cultural expectations are aligned with what teachers want to teach, how teachers want to teach and assess learning, the ways teachers prefer students to learn, and how teachers expect students to interact, are more likely to find school to be a positive experience and a place where their capital is valued. This is often not the experience of students whose cultural background and languages do not fit the school norms. The capital these students bring to the school is generally neither honored nor leveraged for the students' benefit. In this article we argue that all students, regardless of their background experiences, bring vast reservoirs of capital that can be leveraged for learning

and success with schooling. Our goal is to identify and define the various forms of capital, to share what we have learned from our work about capital, and to discuss how schools can build and leverage it to promote success for students, in particular for English learners.

Educational research is replete with theories and studies that attempt to explain why Latino students have experienced persistent underachievement (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Portes & Salas, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999), even where it is understood that to use a term like ‘Latino’ masks vast cultural, linguistic and other variations (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Cultural capital is the knowledge and understandings that people draw upon as they participate in society—including successfully learning to ‘do school’. However, a limited and exclusionary view of capital promotes a deficit approach to educating many Latino, as well as other students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner & Payne, 2013). Conversely, an inclusive view of students both recognizes and leverages what González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) describe as a “funds of knowledge” approach, which includes the background knowledge, life experiences and areas of expertise that students bring with them to school. When teachers infuse students’ cultural experiences and language into the curriculum, they honor the linguistic and cultural knowledge of students

within the school setting, which promotes positive identity development, engagement, and relevant learning experiences. In short, this approach respects the experience of the learner (Boyd & Brock, 2004; Salazar, 2013).

The Study: Questions and Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the success of four Dominican women who are first generation immigrants and English language learners and the ways in which their realities can be understood and explained using in part, the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model (Yosso, 2005). Their life stories yield a deep understanding of the factors that explained, influenced, and, indeed allowed for their academic and professional successes and their eventual advancement into leadership roles in Pre-K-12 education in the U.S. Theoretical perspectives in qualitative research provide an overall framework for the study on questions of gender, class, race, and other issues of importance to marginalized groups (Creswell, 2009). The intent of the study was to make sense of the meanings and understandings the participants had of their experience of and in the world, with a focus on their educational experience. Qualitative research methodologies allowed for a deep understanding of what propelled and allowed the women in the study to be successful. Our goal, as Creswell (2009), states was to “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work, in order to understand the historic

and cultural settings of the participants” (p. 8). More specifically, the study’s aim was to identify and describe the types of capital relevant to the participants’ “lived lives” that contributed in important ways to their educational and professional success. The qualitative methodologies employed allowed the women’s stories to be heard, understood, and shared with others. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) assert, qualitative research is crucial for understanding rich narrative experiences such as those shared by our participants.

The criteria for inclusion in the study included being first generation female immigrants from the Dominican Republic who had earned either a Master’s or doctoral degree in education and were currently working in an administrative capacity in the Pre-K-12 educational arena in Georgia. Four Dominican women who met the criteria were invited to participate in the study. Of the four participants, two had earned their Master’s degrees and two had earned their doctoral degrees. Data collection included, but was not limited to, multiple in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, one-on-one and focus group interviews. Each participant in the study constituted a case and data collection involved an array of procedures for building an in-depth case, where multiple data collection formats were used. In addition to multiple one-on-one interviews, a focus group interview was combined with physical

artifact data, which included photographs. Each participant described a series of photographs she had brought to share during the focus group, as both descriptive and emblematic of her journey. The study addressed the following questions:

- What factors, including various types of capital, do academically successful Dominican women report as significant in helping them navigate the ‘school world’?
- What are the commonalities and variations in the narratives of educationally successful Dominican women across particular categories, including class, gender, and language?

Background to the Study

Ana, Carmen, Rosario and Deyanira (all pseudonyms) are the four women whose narratives we describe. They immigrated to the U.S. during their elementary grades years, are native Spanish speakers, grew up in working class families, and were born to parents who had limited experience with higher education. In this report we share lessons learned from their collective successes and examine ways to apply our findings to promote success among other Latina/o students.

Theoretical Framework: Community Cultural Capital

Immigrant, non-English speaking students from working class families benefit from schooling experiences that leverage their existing capital, while helping them to acquire other types of capital that their middle class, English speaking peers often possess. Here we describe what it looks like to unpack the more generic term 'capital', into various specific types, building on the work of Yosso (2005) as a framework to view types of capital that Latino students often bring to the schooling experience. We offer recommendations for making these strengths more apparent to teachers, so they can leverage them to the benefit of students. Yosso's taxonomy of types of capital encompasses the more commonly used and understood concept of social capital, as networks of people and community resources. However, within the taxonomy are important, yet less understood types of capital, which we use as a theoretical framework to understand, and in large part explain, the educational successes of the women in the study.

Table 1	
<i>Yosso's Taxonomy of Capital</i>	
Type of Capital	Description
Resistant Capital	Behavior that challenges inequality.
Aspirational Capital	Hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers.
Familial Capital	A broad understanding of kinship and ' <i>familia</i> ' that promotes community wellbeing through a sense of community, history, and cultural institutions.
Navigational Capital	People and community resources that provide both instrumental and emotional support for maneuvering through social institutions.
Linguistic Capital	Intellectual and social skills acquired through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.

Illustrative Narrative Vignettes

The four women in the study “beat the odds” in that they became academically and professionally successful, despite their realities as first generation working class Dominican immigrants who learned English as an additional language and whose families had very limited experience with higher education. Their stories demonstrate in various ways how the types of capital outlined above were recognized and leveraged by teachers, counselors,

and others in critically important ways that allowed and promoted educational success among all study participants--Ana, Carmen, Rosario and Deyanira.

Mentors and Cultural Brokers Linked to Capital

Findings from the study revealed that mentors were a key element in each of the women's stories. Each had a mentor who also acted as a cultural broker and whose support and efforts made a critical difference in their immediate as well as their eventual success. These informal cultural brokers assisted the women by helping them to bridge the gap from their home lives and cultures to their lives in the U.S., particularly as those related to schooling. This 'brokering' took various forms. In some instances it was helping them to navigate social and bureaucratic systems or to find jobs. For others it was explaining academic expectations and offering additional opportunities to acquire academic English and information literacy skills, which were critical for their success. For the women in the study, mentors were linked to other kinds of capital, including navigational and aspirational capital.

Aspirational Capital

Carmen, had a high school counselor who helped her develop strong **aspirational** capital, the ability to hope and dream for the future, even in the face of very real obstacles. Carmen's counselor ensured that she had college

aspirations and the requisite classes and skills for college. The counselor also understood that students like Carmen had no experience of college and so took her on college visits and helped her fill out applications, get financial aid, and even convinced her parents that it was good for their daughter to leave home to go to college. This kind of support is important because we know there is a significant disconnect between Latinas' aspirations for college and the reality of them realizing this goal for a number of reasons, not the least of which is financial (National Women's Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). These early experiences and college pipeline programs can and often do have dramatic effects on student participants in terms of aspirations and academic outcomes (Musetti & Tolbert, 2010).

Familial Capital

All of the Latina educators in our study had high levels of **familial** capital and described numerous ways in which their families supported, encouraged and inspired them. All attributed their success in large part to their families, whose words and deeds let them know they must "make something of themselves", be financially independent, and do better than their parents. Each participant described various types of support, often through extended family, that allowed or pushed them to succeed and each described

sacrifices made by family, often the greatest of these by mothers, which allowed them ultimately to ‘do school’. Each of the women said her parents did not visit the school, but cared deeply about their child’s success. Ana’s family, like the others, was busy working and could not come to school. One of the mothers did not even know where the high school was because she worked very long hours in a factory and never attended any school functions. Both authors have worked with educators of Latino students for many years and we often hear teachers lament the fact that parents don’t care about their children’s education, as evidenced by the fact that they don’t come to the school. What we hope teachers will understand, and is reinforced by this research, is that Latino parents, like all parents, care deeply about their children’s education, but may express that caring in ways that differ from traditional school engagement activities, such as “advocating” for their child, fundraising, or attending parent-teacher organizational meetings.

Navigational Capital

Although the women in the study came from immigrant families in which the parents had not gone to college, participants found they could learn to navigate the higher education system through various means, which included supportive programs for first generation college goers, mentors, cultural brokers, family members who had immigrated and attended college,

and other connections including religious structures and social supports. For two women in the study, Ana and Rosario, their religious institutions provided them with important opportunities to develop navigational capital. Rosario's mother insisted that she return to the Dominican Republic when entering sixth grade so she could attend the boarding school affiliated with her church. Rosario did so and attributes that decision in large part to setting her on an educational path to success. For Ana, who was painfully shy, church provided a place for her to participate in service to others and where she could be mentored, which she says allowed her to have more experiences in the world and to build confidence. For Ana and Rosario, their churches provided both the emotional and academic support critical to their eventual academic and professional success.

Linguistic Capital

All of the women in the study said they possessed **linguistic** capital and that their bilingualism was a significant asset to them as educators and administrators. They recalled how their knowledge of Spanish helped them to learn English, but often they expressed frustration with their struggles to attain high levels of academic language proficiency in one or both languages, which all of them eventually developed. One of the participants, Deyanira, described how the development of her Spanish skills helped her develop her

English skills: “What I did was, as my Spanish vocabulary expanded, I brought those words into my English.” Deyanira was not taught to do this sort of transfer or analysis, but developed the strategy on her own. She writes “Many times these comparative analyses helped me with my learning of English.” Here Deyanira speaks to an important principle of language acquisition—the transfer of language skills, specifically—of cognates. Academic English is largely Latin-based, as is Spanish, and many of the common, everyday, high frequency words in Spanish are often text-based, academic words in English (Corson, 1995; 1997). For example, *edificio* in Spanish is a common word for the noun ‘building’; whereas, *edifice* and *edifying* are distinctly academic words in English, but where the words share the same Latin root across the two languages. As another example, *explicar* is a common word in Spanish, meaning ‘to explain’; whereas, in English it has the same meaning, but again, the word *explicate* in English is a decidedly academic word. These words are cognates and therefore have a similar structure and meaning in both languages. However, in Spanish these are more common words used in conversation, whereas in English they are low frequency, academic words, more often found in texts. Spanish speakers learning academic English have a large advantage in that much of their conversational language can potentially transfer to English as academic language, if and when students are made

aware of these cognates. This linguistic capital can be leveraged in significant ways to promote academic success for English learners, as Deyanira discovered for herself.

Resistant Capital

All of the participants had to resist negative stereotypes and other barriers in order to be successful in learning to ‘do school.’ Carmen spoke about her ability to make life choices, including her resistance to choosing the more culturally favored path chosen by her sisters:

“I think it’s an inner choice. I think you look at life, and you look at how you are living, and you then make a choice in whether you want to live in that manner or you don’t. I also had the opportunity to visit friends’ homes and so I knew where they lived...you know the brownstones, so I knew there was a difference with that kind of living. Exposure, I think like going to visit colleges and there was a whole different world outside of your neighborhood and your school. I think that was a big difference....I think my sisters made a choice with life. I think that they were limited in their thinking about life and sometimes I wonder if it was about what was pushed in the Dominican Republic—you got married early and it was about being a housewife and taking care of your husband; I think that’s the cultural piece probably.”

Taken together, the women in the study shared a wealth of aspirational, linguistic, familial, navigational and resistant capital, which helped them ‘do school’. All participants had access to, acknowledged and leveraged all six types of capital outlined in the Community Cultural Wealth framework, albeit at different times in their trajectories and via different pathways.

Intersection of Capital and Caring

We share one final anecdote from our study to highlight the ways in which having an ability-centered perspective of students requires knowledge of students, their lives and cultures, but is also characterized by caring, and how these intersect in ways that make the critical difference for students. One of the women in the study—Rosario, fondly recalled a fourth grade teacher whom she remembered warmly, because she was so “kind.” Rosario was responsible for getting her younger brother to school and to his classroom and was often late to her own classroom, arriving each day out of breath from the morning rush. The teacher understood that she was a child with adult responsibilities and so did not take recess away or punish her in any way, even though she was late to class almost every day. This simple act of caring may likely have changed Rosario’s educational trajectory, since the teacher could have invoked disciplinary action for the tardiness, that when compounded, could have had very negative consequences for her. Instead, Rosario’s teacher understood the reason for her tardiness and appreciated what Rosario was providing for her sibling and her family (familial capital). Rosario identified this teacher’s willingness to accommodate for her tardiness without taking punitive action as one of the factors in her early

educational journey that promoted engagement over alienation. Indeed, among the main school ‘push-out’ factors and contributors to the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ are unreasonable and often unevenly implemented discipline policies. In the current era of zero-tolerance policies at schools, it is important for educators to see the whole child and to understand and take responsibility for the impacts discipline and other policies have on students, including a lack of opportunity to practice critical literacy, especially among students of color (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011).

Recommendations for Practice

It is the authors’ experience as educators who have worked for more than three decades with both pre-service and in-service teachers, that instructional approaches and stances that validate students’ identities, backgrounds, and realities while promoting and leveraging multiple types of capital are most likely to produce positive schooling outcomes and academic success among traditionally marginalized students, including English learners. The students placed most at risk by and within our educational systems, including English learners are the students most in need of highly qualified and well-prepared educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to help them to succeed. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations for educators:

- Offer professional learning and programs, which promote multicultural and multilingual curricula and primary language literacy. Emphasize the importance of developing academic language and leveraging a student's native language in that process, including for example cognate study (**linguistic capital**).
- The Common Core State Standards have an increased emphasis on informational texts, which is critically important. Here we also encourage the continued use of narrative in Pre-K-12 classrooms and in teacher preparation as a means of activating awareness of various types of capital and of developing the same, while honoring students' developing identities. Specifically, we recommend the use of texts, which allow and require students to explore their developing identities (Cummins, 2006). This may include having students do cultural autobiographies, explore boundary crossing experiences, draw neighborhood maps with accompanying stories, compose poetry about where they are from, document oral histories and create cultural memoirs, to name a few examples (**resistant** and all other main types of capital explored here).
- Create and expand pipeline programs, which expose first generation college-going students to college life, expectations and experiences. If a

school has little experience with these programs, start small, for example with a month long intensive summer program and grow it over time. Also learn from others who have successfully implemented such programs and enlist the assistance of organizations with experience doing these programs, including but not limited to Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF), Math, Engineering and Science Achievement (MESA), and others (**aspirational and navigational capital**).

- Do more to engage families of immigrant and all students in welcoming, culturally appropriate ways, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized within our social, economic, political, and educational systems. Consider alternative models of family engagement such as those outlined by Allen (2007) in her work on creating welcoming schools and authentic family-school partnerships. Meet families both literally and figuratively on their turf and terms and in ways families identify as important. Minimally this would include communicating with families in the language(s) spoken by them (**familial capital**).

From this study we can conclude that students, including English learners, bring with them multiple types of capital. At times these are understood, discovered, and cultivated by teachers, but often they are unacknowledged

and unleveraged by teachers and schools. These multiple types of capital are huge assets, which encourage students to remain motivated, help them to learn, and allow them to succeed. The question we leave readers to ponder and address in their professional settings is: How can educators and schools allow for the co-creation of success by drawing upon what students bring as assets and strengths, while at the same time operating as places where students can acquire various types of capital and literacies that they do not already possess in large measure? It is our hope that meaningful discussions of this among educators, students, families and other community members might yield new insights and new ways to 'do school' for English learners and other students placed at risk.

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