

# **“They Always Keep Us in Line”: Neoliberalism and Elementary Emergent Bilinguals**

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the ways neoliberal school culture mediates the schooling experiences of elementary emergent bilinguals. I draw upon narrative inquiry to privilege the voices and stories of the children who contributed to this work. With the exception of children in first grade, who were sheltered from the discourse of accountability, students experienced pressure to achieve at the mandated levels on standardized state tests, perceived academic literacy tasks as labor to endure and complete, and found their lives within the school to be constrained by systems of compliance and conformity. The children’s narratives highlight the powerful influence of the current culture of neoliberalism, which negatively impacts their schooling by narrowing curriculum and denying access to instruction that supports questioning, critiquing, and curiosity.*

**Keywords:** *Emergent Bilinguals, Neoliberalism, Literacy, Narrative Inquiry, English as a Second Language*

## **Introduction**

“Why do we read?” I asked my class of second-grade emergent bilinguals. It was late August and we were together in my English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom for the first time. I asked the question as a lead-in to my introduction of our classroom library, a collection of picture books, graphic novels, chapter books, and bilingual books, all to be borrowed, taken home, shared, and enjoyed. They sat in awkward silence, looking at each other, until one brave student raised his hand in excitement. He had THE ANSWER: “So we can do good on the test!”

When I asked this question, I hoped for a range of possible responses: *Because it's fun. To learn about the world. So I can tell better jokes.* Yet, the answer I received revealed my students' experience of literacy at school not only differed from my own, but also contrasted with the learning environment I intended to create.

This article details the ways neoliberal school culture has mediated the academic literacy experiences of emergent bilinguals, also known as English learners, at two elementary schools. I draw upon the voices of students themselves, supplemented by additional insights from the voices of their teachers and the discourse of the schools in which they learned, to consider three questions: *How may neoliberal school cultures impact the academic literacy experiences of elementary emergent bilinguals? What elements of neoliberalism may be found in the narratives of elementary emergent bilinguals? What may be the impact of such elements on the lived experiences of these students?* Findings reveal the ways neoliberalism in education can play out at the classroom and school level, thus directly impacting the instructional lives of elementary emergent bilingual students.

## **Neoliberalism in Education**

According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is a

theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (p. 2)

In light of this, interventions by the state should be minimized to allow systems to work with as much freedom as possible. The basic tenet of neoliberalism asserts that society is best served through a free market system that values competition and individual accountability (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007; Hill, 2009; Hursh, 2008). As Hursh notes, although neoliberalism is “rarely explicitly acknowledged” (p. 5), it is the dominant political ideology in the United States and has a substantial influence on education at all levels, from national policy to classroom instruction. According to Clarke (2012), neoliberalism in education is found “in the form of marketization, privatization, standardization and accountability measures” (p. 298). Neoliberalism in education has been found to increase measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing, a practice with impacts that range from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008; Ravitch, 2013; Wrigley, 2009). At the school level, Rafferty and Turunen (2015) found neoliberal reform models lead to a culture of compliance with a reduction in the agency of teachers and a devaluation of

their professionalism. Furthermore, the principals in the Rafferty and Turunen study increasingly acquired roles more aligned with that of corporate, rather than school, leaders. At the classroom level, Atkinson (2014) demonstrated the focus neoliberalism places upon preparing adult emergent bilinguals for the workplace leads to an overemphasis on functional literacy skills to the detriment of students’ sociocultural learning needs. Thus, the culture of neoliberalism permeates all levels of education, from national mandates to daily classroom practices (Brass, 2014).

Research has examined the effects of neoliberalism at levels that range from national and state policies (Hursh, 2008), administrators and principals (Rafferty & Turunen, 2015), pre-service and in-service teachers (Gorlewski, 2013; Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2013), adult students (Atkinson, 2014), and adolescents (Goodman & Cocca, 2014). However, there remains a need for work that privileges the points-of-view of young learners. Given that elementary schools serve students in the first half of their public schooling experiences as well as provide foundational and intermediate literacy instruction, it is important to consider how neoliberalism may mediate the literacy experiences of elementary students.

### **Emergent Bilinguals**

Multilingual students are part of the linguistic diversity that is the “New Mainstream” (Enright, 2011). The children whose voices are heard in this article are all emergent bilinguals, a group which in the 2012-13 school year, made up 9.2 percent of all public school students in the United States (NCES, 2015). Additionally, because Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language at home by public school students (NCES, 2012), this article brings the experiences of emergent bilinguals who speak Spanish at home into the conversation addressing neoliberalism in public education.

Due to the United States’ complex history of colonization and immigration, multilingual students have been members of its educational system since before its official establishment. As early as 1754, Native youth were sent to boarding school to learn English and to be stripped of their indigenous home languages (Graham, 1998). Waves of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries created pockets of other languages within the United States as they settled or as the territory on which they lived was annexed to the country (MacNeil & Cran, 2005; Wilkerson & Salmons, 2008). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these languages were frequently the language of instruction in schools (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006). Indeed, many states created legislation to allow non-English language instruction (Crawford, 2004). The movement

for linguistic assimilation started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006), although most schools did not recognize the importance of creating meaningful opportunities for learning English both alongside as well as through the learning of academic content. However, beginning with the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, an element of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal government finally recognized the particular needs of emergent bilingual students.

While federal policy and court decisions, such as *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974, continued to clarify and articulate mandates about the pedagogical requirements for emergent bilinguals, George W. Bush's 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), created a new set of accountability requirements. These included annual English language proficiency testing for emergent bilinguals. De Cohen, Clewell, and Chu (2007) assert NCLB has been successful in putting emergent bilinguals "on the map," making schools, administrators, and teachers address their needs because educators are now legally accountable for demonstrating the educational progress of their multilingual students. Although they note more valid assessments must be created and teachers need more preparation for effectively instructing students, the authors point to the overall positive effect of NCLB on the education of emergent bilinguals

In contrast to this perspective, Ovando, Combs, and Collier (2006) note under NCLB, the Bilingual Education Act has been renamed the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act. This name change repositions emergent bilinguals from students bringing multiple linguistic resources into the classroom to students with a linguistic deficit. Such an emphasis on deficit is not new. Although the federal government increasingly uses the term English Learners to reference students developing academic proficiency in English, it continues to use LEP, "Limited English Proficient" in official documents (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2015). The use of labels that nullify students' linguistic resources disregards the assets of language and culture they bring to the classroom, and may encourage teachers to focus on low-level, disengaging academic tasks with these students (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2014; MacSwan, 2000).

Additionally, "poor performance" by emergent bilinguals on high-stakes assessments is problematic for districts and schools with disproportionate numbers of these students (Menken & Solorza, 2014). Under NCLB, emergent bilinguals are required to take annual assessments in reading and math alongside their grade-level peers. However, their

classification as ELL or LEP students means they have not yet attained the English language proficiency necessary for completing grade-level work independently. Thus, such tests serve as measures of language proficiency as much as they serve as measures of content and literacy knowledge (Abedi, 2004). Indeed, Menken and Solorza found emergent bilinguals were blamed for schools’ inability to achieve the assessment standards set by NCLB, quoting an acting principal as saying, “failure by emergent bilinguals to make adequate yearly progress” was “the main cause for her school being listed low performing and at risk of closure” (p. 107). The low performance of emergent bilinguals on standardized tests was also found by Menken and Solorza to cause administrators and teachers to perceive such students as a “liability.”

Despite assertions to the contrary, evidence demonstrates high-stakes accountability measures negatively impact the educational experiences of emergent bilinguals by (1) reducing their access to bilingual education programs (Menken & Solorza, 2014) regardless of research illustrating that home language literacy knowledge can accelerate English language literacy development; (2) penalizing emergent bilinguals and their schools based on test scores derived from invalid assessments; and (3) turning emergent bilinguals into scapegoats for their schools’ failure to meet the standards set by NCLB. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on numbers, accountability, and quantification of school success, has served to further marginalize emergent bilinguals who, with the passing of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, had only just begun to emerge from the shadows of the U.S. educational system and receive instruction that valued their cultural and linguistic resources.

In their examination of inclusive education reform in light of the current neoliberal agenda, Waitoller and Kozleski (2015) found diagnostic assessments have become more standardized in an effort to identify the individual needs of an increasingly diverse student population. They argue that these results, rather than addressing the “unique circumstances” of each student, become simply “another way of putting students in particular boxes” (p. 7). Differentiation, under neoliberalism, creates new ways of reifying students into positions of deficit and disability. Although the teachers and administrators in their study sought to eliminate negative elements from their discourse about students, the standardized assessments upon which educators relied led to the creation of new, not necessarily better, labels. The assertion that school reform in a culture of neoliberalism has led to less, rather than more, equitable instruction is seconded by Ceci and Konstantopoulos (2009), who point out some reforms nominally designed to improve schools for all students only lead to greater variability in

achievement across students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Looking at Response to Intervention (RTI), a well-intentioned approach to meet the needs of students who are challenged academically, Artiles, Bal, & King Thorius (2010) found the analytic structure of RTI eliminated consideration of intersections of ethnicity, language, SES, and other elements from understandings of individual student performance. The standardization of assessment impelled by neoliberalism has resulted in an approach “narrowed to considerations of ability, stripped of cultural and linguistic resources and mediating forces” (p. 255). Again, educators are losing any gains they have made in the past 50 years regarding bilingualism, funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and strength-based approaches to student learning to the doctrine of neoliberalism.

Although emergent bilinguals benefit from instructional practices that are effective with all students, including well-defined goals and rich student engagement (Goldenberg, 2013), they also have specific linguistic and sociocultural needs. These needs include additional supports that focus on English language development in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as the use of students’ home languages to further English achievement (Goldenberg, 2013). Additionally, to successfully serve emergent bilinguals, teachers and schools must affirm and value the multilingual and multicultural identities of these students in ways that invite their identities into the classroom (Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Kristina Montero, 2015).

## **Research Methods and Data**

Over the course of two years, I conducted three small qualitative studies investigating different aspects of the schooling experiences, literacy practices, and perspectives of emergent bilinguals at two elementary schools with participation by nine children (Hickey, 2011, 2012, 2014). Although each study design included different types of data, such as child-created artifacts, classroom observation, and student work samples, a commonality across the research was the use of open-ended, conversational interviews to gather the stories and perspectives of the children and their teachers. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “When one asks what it means to study education, the answer – in its most general sense – is to study experience” (pp. xxiii-xxiv). By highlighting the voices of these children through narratives shared in those interviews, this article sheds light on how the culture of neoliberalism may impact the experiences of those the educational system exists to serve – its students.

The interview protocol differed for each of these three investigations and aligned to each study’s research questions. However, each student interview protocol included questions asking the child to tell me what he or she believed was important for me, as someone seeking to make learning at school better, to know. Additional questions in each protocol prompted the children to describe their daily lives at school in an open-ended way that left the telling and focus up to them. As the children responded to these questions, I asked them to expand on their remarks to help me to understand their particular points-of-view.

Because all of the children who took part were emergent bilinguals who spoke Spanish as a home language and English at school, I was accompanied on all interviews by a trained Spanish-English interpreter to interpret for each child as needed. The children were invited to use the language most comfortable for them, and encouraged to codeswitch.

After one interview, as the interpreter and I were walking to our cars, she noted that it hadn’t been a very productive session for me since the student had spent most of the time bringing the conversation back to the topic of recess. On the drive home, I reflected upon the notion that my research questions were about what *I* thought was important regarding school and literacy. The items in my protocol asking students to tell me what could be better about their school day and what information I should know about them addressed what *they* considered to be important. As I coded the data for each of the three studies, I noticed there were threads of data across the studies related not to my research questions, but to elements of schooling the students found important and wanted to share. Those threads of data are the themes brought to light in this article.

As I have noted, all of the students whose voices are heard in this article were elementary emergent Spanish-English bilinguals from two schools in the same suburban-urban school district. These students were receiving English as a Second Language classes to support their ongoing development of English. Although most of the children were born in the United States as the children of immigrants, some were immigrants themselves. I selected the schools because they both had large populations of students classified as English learners: 37 percent at Findley Elementary and 20 percent at Water Street Elementary. Both schools were Title I-designated schools, with 85 percent and 83 percent of students, respectively, eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FARMS). Table 1 provides information on the students whose voices are included in this article.

Table 1: Student Information

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>School</b>
Jose	First	Not shared	Findley
Kevin	First	Born in the United States to El Salvadoran immigrants	Findley
Mike	Third	Born in the United States to Mexican immigrants	Water Street
Alejandra	Third	Born in the United States to Mexican immigrants	Findley
Andres	Fourth	Born in the United States to El Salvadoran immigrants	Findley
Marco	Fourth	Born in the United States to Mexican immigrants	Findley
Angelo	Sixth	Born in Mexico, arrived in the United States at the end of second grade	Findley
Diana	Sixth	Born in the United States to Mexican immigrants	Findley
Katie	Sixth	Born in the United States to El Salvadoran immigrants	Findley

In order to “figure out the taken-for-grantedness” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78) held by students across the trajectory of elementary school, the children whose voices are shared in this paper represent a range of grade levels, from first through sixth grade. Thus, this study considers students’ experiences across the trajectory of elementary school.

Although most interviews with the children took place at their homes, in the presence of their parents, two interviews took place at the school at the request of the students’ parents. In writing of doing research with children in their homes, Mayall (2000) notes, “As a guest of the child too, the researcher must take account of what the child sees as appropriate” (p. 116). Engaging with students outside of their school setting offered insights into their out-of-school identities and provided them with the opportunity to talk about school in *their* spaces. In order to understand the context for the narratives of the students and to develop a deeper knowledge of their school settings, I also conducted interviews with their teachers in their classrooms. This provided insights into the structure of each child’s school day, teachers’ perspectives on the activities and events described by the children, and information for me on the layout and setting of the school



itself. These perspectives are shared in this article, providing parallels and contrasts to the experiences of the students.

## **Data Analysis**

In my initial work with the data, I first began by reading and rereading the transcribed narratives as well as field texts from the school setting particular to each student. Chase (2005) states, “Rather than locating distinct themes *across* interviews, narrative researchers listen first to the voices *within* each narrative” (p. 663). Thus, I sought to become deeply familiar with the story of each child before looking for common elements across stories. Furthermore, as Bell (2002) writes, “A key way of coming to understand the assumptions held by learners from other cultures is to examine their stories and become aware of the underlying assumptions that they embody” (p. 207). Given my history as an elementary school teacher, I found spending substantial time with each narrative was essential in discovering children’s held assumptions as elementary students.

Once I realized there were shared threads across the data sets that didn’t fit with my initial research questions, but which held strong, common themes, I revisited the narratives to identify these themes. In my second round of analysis, I coded shared elements within and across grade levels. I considered these threads and noticed the connections to neoliberalism. Moreover, I researched the literature on neoliberalism and education, as outlined in the literature review of this article, and then set to analyzing the data in light of neoliberalism. In the final iteration of analysis, I connected my second round of coded elements to elements of neoliberal educational culture as described in the literature. After identifying these elements within the students’ narratives, I turned to the teacher narratives in order to discover what parallels, contrasts, and connections they held.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Several themes connecting to neoliberal culture emerged from the data, especially for students in third through sixth grade. Thus, one important initial finding was that first-graders’ experiences of literacy development at school differed significantly when compared to those of students in the upper grades. The rich scaffolds provided to them by their teachers, their frequent experiences of success, and their relative isolation from standardized testing provided them with some immunity from neoliberal elements. For example, while most of the intermediate and upper grade students used “work” to

describe school as a litany of mundane tasks to be completed, both of the first-grade students declared that school was “fun.” For older elementary students, the academic literacy experiences of school were not those of engagement and meaningful connection to text and new knowledge, but of worksheets to endure and tedious labor to be completed.

### “I think I’m going to fail”: A Culture of Assessment and Accountability

A culture of testing and standardization was apparent even before children shared their experiences. After walking into the large, airy lobby of Findley Elementary, one could see that half of the right-hand wall, reaching up two stories, was covered with a massive, colorful display that appeared, at first glance, playful. A paper racetrack bedecked with numerous paper racecars attracted the viewer’s eye to it. A closer look revealed that each car bore a student’s name, as well as wheels of several different colors. A key on the corner of the display explained that the multi-colored wheels signified the students’ scores for the quarterly standardized assessment, which aligned with the state’s annual reading and math assessments. The quarterly assessment was intended to offer data regarding students’ instructional needs as well as information about their current achievement level. Particular colors on the wheels stood for proficient (passing) scores and near-proficient (not quite passing) scores. Students lingering in the hallway or lining up for lunch could see how they compared to, surpassed, or fell short of their peers. Their daily arrival at school put them face-to-face with their level of achievement. I met with a sixth-grade language arts teacher, Mr. Nix, for a conversational interview after passing this display and he teased, “Where were you on the racetrack? Did you find yourself?” later adding, “Testing rules.”

The influence of the culture of accountability expanded beyond the entrance hall at Findley Elementary and infiltrated the classrooms. In order to have students draw upon only their own knowledge and avoid invalidating their standardized test scores by using resources from charts and bulletin boards in their classrooms, the school district mandated such resources be covered or taken down during such assessments. One day near the end of the school year, I stayed late to help Mrs. Fowler, one of the fourth-grade teachers, take down the newspapers that had covered the walls and ledges of her ceiling for weeks. She explained to me because there were so many tests, she had given up taking down the newspapers after every assessment because she spent so much time putting them back up. The same was true for Mrs. Hoff, a fourth-grade ESOL teacher,

who said of the newspapers in her classroom: “After the annual state assessment I did not take them down because I know the benchmark test was coming. What’s the point?”

Students felt an immense amount of pressure to be successful on the quarterly benchmark and annual standardized exams. This phenomenon was also recorded by McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Vasquez Heilig (2008) who found that students felt “defeated” by the stress of high-stakes assessment (p. 21). Even Katie, a sixth-grader who perceived herself as doing well academically, shared, “*It’s hard because I get nervous because I think I’m going to fail.*”

I found the pervasive emphasis on student performance was not limited to standardized assessments. Describing his experience with classroom tests, Angelo, a sixth-grader at Findley Elementary, shared,

I wanted to practice and get good grades on the quiz and I actually get right every single time we do a test, I get good. Sometimes I get my test put up in the hall because I got all of them right. (Angelo, sixth grade, Findley)

The reward for doing well on an assessment was a public display of one’s success. This emphasis on display and performance extended to classroom discussions. Several children shared their anxiety about being called upon in class because they feared they wouldn’t know the right answer and consequently be embarrassed in front of their peers.

I just go up and something like my teacher, and my math teacher, tell me to write something on the board I get really nervous. Yeah, I get really nervous. Some people, some kids in there don’t really get that nervous like me. But I’m shy and nervous a lot. (Alejandra, third grade, Findley Elementary)

I get nervous. Yeah, cause I have to read in front of all the people out loud. Umm, then if I can’t, I can’t read the – somebody, somebody else gets called. Yeah, like persons that raise their hands and then I like, keep my hand down so I can’t read. I keep my hands down [so the teacher won’t call on me] (Mike, third grade, Water Street Elementary)

It’s kind of difficult because I still don’t know what, um, I still have to think what I have to say. I get embarrassed. (Andres, fourth grade, Findley Elementary)

Students who were challenged academically were acutely aware of their inability to achieve the standards set for them. In describing their experiences with literacy, both Diana, a sixth-grader at Findley, and Mike used assessment discourse while describing

their experiences to me. Explaining the challenges school held for her, Diana noted, “*I struggle.*” This statement echoes the common use of “struggling reader” used by teachers, researchers, and administrators to describe students’ experiences of literacy difficulties (Bennett, Calderone, Dedrick & Alberton Gunn, 2015; Zvoch & Stevens, 2015). The term “struggling reader” brings deficit assumptions to our thinking about such students, without creating space to focus on the strengths, resources, and motivations students bring to acts of literacy.

Uptake of assessment language was also demonstrated by Mike, third grade, whose attempt to describe his reading experiences led to an initially confusing conversation:

- Researcher: What parts of reading are you good at?  
Mike: Second grade.  
Researcher: You’re good at second grade reading?  
Mike: Um-hmmm. I’m trying to get the “L” out.  
Researcher: What do you mean?  
Mike: Like get out.  
Researcher: Do you want to show me?  
Mike: I don’t know where, my thing is. There’s a B and an L.  
Researcher: A B and an L?  
Mike: Um-hmm. That’s like second grade reading.  
Researcher: Oooh! And that’s on some of your books.  
Mike: Um-hmmm.

Mike was describing the “BL” label, Below [Grade] Level, on the books he was able to read. He wanted to “get out” of the BL label and move successfully into grade level books that didn’t wear the stigma of “BL.”

Angelo, sixth grade, was also highly aware of his reading level and the reading level of his peers. In reference to his reading group, he pointed out:

They don’t help me that much because we are in the same level. And we know the same things. But they can’t help me and I can’t help them because they know what I know.

As Angelo pointed out, because of the emphasis on data and level at his school, most of his peer interactions during his literacy block time were with other students of the same abilities, resources, and skills as himself. Thus, he was neither able to learn new concepts from his peers, nor share the strengths he brought to the classroom.

As Biesta (2014) notes, “The language of learning is not an innocent language but actually a language that exerts a powerful influence on what we can be and how we can be, one that tends to domesticate rather than to emancipate” (p. 68). The students’ daily anxiety in a culture of accountability demonstrates how the language of learning can be infiltrated by a language of testing. Biesta also speaks of the danger “when a particular discourse becomes hegemonic – that is, when a particular discourse begins to monopolize thinking and talking” (p. 123). Here we see how the language of testing has trickled down from national and state policy, to administrators, to teachers, to the students themselves. Students have taken up the discourse of literacy assessment to describe experiences of reading marked always by evaluation.

Many of the teachers were aware that the stress the students experienced related to assessment. Mrs. Fowler declared, “My fear up to this point is that the kids might get testing fatigue especially in the last part of the school year.” She explained because the school year included the standardized state assessment, three standardized benchmark assessments, standardized reading comprehension assessments, and individual reading assessment, the teachers decided earlier in the year to make it a competition to see which classroom made the most progress on each assessment. However, “We never tell them which classroom won. We don’t want kids to be fighting around school because of testing.” In the end, the friendly competition just felt like one more test.

Mrs. Elliott, an ESOL teacher who worked with sixth-graders, worried about how the emphasis on test preparation would actually undermine the success of the emergent bilinguals she saw as her primary responsibility. She explained the afterschool program was “excluding somebody, and mainly the lower ESOL students or the special ed students because [school administrators] felt they would not improve to a considerable level [on the standardized tests used to measure Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB].” She added that she shared her concerns with the school administration, “I also pointed out, ‘If you continue to do this every year, there is not hope these students will ever catch up with the rest of the student population’.” Rather than providing equal opportunities for all students to be successful, the need to meet specific measures of achievement through annual standardized testing induced the school to further limit opportunities for already marginalized groups, including emergent bilinguals and students with disabilities.

This continued and concentrated disenfranchisement aligns with Fabricant and Fine's (2013) assertion that

The well-funded technology of testing systematically diverts policy attention away from the structural conditions imposed on youth, communities, and schools, which produces inadequate outcomes and naturalizes racial and class hierarchies, foreclosing educational opportunities for most youth of color. (p. 99)

Thus, instead of mitigating inequities, as had been its nominal intent, the use of high-stakes standardized annual assessment to measure school success became a tool for increasing inequity, as schools such as Findley Elementary sought to find efficient ways to increase its score and meet AYP. In a culture of neoliberalism, "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being" (Harvey, 2005, p. 65). However, as Harvey points out, this detaches any individual's failure or poor outcome from elements of the greater system that may be beyond a person's control, including marginalization or discrimination due to class, gender, race, culture, or language. "The neoliberal presumption of perfect information and a level playing field for competition appears as either innocently utopian or a deliberate obfuscation" (Harvey, 2005, p. 68). In this case, the assumption that high-stakes assessment would support the achievement of all children was not simply incorrect. High-stakes testing at Findley Elementary minimized meaningful opportunities to learn. It was part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

### "Sometimes they give you a lot of work": Literacy Experiences as Labor

Another element of neoliberalism threaded through the narratives of the children was the act of school reading and writing as one of labor. For the children whose experiences are voiced in this article, such literacy events were lived as tasks to be gotten through and subsequently handed in to the teacher.

Sometimes they give you a lot of work. (Mike, third grade, Water Street Elementary)

The teacher has to check it because if we fake that we did it then she will know because she will check it...I don't really read it. I just, I just – what the sentence is, and the period is – I write down there. That's more easier for me and I always get a check. Yeah. It's more easier for me instead just wasting time reading, instead first reading the questions, then looking it up, then writing it down. (Alejandra, third grade, Findley Elementary)

She gives us a paper, and actually three papers stapled together. And then we have to read all those papers, then answer the questions. (Andres, fourth grade, Findley Elementary)

Every class is about we have to read the chapter, the textbook, and then we have to answer this worksheet about it. (Angelo, sixth grade, Findley Elementary)

I don't like social studies because you, -- you get a lot of stuff to do in there. Like a lot of worksheets at the same time and you have to fill them all in. (Angelo, sixth grade, Findley Elementary)

I don't really get to read that much at school. I have to do work, and I have to do this, and I don't really have time to read. (Diana, sixth grade, Findley Elementary)

The students saw reading and writing at school as an endless series of chores to be completed. For them, learning was not an experience that called for curiosity, questioning, flashes of insight, or joy. For Alejandra, third grade, reading was an activity that wasted time better spent getting tasks done so her teacher could check them off. When asked about her reading experiences at school, Diana, sixth grade, did not recognize school activities as including “reading.” School was a place where students were so busy working and taking tests that there wasn't time left over for “reading.”

The practices of school included not simply work to be accomplished because the teacher said so, but wage labor as well. Marco, fourth grade, described a reading log in which he recorded how many minutes he read a day and wrote a summary of what he read in order to earn points for extra credit. Angelo experienced a different incentive program:

Every time we do our homework she gives us a card – she gave us a card at the beginning and every time you do your homework she hole punches the card and when you fill up the whole card she will give you some, she will give you a prize. (Angelo, sixth grade, Findley Elementary)

In addition to these experiences of earning extra credit or prizes, almost all children, including the first-graders, shared their experiences with the Pizza Hut “Book It!” program, a reading incentive program that began in 1984 and exchanges reading logs for personal pan pizza certificates (Pizza Hut). Neoliberal culture has created opportunities like this for Pizza Hut and other corporations. Although these programs mask themselves as pedagogical supports, they groom students for the market place, both as consumers with brand allegiance and as paid laborers (Boyles, 2005; Kayoko Peralta, 2015; Stout, 1991).

According to Fabricant and Fine (2013), “Testing regimes and policing are expensive policies that...undermine the teaching environments in schools” (p. 122). The focus on finishing worksheets and the treatment of literacy events as labor to be completed quickly in order to prepare for tests has overpowered the curriculum. Sidorkin (2014) builds on this notion, pointing out that students at elite schools know that they will be well-paid for their labors of learning. Their compensation will include access to social networks, excellent colleges, and high-level jobs. On the other hand, students at mass schools know that the work they put into learning will likely have little return in the long run because escape from their current socioeconomic realities is the lucky exception, rather than the likely rule.

According to Mr. Nix at Findley Elementary, “The annual state test comes so we have to stop and we had to do review for four weeks.” The focus on test preparation pushed out more meaningful aspects of teaching and learning, such as author’s studies and writing workshops. He added:

It’s all test attack. It’s mostly test attack. The test scores...I can have the best writing. I can work on writing all year and have the best writing somewhere on the wall here. I can have the kids publish their own narratives. But if they score basic or they don’t score overall a percentage increase. If we don’t make Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP, and our school can be in trouble. So this isn’t even on a school level, the test thing, this is on a federal level when it comes to testing. (Mr. Nix, sixth grade teacher, Findley Elementary)

The students and teachers whose experiences are shared in this article felt their lives at school were driven by the need to work efficiently. For teachers such as Mr. Nix, this labor was required by pressure from school and district administrators to succeed on the test. He and Mrs. Elliott both mentioned that earlier in the year, they’d co-implemented an author’s study on Gary Soto, with the intention of building meaningful connections between the literature and the home language and cultures of their Hispanic students. Although the teachers wanted to create meaningful instruction, the culture of assessment that had invaded the school prohibited engaging with literature and writing in ways not directly aligned to the test.

### “Or you go to the wall”: Conformity, Crime, and Punishment

“But when I got out, it was already over. And I wasn’t late.” Marco, fourth grade, described his annoyance with recess, or the lack of it, at his school. This was a frustration



shared by multiple students, and it went beyond the complaint one would expect of children wishing for more play time. Students’ experiences of recess at school offered insights about other elements of the school culture.

When asked what she would share with her teachers or school principal if she could do so without penalty, Katie (sixth grade) said, “*Umm, what I’m going to say is really weird, so tell [the principal] to let us have recess.*” She explained going outside was generally limited to a reward for having taken a test, noting “We did went outside on Thursday. We went outside Thursday for a softball game. For the testing.” Because of Katie’s sixth-grade status, she didn’t have the same access to recess the younger children did, because the sixth-graders were being prepared to transition to middle school, where recess did not exist.

Although students in the lower grades had a scheduled recess time, actually getting to experience recess came with its own challenges, as Alejandra, third grade, Findley Elementary, describes:

- Alejandra: Then we stand in the line, the black line that’s right there to get our lunch.
- Researcher: When you walk in the school do you have to walk on a certain tile?
- Alejandra: Oh, no, that’s in the cafeteria!
- Researcher: Okay, the black line is only in the cafeteria?
- Alejandra: Yeah.
- Researcher: When you walk around in the school regularly is there a place where you have to stand?
- Alejandra: Yes, it’s on like a white line. You have to stand in it, you can’t stand, you can’t stand, like, right beside him.
- Researcher: You can’t stand beside the white line?
- Alejandra: No, you have to be in the white line.
- Researcher: You have to stand on the white line? So if you’re off the white line is that when they make you stand up at recess?
- Alejandra: No, if you stand out of the line they send you back or you don’t get recess for **one day**.
- Researcher: You lose your recess?
- Alejandra: Or you go to the wall.
- Researcher: What does it mean going to the wall?

- Alejandra: Going to the wall means you just see people having fun and that's not really fair.
- Researcher: You have to stand against the wall and watch everyone else play?
- Alejandra: But I don't stand on the wall. I never stand on the wall.
- Researcher: So in the cafeteria you were standing on the black line.
- Alejandra: Yeah. Sometimes these are the kids that are called the "troublemakers."

Numerous rules had to be followed, including standing on the right tile while moving throughout the school or waiting for lunch, in order to enjoy recess. Students who broke these rules, including the minor transgressions, could be labeled as "troublemakers." The experiences described by the children in this study demonstrate how neoliberal culture extends beyond academics and assessment in schools. It insinuates itself into children's social interactions and identities. Echoing this understanding, Saavedra and Marx (2016) discuss the ways culturally and linguistically diverse children are viewed as "wild tongues and bodies" that must be controlled (p. 50). As Raible and Irizarry (2010) explain, teacher candidates and teachers are encouraged to serve as "agents" of surveillance "in the name of accountability" (p. 1197). Thus, accountability in education includes not just learning and testing, but the regulation of children outside of the classroom, in the lunchroom and on the playground. For Alejandra, even avoiding classification as a misbehaving student did not guarantee her freedom to enjoy recess.

- Alejandra: Yeah, but sometimes, I don't know why they keep us out like standing if recess is just go play. They always keep us in line. Sometimes they make us just walk in a circle.
- Researcher: What? So it's recess time but you have to stand in a line?
- Alejandra: Sometimes we go play but only for a little while.
- Researcher: They make you stand?
- Alejandra: Yes. In like a line. If it's not perfect then you can't go. You have to stand there until it's straight.
- Researcher: Is it because someone's talking?
- Alejandra: [laughing] I don't know.
- Researcher: Or is it because you don't have a perfect line?
- Alejandra: I think the both of them.
- Researcher: It's the both? And then sometimes they make you walk in circles in your line?

Alejandra: Yes. Or they’ll make us run.  
Researcher: Run? This is recess?  
Alejandra: Yes, now they make **rules**! I don’t know why. It’s recess. You don’t have to make rules to go play or nothing.

Other rules existed during lunch itself, after students had stood in line and retrieved their trays. Because students frequently became too loud during lunch, a “silent lunch” policy was sometimes implemented, and students were penalized for breaking the silence.

We don’t really have time to talk to our friends. We can’t really talk at lunch. We lose points. (Katie, sixth grade, Findley Elementary)

When we get a little bit loud. We can whisper. Except when we’re in the line we have to be quiet or if we don’t be quiet we just talking and moving around they take us and they put them in the wall. (Alejandra, third grade, Findley Elementary)

The privileges of talking during lunch and of playing during recess were not the only luxuries the children needed to earn. Although sixth-graders did not receive recess, they had other things to look forward to, such as art class. According to sixth-grader Diana, however, even that had to be earned, and she and her classmates had art, “*When we deserve it. Don’t talk loud or be bad.*” But she said they didn’t get art, “*If we make the teacher mad.*”

Other strategies were in place to monitor student behavior and support conformity. When asked if she would change anything about her school, Diana explained that she would eliminate the uniform rule,

Diana: Because, it’s – everyone’s wearing the same thing. Yeah, and like, when you’re trying to make, like, a teacher doesn’t notice you or you’re calling, like that “girl with the yellow shirt.” Everybody’s wearing yellow! But we’re going to start wearing white and khaki for seventh grade. That’s what seventh grade. The sixth-graders has to wear blue. Eighth grade has to wear gold.  
Researcher: Why?  
Diana: To know where you’re ‘posed to be. It’s like if a sixth-grader’s on the seventh grade floor then they will tell him “why are you doing that?” So it’s ‘posed to be – They don’t get confused and try to trick the teachers that they go to, this.

Here again we see neoliberalism's emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility, as well as its elements of surveillance and policing that are typical at all levels of a neoliberal state (Harvey, 2005). As Fabricant and Fine (2013) write, there is a "nasty co-occurrence of policies that mandate over-testing and over-policing of children of color in schools of high poverty" (p. 117). Sidorkin (2014) points out that "elite schools are often run in a more democratic and freer manner than the mass schools" (p. 129). We see this play out in the daily lives of the students described here. As I have noted, the majority of the students at both Findley Elementary and Water Street Elementary were of low socioeconomic status, with more than 80 percent of students at each school eligible for FARMs (Free and Reduced-Price Meals). Drawing on Grady, Marquez, and McLaren (2012) and Kupchik and Monahan (2006), Turner (2015) writes, "maintaining the neoliberal school requires discipline, control, and containment through high-stakes testing, further reliance on performance indicators, and zero-tolerance policies for minor disruptions, which all intensify patterns of control and conformity" (p. 12). Furthermore, Turner adds that such policies tend to focus on youth of color, including Latino students, as well as youth from low SES backgrounds. These approaches are implemented under the claim that they work to develop "personal responsibility" while in actuality they create cultures of submission and compliance, where absurd rules cease to be questioned, because questioning them results in further penalty. This demand for "responsible submission" (Cox, 2015) requires children and youth to demonstrate their ability to moderate their behavior by compliance, leading to further inequities. Cox's study found youth of color in the juvenile justice system were punished for "even low-level incivilities" such as "stepping out of line when walking between activities," a finding with concerning echoes of the experiences of the elementary students in this study.

The consequences of a school culture grounded in compliance, penalties, and confusing rules are not simply playground memories of standing on the sidelines. Rather, they are also a lesson in how questioning the creators and implementers of such a system will be met with more punishment. As Turner (2015) writes, in a neoliberal school, children are denied the opportunity to learn how to critique and resist unfair systems, and are socialized into the types of consumers and workers desired by corporations and neoliberal policy makers. Childhood itself is reimagined.

### "It's all fun": Immunity and Joy in the First Grade

In contrast to the other grades, primary students seemed to be sheltered from much of the school neoliberal culture. Although the first-grade classroom I visited at Findley

Elementary also participated in displaying student work in the hallway, the selected work, while of high quality, emphasized students’ creativity and personal voices. When I asked the first-graders during my conversations with each of them to tell me about school, Jose declared, “It’s all fun!” Kevin used the word “work” in his response like many of the older students. However, in this case, it was to declare that, “It’s fun to do work.” The first-grade classroom, immune from the mandated benchmarks and high-stakes assessments of the upper grades, and with clear rules and expectations that fostered independence rather than submission, was a sanctuary where the pressures of testing hadn’t filtered into every corner.

Commenting on the racetrack display discussed earlier in this article, Ms. Peirce, the first-grade ESOL teacher, shared, “I’ve not been exposed to those upper grades and I’ve not been exposed to a testing grade. I’ve never had to teach a testing grade. And I’ve been told that I’m very lucky.” Because NCLB required students’ progress to be measured beginning in third grade, the primary grades did not experience the high-stakes assessment pressure felt by the upper grades.

Not only did Ms. Peirce feel she wasn’t exposed to the anxiety of testing as a first-grade ESOL teacher, but she also resisted attempts to bring her into the culture. She explained,

And you know what, principals have always tried to make me when I do a bulletin board, put the students’ grades. I refuse. I won’t do it. Those grades are confidential and as a teacher I am to keep student information confidential. Putting their grades out on the bulletin board for everybody to see is breaking confidentiality. Now I understand their reasoning but only to a point. They want students to see what a good paper is as opposed to a poor paper but imagine being the student with the poor paper for the whole school to see out on the bulletin board. No! (Ms. Peirce, ESOL teacher, first grade, Findley Elementary)

Whereas in describing recent events in their classrooms, the teachers in the upper grades discussed testing, test preparation, and their concerns for students related to the testing pressures, Mrs. McKinley, a first-grade teacher, described a classroom visit by a Mariachi musician and Jose’s delight in the performance.

I was watching Jose during the music. And of course my Hispanic kids were in seventh heaven because he was singing in Spanish, of course. And I was moving like this and I looked at Jose – the biggest smile on his face, and he was MOVING his... [Mrs. McKinley smiled, dancing in her seat, mimicking Jose]. (Mrs. McKinley, first-grade teacher, Findley Elementary)

I found the children in first grade were protected from the culture of neoliberalism by the lack of a high-stakes testing mandate, due to the resistance of teachers such as Ms. Peirce,

and by the time and capacity to invite guests such as the musician. Unlike their older peers, the first-graders still found school to be a place full of joy, meaningful learning, and fun.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

One of the most disturbing findings of my analysis of these children's narratives was the immense silence surrounding their home languages and cultures in their narratives of school. From my interviews with teachers, I knew the sixth-grade teachers had sought to connect with students' culture through an author's study. In first grade, the book, *The Three Little Javelinas*, was chosen because of its cultural and linguistic connections to students, as had the Mariachi musician guest visit. However, overall, the students' multilingualism and multiculturalism were not important elements within their academic lives, particularly as noted through their narratives.

United States schools have long been sites of assimilation, with the goals of preparing citizens (Labaree, 1997) and, as Brumberg (1986) writes, "transforming the motley immigrant classes into clean, orderly, patriotic, English-speaking Americans" (p. 199). Despite the rich multilingual history I outlined in the beginning of this article, U.S. schools operate as places of "dispossession" where home languages are neither developed nor valued. As Fabricant and Fine (2013) note, "Disposability and dispossession are not accidental outcomes but rather embedded in the policies of the day that privilege testing and policing 'reform' over strategic learning investment in the poorest communities" (p. 122). Rather than valuing diverse students' home languages and cultures, schools under the influence of neoliberalism marginalize such students because of their language and culture. We see the possibilities for engagement and connection in first grade, and glimpse them even up to sixth, but they are increasingly snuffed out through high-stakes testing, policies such as No Child Left Behind that trade bilingual support for monolingual ideology (Wiley, 2014), and a growing focus on test preparation rather than meaningful instruction for the students who would most benefit.

Additionally, the intense focus on test preparation described by the teachers and students in this article speak to the ways in which neoliberalism has even infiltrated students' and teachers' experiences of spatio-temporality at school. Harvey (1990) writes,

It is nevertheless the case that ideological and political hegemony in any society depends on an ability to control the material context of personal and social experience. For this reason, the materializations and meanings given to money, time, and space have more than a little

significance for the maintenance of political power. (p. 227)

As market forces and technology have worked to “speed up or intensify labour processes” (Harvey, 1990, p. 231), so neoliberalism’s impact on space and time has also permeated the spaces of the school day. With so much emphasis on the need for students to score well on the test for the sake of their teachers and the school, the instructional day holds little time for anything except test preparation. This compressed day certainly does not have space for any sort of play, whether it be recess or intellectual play, except in the brief interlude of the primary grades.

However, in the joy still visible in first grade, in the resistance and frustrations voiced by teachers, and in the humor and resilience evident in the voices of children, there is hope schools still have the potential to be places of opportunity and engagement for students. By listening to students and hearing what they value and need, we may better know how to work against the oppressive culture of neoliberalism and create instruction that invites curiosity and confidence, possibilities and play. Insights from this article and future studies may also support researchers, teacher educators, teachers, and the students themselves in working for an educational culture that values creativity, linguistic diversity, and multiple measures of learning.

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