UC Berkeley
L2 Journal

Title
Neoliberal Discourses and the Local Policy Implementation of an English Literacy and Civics Education Program

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/28h0b0bq

Journal
L2 Journal, 7(3)

Author
López, Dina

Publication Date
2015

DOI
10.5070/L27323545

Copyright Information
Copyright 2015 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at https://escholarship.org/terms

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

L2 Journal, Volume 7 Issue 3 (2015), pp. 97-122 http://repositories.cdlib.org/uccllt/l2/vol7/iss3/art6/

Neoliberal Discourses and the Local Policy Implementation of an English Literacy and Civics Education Program

DINA LÓPEZ

E-mail: dlopez@ccny.cuny.edu

The issue of language, specifically access to English, has emerged as a key concern for both U.S. policy-makers and immigrant communities alike. Many of these debates are framed by neoliberal and human capital perspectives, which view English as a set of skills and linguistic capital that are inextricably tied to employment opportunities and economic mobility. It is within this socio-historical, political, and discursive space that adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes are envisioned, developed, and implemented in various communities across the U.S. For decades, the federal government had allocated monies for states to fund programs that linked teaching English with the teaching of job readiness and workplace skills. In 1999, however, the Clinton administration launched a $70 million state grants program that integrated English literacy with civics education (EL/Civics). This was a clear departure from language education policies that positioned adult immigrants simply as workers who needed the linguistic skills to participate in the labor system.

This paper argues that despite the purported aim to link English language instruction with broader notions of civic and political participation, a neoliberal agenda finds its way into the local implementation of the EL/Civics policy. Informed by poststructural and sociocultural theories as well as a transnational perspective, this paper draws on data from a 10-month ethnographic study of an EL/Civics program in Queens, NY. I employed ethnographic data collection methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-recorded classroom discourse. Guided by the following questions, the analysis focuses on how neoliberal discourses insinuate themselves into the organizational practices and classroom interactions of an EL/Civics program: How are neoliberal discourses both taken up and interrogated by adult immigrant students? How do neoliberal discourses interact with enduring narratives of immigration? This work adds to the growing research on the critical role that language teachers and language learners play in responding to and remaking policies in their classrooms—a process that is mediated by actors' identities, local contexts, and widely-circulating discourses of immigration and neoliberal logic. The paper concludes with a discussion of how we can begin to rethink EL/Civics programs and approaches and provide an alternative to the neoliberal model of adult English language education.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of language, specifically access to English, has emerged as a key concern for both U.S. policy-makers and immigrant communities alike. Many of these debates are framed by neoliberal and human capital perspectives, which view English as a set of skills and linguistic capital that are inextricably tied to employment opportunities and economic mobility. It is within this socio-historical, political, and discursive space that adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes are envisioned, developed, and implemented in various communities across the U.S. For decades, the federal government had allocated monies for states to fund programs that linked teaching English with the teaching of job readiness and workplace

skills. In 1999, however, the Clinton administration launched a $70 million state grants program that integrated English literacy with civics education (EL/Civics). This was a clear departure from language education policies that positioned adult immigrants simply as workers who needed the linguistic skills to participate in the labor system.

This paper argues that despite the purported aim to link English language instruction with broader notions of civic and political participation, a neoliberal agenda finds its way into the local implementation of the EL/Civics policy. Informed by poststructural and sociocultural theories as well as a transnational perspective, this paper draws on data from a 10-month ethnographic study of an EL/Civics program in Queens, NY. I employed ethnographic data collection methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-recorded classroom discourse. Guided by the following questions, the analysis focuses on how neoliberal discourses insinuate themselves into the organizational practices and classroom interactions of an EL/Civics program: How are neoliberal discourses both taken up and interrogated by adult immigrant students? How do neoliberal discourses interact with enduring narratives of immigration? This work adds to the growing research on the critical role that language teachers and language learners play in responding to and remaking policies in their classrooms—a process that is mediated by actors' identities, local contexts, and widely-circulating discourses of immigration and neoliberal logic.

A number of scholars have offered critiques of neoliberalism as a policy and ideological framework; however, there is a scarcity of work that examines empirically how neoliberal discourses find articulations on the ground in local contexts (Ayers & Carlone, 2007). In an attempt to address this gap in the literature, my analysis sheds light on the social, cultural, and linguistic resources that students use to position themselves as immigrants and language learners in the EL/Civics classroom. I found that widely-circulating discourses such as neoliberal discourses of choice, flexibility, personal responsibility, and enduring narratives of immigration figured significantly in processes of social identification and discursive positioning. However, students were also able to interrogate and critique dominant narratives through improvisational moves that brought their lived experiences and relationships to bear on classroom activities—effectively transforming them into important "spaces of authoring." I conclude the paper with a discussion of how we can begin to rethink EL/Civics programs and approaches and provide an alternative to the neoliberal model of adult English language education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in poststructural and sociocultural theories of identity, discourse, and language learning Within this paradigm, language is seen as the locus of social relations and power, a form of symbolic capital, and a site of struggle where subjectivity and individual consciousness are produced (Bourdieu, 1991). The following is a brief review of the literature that undergirds this research approach including a discussion of neoliberalism as discursive practice as well as the concepts of figured worlds, circulating models of identity, and spaces of authoring.

Neoliberalism as Discursive Practice

> Neoliberalism is not simply the response to a crisis of accumulation and a readjustment of the relations between capital and labor following the formation of truly global

> markets. It is the ideology of the period in which capitalism deepened to embrace the production of social life itself, seeking to commoditize the most intimate of human relations and the production of identity and personhood. (Gledhill, 2004, p. 340)

The 1970s saw the emergence of neoliberalism as a political and economic theory guided by a premise "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). The theory was operationalized in industrial countries such as the U.S. and Great Britain through economic reform policies that deregulated the market and divested government funding from social welfare services, including education (Hantzopoulos & Shirazi, 2014; Morrow & Torres, 2000). As more and more nations adopted these policies, neoliberal ideology assumed hegemonic power as a mode of discourse and cultural logic (Harvey, 2007; Ong, 2006). It is this aspect of neoliberal ideology with which the present study concerns itself—neoliberalism as situated discursive and cultural practice and the implications for language learning and social identification.

Within a neoliberal framework, a society flourishes when people assume individual responsibility for adapting to the needs of the labor market and acquiring the skills needed to become mobile and flexible workers (Kopecký, 2011). According to Bansel (2007), "individuals, rather than governments, are understood as best able to exercise rational choices among the field of rational actors and institutions that comprise the economic networks in which they are enmeshed" (p. 285). Bansel's work explores the ways in which these discourses of choice, freedom, and opportunity are taken up in the life-history narratives of adult learners. The findings from Bansel's study illuminate how education and training become sites for the production of flexible workers and thus, neoliberal subjects. Within these contexts, the notion of life-long learning becomes inextricably linked with the interests of capital and the labor economy (Ball, 2009; Gouthro, 2009). This is a particularly salient insight for examining the EL/Civics classroom as teacher and students both took up and interrogated neoliberal discourses vis-à-vis English and participation in the market economy.

A burgeoning body of scholarship has explored the wide-reaching ramifications of neoliberalism on English language teaching and learning. Pillar and Cho (2013) contend that neoliberal logic is the driving ideology and "covert language policy mechanism" behind the global spread of English. With a focus on the European Union's language policies, Flores (2013) cautions the TESOL field against embracing plurilingualism purely on the basis of its neoliberal and economic merits. He argues that the shift in the field toward multi- and plurilingualism:

> …parallels the production of a neoliberal subject that fits the political and economic context of our current sociohistorical period—in particular, the desire for flexible workers and lifelong learners to perform service-oriented and technological jobs as part of a post-Fordist political economy. (Flores, 2013, p. 501)

Though there is a dearth of research that focuses on neoliberalism within the adult ESL context, Gibb (2008) analyzes adult ESL policy in Canada and its relationship to the articulated employment skills policy. Her analysis of national policy documents points to neoliberalism and human capital theory as the underlying ideologies and predominant

discourses that construct worker and immigrant subjects "in such a way that workers and newcomers are expected to assume full responsibility for particular sets of behaviors, marginalizing the social and cultural complexities of second language learning in adulthood" (p. 318). Ullman's (2012) interview-based study on the English language program *Inglés Sin Barreras* [English without Barriers] is one of the few studies that documents how adult immigrants take up neoliberal discourses as they make meaning of learning English in relation to national belonging. Ullman concludes that "national belonging for Mexican migrants in the USA involves producing themselves as neoliberal subjects" and that the "learning of English… is central to this struggle for personhood" (p. 466). This study builds on Ullman's work as my findings demonstrate that neoliberal ideology reworked and redefined notions of opportunity and the American Dream.

Though it is important to recognize the power and dominance of neoliberal discourses, the work of Peck and Tickell (2002) cautions against viewing neoliberalism as a monolithic ideology with deterministic and predictable consequences. Neoliberal ideas gain meaning as they are taken up and interpreted by social actors in specific social and discursive contexts (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Kjaer & Pederson, 2001). As such, the following section outlines the conceptual framework that guided analysis of the data collected through ethnographic study of an EL/Civics program and classroom.

Figured Worlds, Circulating Models of Identity, and Spaces of Authoring

Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998)'s notion of *figured worlds* provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the social and discursive work that people engage in as they negotiate identities vis-à-vis neoliberal discourses, including the EL/Civics classroom:

> By 'figured world', then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by agents…who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52)

Figured worlds are characterized by particular cultural and discursive narratives that mediate actors' participation and identity negotiation within them. This culturalist and constructivist lens allows for an understanding of the complex interplay between people's sense of themselves, their actions and behavior, and their sociohistorical contexts. This theoretical construct takes an anti-essentialist stance on identities in relation to race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Rather, Holland and colleagues focus on the development of identities and agency in socially-situated and historically-contingent "worlds." Thus, blanket racial, ethnic, and national categorizations such as "Black," "Latino," "immigrant," "Colombian" will vary in meaning across sociohistorical contexts, as people will take them up in creative and contingent ways. Bringing this perspective to the context of an El/Civics classroom necessitated a close and prolonged examination of locally-specific identities and forms of agency.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Foucault, and Holland and colleagues, Wortham (2006) proposes a theoretical and methodological approach to identity that examines the circulating models of identity with which students and teachers engage in a local educational context. He argues

that, in classroom-based analyses of identity, it is necessary to bring academic learning and non-academic social processes in the classroom closer together. He focuses on how

> social identification and academic learning … can overlap and partly constitute each other [and] shows how subject matter, argument, evidence and academic learning sometimes intertwine with and come to depend upon social identification, power relations and interpersonal struggles in classrooms. (pp. 1–2)

Wortham (2006) insists that an analysis of identity in classroom contexts must include two dimensions. First, researchers must examine how categories on different *timescales* play a part in local constructions of knowledge and identity by analyzing "the cross-timescale resources [that] are available to processes of social identification" (p. 218). Drawing on the work of Lemke (2000), Wortham (2006) defines timescales as "the spatiotemporal envelope within which a process happens" (p. 4). Second, researchers must study the trajectories of learning and identification of individual students in the classroom over a prolonged amount of time in order to grasp how their specific learning and identities develop. As Wortham argues:

> Neither 'structure' nor 'agency' nor any other potentially relevant factor always plays a central role—or even the same role—in social identification. If 'practice' is to help explain processes like social identification more precisely, it must be understood to mean the configuration of resources from relevant timescales that come together to establish identification in a given case. (2006, p. 43)

Models of identity, according to Wortham (2006), are sociocultural phenomena that frame the interpretation of signs in the classroom, recur across events, and persist across time and space. Wortham sees these cultural frames as circulating so that "many competing models, categories and practices emerge and become recognizable, [as] they get replicated, transformed or discarded" (p. 38). When models of identity paint pictures of whole groups of people, they are described as *models of personhood*. In a more recent publication, Wortham and colleagues (2009) define models of personhood as "characterizations of the dispositions, typical behaviors and life prospects of a person or group" (p. 391). These models become resources for people "to make sense of others and themselves as they interpret signs of identity" (p. 391).

The analysis presented in this article takes into consideration the cross-timescale resources available to the teacher and students in the EL/Civics classroom. I examine what I call "enduring narratives of immigration," discursive remnants of previous periods of immigration that continue to bear on the educational experiences of adult immigrant students in the United States. I explore how these discourses interact with neoliberal discourses of choice, personal responsibility, and flexibility. In addition to these more widely-circulating discourses, students drew on local resources for social identification such as class-based texts and locally-produced cultural artifacts.

However, though Wortham's insights are crucial to my study, the analysis presented in this paper focuses less on the learning trajectories of *individual* students and more on the recurring models of identity vis-à-vis citizenship, immigration, and language learning, which EL/Civics students consistently drew upon to make meaning and negotiate identities in the classroom. Some of the questions that guided analysis were: What are the models of identity

and personhood that circulate in EL/Civics classrooms? How do these identity models relate to dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism about what is means to be an immigrant, a citizen, and English language learner? Wortham's insights help me examine identification as a process that is inextricably tied to learning—one that is interactionally-produced in classroom contexts and that draws on sociocultural resources across time and space. I pay particular attention to the ways in which widely-circulating models of identity interacted with local models of identity and how the curriculum was a resource for social identification for teacher and students.

The present study also draws on Holland and colleagues' concept of "spaces of authoring," a perspective grounded in Bakhtinian theory that locates agency not in the individual, but rather, in the dialogic relation between people and their social world:

> The world must be answered—authorship is not a choice—but the form of the answer is not predetermined. It may be nearly automatic…or it may be a matter of great variability and most significant to a single person's address. In either case, authorship is a matter of orchestration: of arranging the identifiable social discourses/practices that are one's resources…in order to craft a response in a time and place defined by others' standpoints in activity, that is in a social field conceived as the ground of responsiveness. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 272)

In the figured world of the EL/Civics classroom, students were able to draw on a variety of social, cultural, linguistic, and symbolic resources to develop their own *authorial stances* vis-a-vis neoliberalism, dominant language ideologies, and discourses of immigration. Students presented and represented themselves in multiple ways, thereby authoring and coauthoring identities in dialogical relationship with each other, the teacher, and EL/Civics curriculum. Baynham (2006), who also draws on the work of Holland et al. (1998), argues that this kind of analysis of classroom interactions

> moves from the notion of the authoritative teacher permissively creating space and opportunity for student agency, which is… typically implicit in current classroom discourse models, towards one where the classroom is a site of dynamic pushes and pulls, with teacher and student agendas robustly shaping interaction, claiming space. This creates a messier, but arguably a more dynamic, agentive and contingent classroom environment, a space of authoring…. (p. 38)

My ethnographic research of the EL/Civics classroom bore witness to such a messy, dynamic, contingent, and agentive space. Though clearly it was the teacher who set the framework for classroom discourse and participation, students were able to appropriate the curriculum and claim interactive space in order to relate class texts to their own lived experiences and offer alternative interpretations and counter-narratives.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the EL/Civics program at the Center for Immigrant Adult Education (CIAE) at a community college in Queens, NY four days a week for a total of 10 months. This "prolonged engagement in the field" allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of classroom and organizational norms and practices. According to

Maxwell (2005), "repeated observations and interviews, as well as the sustained presence of the researcher in the setting studied, can help rule out spurious associations and premature theories" (p. 110). Participant observation for this amount of time also enabled me to gain perspective on the power relations and dynamics of the educational processes at work in the program—particularly as it related to processes of identification and notions of "civics" and "agency" (Angrosino, 2006b; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

The focus on one program and one classroom afforded me the opportunity to engage more deeply and meaningfully in the vertical analysis of how the national EL/Civics policy gets taken up by local policy actors and how it plays out in the context of the classroom. As mentioned above, I spent four days a week at my research site. There were both daytime and evening EL/Civics classes offered at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels at CIAE. I had the opportunity to work with an intermediate level class that met four days per week. Prior to starting my fieldwork in September of 2008, I volunteered with their summer program for one day a week in order to establish rapport with the teacher I would be working with throughout the year. I continued to work with this teacher for the entire academic year, which consisted of three 14-16 week sessions of classes: Fall 2008 (Sep-Dec), Winter 2009 (Jan-Mar), and Spring 2009 (Apr-Jun).

I spent an average of 15-20 hours a week at my research site, accumulating about 400 hours of participation for the entire length of the study. I worked with the EL/Civics teacher to figure out what my role should be in the classroom. I made myself available as a teacher's assistant and volunteer so that I could become an active member of the classroom community; this facilitated relationship building with teacher and students. Classroom observations allowed me to examine the identities and social positionings of adult immigrant students as they were co-constructed and interactionally-achieved in particular classroom situations. Observations over the course of 10 months made it possible to identify social and cultural patterns in the figured world of the EL/Civics classroom.

I took down as many notes and jottings as I could during the observations themselves. However, I also developed full sets of field notes based on these notes/jottings immediately following each of the observations. In addition, I audio-recorded classroom discourse, interactions, and activities on a biweekly basis. Data analysis for this study was an iterative and recursive process "in which ideas [were] used to make sense of the data, and data [were] used to change [my] ideas" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed for recurrent patterns and themes on a continual basis. Data analysis pervaded all phases of the research and was both an inductive and deductive process.

Julia: The Teacher

The teacher of the class was a woman in her early forties who had been teaching in the EL/Civics program for the past seven years. Julia is originally from Brazil and immigrated to New York in 1990. She earned a degree in Economics from a university in Brazil and held a certificate in TESOL from a graduate school in New York City.

EL/Civics Students

The EL/Civics class I worked with throughout the year was made up of a core group of 17 students. Though there were about 20-22 students in the class at any given time, at various points throughout the year, students stopped coming or switched to another level of class. As a result, new students joined the class at irregular intervals. The following table provides demographic information on the core group of 17 students that consistently attended the class from September 2008 to June 2009, as well as 6 others who only attended one semester out of the three (Fall, Winter, and Spring).

Students who attended all three semesters			
Name	**Gender**	**Country of Origin**	**Age**
Abiba	Female	Afghanistan	Early 40s
Daniel	Male	Colombia	Late 20s
Ernesto	Male	Ecuador	Early 30s
Gabriela	Female	Colombia	Late 20s
Jing	Female	China	Late 60s
Juan	Male	El Salvador	Mid 40s
Julieta	Female	Mexico	Mid 40s
Lida	Female	Colombia	Late 20s
Maricruz	Female	Mexico	Late 20s
Marjan	Female	Iran	Late 40s
Alejandra	Female	Mexico	Early 20s
Rosa	Female	Ecuador	Mid 20s
Rosana	Female	Colombia	Early 50s
Sanjib	Male	Bangladesh	Late 30s
Selva	Female	Turkey	Early 50s
Wei	Male	China	Early 70s
Gladys	Female	Dominican Republic	Late 20s
Students who attended only one semester			
Pedro	Male	Ecuadaor	Early 20s
Sandra	Female	Colombia	Late 40s
Roberta	Female	Colombia	Late 60s
Lin	Female	China	Early 20s
Jung	Male	Korea	Mid 20s
Veronica	Female	Colombia	Early 30s

Table 1: EL/Civics Students Participating in Research Study

Researcher Positionality

It is also important to acknowledge my position as a Spanish-speaking, first generation immigrant, as it had an impact on how I participated in classroom interactions and with whom I was able to build rapport. My knowledge of Spanish facilitated relationship building with students from Latin America. I was able to speak in their native language and students felt comfortable talking to me about their lives in and out of the classroom. Though I befriended most students in the classroom through my participation in classroom activities, I

was able to develop more deep and meaningful relationships with those students who were not limited to English-language interactions with me. My own biography as an immigrant who was at one time undocumented but had "made it" by "seizing opportunities" and pursuing higher education, in many ways, represented commonly held ideas about the American Dream. My story was also used as a resource for social identification in the EL/Civics classroom. Thus, I was very much a part of the social world and phenomenon that I investigated, though my role in the classroom evolved throughout the fall, winter, and spring semesters.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLICY CONTEXT

A Brief History of the English Literacy and Civics Education Policy[1]

As previously mentioned, adult education efforts in the U.S. have included civics education and citizenship preparation classes for immigrants since the turn of the twentieth century. These initiatives were carried out mainly by social service and community-based organizations. However, in 1999, the federal government introduced a program that sought to ensure more systematic implementation of civics education for immigrants via formula grants to state departments of education. The English Literacy and Civics Education Program (EL/Civics) provided funding for demonstration grants to support projects that could develop exemplary models and effective practices for linking English language instruction with civics education. The call for proposals defined EL/Civics as "an education program that emphasizes the contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, civic participation, and U.S. history and government to help students acquire the skills and knowledge to become active and informed parents, workers, and community members" (as cited in Powrie, 2008, p. 157).

The broad and open nature of the guidelines put forth by the U.S. Department of Education has resulted in a variety of programmatic approaches and teaching methodologies based on differing ideologies about language, civics, and immigrant integration (Powrie, 2008). Burns and Roberts (2010) suggest that "language and language learning becomes indexed in the minds of political leaders, and many of the public, as national belongingness, although language fluency is clearly no sure mark of alignment to new country and new culture" (p. 412). Thus, programmatic and pedagogical approaches may position adult immigrants as not only learners of the English language, but also as learners of "American" history, institutions, and culture. In addition, there are always unintended consequences of adult literacy efforts, and, as I argue in this paper, dominant narratives and widely-circulating discourses, such as neoliberalism, are often taken up by local policy actors in contingent ways.

In theory, the EL/Civics program represented an important departure from the human capital paradigm that had undergirded much of adult literacy official policy in the US throughout the twentieth century. However, it is my contention that despite its aim to broaden then scope of English language teaching and learning to include notions of civic and political participation, widely-circulating neoliberal discourses of choice, individual responsibility, and flexibility found their way into the daily social and interactional life of the EL/Civics classroom.

[1] A longer version of this history can be found in López (2012).

Local Policy Implementation: Organizational and Structural Arrangements

National and local EL/Civics policy mandates provided both constraints on and opportunities for the agency of local actors. In order to receive state funding for their EL/Civics program, administrative staff at CIAE responded to a Request for Proposals issued by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). In 2008, thirty two million dollars were made available to fund adult literacy initiatives throughout the state of New York, and approximately $7.5 million of this money was allocated to EL/Civics programming. Given the broad nature of the federal EL/Civics mandate, it is critical to understand the state policy—as it is at this stage of the policy process that more specific requirements are put into place. CIAE received about $340,000 for their EL/Civics programming in 2007 and renewed their grant in 2009 for $420,000. As a result, there were certain structural arrangements at CIAE that were directly linked to the terms of the grants they received from the state:

- *Standardized testing:* Students were tested at the beginning of the year, mid-year, and end of the year. The test administered to students was the *Best Plus* oral proficiency assessment developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). The results of these tests must demonstrate sufficient "language gains" in order for the program to be eligible for renewal of funding.
- *The use of computers:* Speech lab and computer lab time were integral components of the EL/Civics program. Students used the computer lab and speech lab for half a class session on a weekly basis. The program encouraged teachers to incorporate the use of technology into their EL/Civics lesson plans.
- *Financial and healthy literacy components:* The RFP made specific references to banking and health care as "key American institutions" that students must learn how to navigate. In my interview with the Program Coordinator, she also mentioned "a big push for financial and health literacy" coming from the New York State Education Department. As a result, the summer session of the EL/Civics program had a specific focus on health literacy, and the program recruited an outside speaker to facilitate a workshop on financial literacy for all of their EL/Civics classes.
- *Emphasis on post-secondary education and job training:* According to state policy, the primary outcomes of EL/Civics programs must also include gains in the number of students who go on to pursue post-secondary education or job training. Thus, CIAE required EL/Civics teachers to incorporate college access workshops into their lesson planning and curriculum development. Program-wide job fairs were also coordinated for students in all of the literacy classes.
- *Provision of support services:* State policy required programs to have mechanisms in place for support services such as counseling and other forms of assistance—either through direct provision or referrals to outside agencies. CIAE is among the few adult literacy and education centers that have a certified social worker on staff. This social worker was available to all CIAE students for assistance with personal, academic, housing, and legal problems.
- *Community project components:* General involvement in community activities was a secondary outcome for EL/Civics grantees. CIAE addressed this outcome measure by requiring all EL/Civics instructors to incorporate field trips to New York City

museums, attractions, cultural events, and neighborhoods. Food drives and toy drives are often coordinated across programs, and a few EL/Civics students are usually chosen to solicit donations among their classmates. In addition, CIAE is part of a coalition of adult literacy organizations across New York City that coordinated rallies and demonstrations to protest cuts to adult literacy and adult education funding.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an in-depth analysis of the policy (en)actors outside of the classroom space, but it would be remiss not to acknowledge the larger structural factors that affected local policy implementation and, in many ways, helped usher in a neoliberal agenda. In this regard, a couple of things are worth noting. Firstly, all state-funded EL/Civics programs are largely evaluated using quantitative measures such as standardized testing, attendance rates, and percentages of students able to access post-secondary education and job training. The lack of qualitative analysis of these programs means that there is no systematic collection of data on how students use the knowledge/skills gained to participate in the civic, social, and political life of their communities. In addition, what the state calls *community project components*, a category that encompasses the more civics-oriented aspects of a program, is considered a secondary outcome measure. This emphasis on secondary education and job training could send the message that ultimately, developing human capital is valued more than efforts to engage in more civics-related activities. The state RFP also makes references to banking and health care as key institutions that students must learn to navigate through their participation in EL/Civics classes and through mandatory components such as financial literacy and health literacy workshops. The assumption is that these key institutions are functioning equally for all populations and that students must simply become literate and knowledgeable as individuals in order to gain access to them. However, these state grant requirements are far from prescriptive, and grantees still have much leeway on how they decide to approach both the teaching of English and Civics.

CIAE's own EL/Civics curriculum was described as follows:

> *The curriculum covers a broad range of topics related to improving students' listening and speaking skills in their daily lives, obtaining citizenship skills, increasing involvement in community activities, and identifying and achieving personal goals. While not exclusively citizenship preparation classes, civics classes introduce students to topics in local and U.S. history and government that will help them better advocate for themselves and their families in their new community.*

Individual EL/Civics teachers were fully aware of grant requirements, and there were certain program-wide activities such as standardized testing, field trips, workshops, and job fairs, but they were not given a prescribed curriculum and could take their own personalized approach to the teaching of EL/Civics in their individual classrooms. What this meant was that although there were some general guidelines about what constituted teaching English through civics, there was not much specificity of what it should look like at the level of classroom practice. According to Howard and Patton (2006), "a civics education curriculum that lacks an explicit and firm political commitment to an unambiguous vision of democratic citizenship will, in the end, be shaped by dominant political, ideological, and cultural trends" (p. 455). As my analysis of classroom discourse will illuminate, this lack of a coherent and explicit framework for what civics education should look like was a possible factor in shaping the EL/Civics classroom as a neoliberal space.

FINDINGS I

Enduring Narratives of Immigration and Neoliberal Discourses of Choice, Responsibility, and Flexibility

Legacies of bygone eras of immigration and institutionalized practices of immigrant assimilation have left enduring traces in the education of adult immigrants in the United States. I argue that the cultural and discursive remnants of previous periods of immigration continue to bear upon the educational experiences of adult immigrant students in EL/Civics classrooms. These, what I call *enduring narratives of immigration,* interact in significant ways with widely-circulating neoliberal discourses of choice, individual responsibility, and flexibility vis-à-vis the global labor market. Students used these narratives to invest in the language learning process and participate in classroom activities. Discourses such as the American Dream and the Opportunity Narrative interacted with English language ideologies and neoliberal notions of what it meant to be a "good language learner." Enduring narratives of immigration and neoliberal discourses of choice, responsibility, and flexibility circulated in the figured world of the EL/Civics classroom and became important resources for negotiating identities vis-à-vis language, civics, citizenship, and immigration.

English, the Opportunity Narrative, and the Neoliberal American Dream

"Is the reason why we come here…for more opportunity…for a better life for our families."
(Gladys, Field notes, 10/9/08)

My mother immigrated first…I was only a little girl when she left Ecuador. I missed her a lot but my father always told me that she went to the United States to find more opportunities. It was a huge sacrifice for the family… (Rosa, Interview, 12/9/2008)

This vision of the United States as a land of boundless "opportunity" is one that has characterized the immigrant experience for over a century. It is what is known in the research on immigration as the Opportunity Narrative and has been well documented in the literature (Bartlett, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Immigrants use this narrative as a resource for making decisions and making sense of their experiences in the United States. When this discourse interacts with neoliberal discourses of choice and individual responsibility, the result is a particular portrayal of what it means to be a "good immigrant" and "good language learner." Learning English becomes a matter of seizing opportunities and taking responsibility for your own individual progress and success. It is understood that "sacrifices" must be made in order to access the American Dream. Neoliberalism has reworked the notions of the American Dream through its emphasis on monetary success, personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and flexibility. The Neoliberal American Dream is not concerned with questions of cultural assimilation, social integration, or civic participation, as the public sphere and collective action are not part of the neoliberal equation for personal success and accumulation of wealth. According to Lipman (2011), neoliberalism "redefines democracy as choice in the marketplace and freedom as personal freedom to consume" (p. 10). These discourses figured prominently in the classroom practices and interactions of the EL/Civics classroom at CIAE.

The EL/Civics teacher drew on enduring narratives of immigration to frame curricular activities around the teaching of English and goal setting. As an opening activity for the fall semester, Julia wanted the students to think about their own immigration journeys in connection to their goals of learning English. She asked me if it was ok to share my own story with the class as she planned to do the same. I agreed, and we both created one-page narratives about our immigration experiences. In her story, Julia related how difficult it was for her to find work in the United States and to get used to a new culture and language. She concluded her story by talking about her persistence and determination to go to school and finally achieve her goal of becoming a teacher. In my own narrative, I discussed how my family immigrated (via the Rio Grande) to Rhode Island from Guatemala in the early 1980s and then later went on to secure a scholarship that would fund both my Master's and doctoral degrees. It is interesting to note how I positioned myself in this narrative: as an undocumented immigrant, as someone from a humble upbringing, as a person who "worked hard" in school and was able to access higher education, as a researcher, and as a person who was trying to help other immigrant families. [2]

The narratives were well received by the students, with many of the students asking follow-up questions about our respective experiences. Much of the discussion revolved around education and the opportunities it offered immigrants in the United States. We (and I say "we" because I was very much a part of this discussion) seemed to be drawing on widely-circulating models of immigrant identity that characterized immigrants as working hard to overcome the struggles of life in the U.S. and using education as a means to do so. In many ways, this set the tone for many ensuing discussions on being an immigrant and learning the dominant language. Neoliberalism's narrow conception of human agency also characterized many of these discussions, as students emphasized not only the need to work hard, but to develop the linguistic skills needed to start their own businesses, become entrepreneurs, buy nice things, and participate in the global economy—preferably as flexible, transnational workers.

Shortly after Julia and I presented our immigration narratives to the class, Juan wrote about his own journey from El Salvador to the United States and described a trying and harrowing experience:

> I cross Mexico by Tecun Uman. I don't want to remember that experience because that journey was too hard. It took me 30 day to arrive to Matamoros. That day I cross the border with the U.S. by Rio Grande. Thanks God I am writing this story because I don't know how to swim and the river is deep.

Later on in the journal entry, he describes his reasons for taking English classes at CIAE:

> Now I am working in a restaurant as a cook. My goal is to have my own business. Also, I will study a short course like paralegal studies. That's why I am studing [sic] English now.

In another student's journal entry, Daniel describes how difficult it was for him to leave his home country of Colombia when his mother—who had been living in New York for 10 years—petitioned for him to be reunited with her. He admits that he did not necessarily want to immigrate, but that he understood "the sacrifices" his mother had made for him:

[2] See Lopéz (2012) for further analysis as well as the text of these narratives.

> Unfortunately, by major forces of destiny I had separated from my mother…this way she looked for better opportunities for me, but the last one was definitive. It is that everybody call "The American Dream."

In addition to widely circulating discourses of the opportunity, students drew on local resources such as the EL/Civics curriculum and class-based texts to negotiate their identities as immigrants and language learners. Many of the available books that students read for their biweekly book circle discussions were part of a series of books called "Hopes and Dreams" by Tana Reiff (1989). According to the author's website, these books feature "true-to-life characters [who] meet the challenge of a new life and new land in these sensitive explorations of the immigrant experience" (Reiff, n.d., para 1). Julia used literature or book circles, which were classroom-based student reading and discussion groups, as a way to encourage students to practice reading regularly at home and to practice listening and speaking skills in the classroom through oral presentations to their fellow classmates. Analysis of field notes and audio-recorded data reveals many examples of book circle discussions in which students draw on the linguistic and cultural resources of these ESL readers and position themselves in relation to the immigrant narratives depicted in the texts. The fictionalized accounts of immigration resonated with the majority of the students in the class, as they found that these narratives accurately captured the social, linguistic, and cultural challenges they faced in New York City.

In addition to these readers, the students also had access to non-fiction books on important figures in U.S. history. The following data excerpt features Marjan—a female student from Iran— discussing a book on Booker T. Washington. During this book circle activity, she recounted a brief history of Booker T. Washington's life to the other three students participating in the literature circle. She described Booker T. Washington as someone who had had a "very difficult life and situation as a slave," who becomes a free man, and who "works very hard" to pursue an education despite trying circumstances.

> He was 12 years old when he became free. He doesn't have money and he can't go to school, he has to working for his family. He walked 500 miles to go to school. I like this story…this book….because he was important in American history. He have dream…he works hard because he has dream…I have dream…maybe I can…my dream is English. My dream is speak English and work for study…and I like this story because it is very nice and he works very hard. (Field notes, 11/6/08)

Thus, part of the message students and teacher co-constructed in this figured world was that achieving your goals and dreams was a matter of believing in yourself and having a strong work ethic. This discourse had implications for the social and cultural meanings of learning English. Being a "good student/language learner" meant working hard both in and out of the classroom, and becoming a proficient user of English necessitated a strong belief in the individual self. For one of the computer lab sessions, Julia chose the song "I believe I can fly" by R. Kelly (See Appendix 1 for complete song lyrics). She played the song two times for students to listen to and asked students what they thought the song meant and how it related to their discussion on goal setting during the previous class.

[Song Chorus]

I believe I can fly
I believe I can touch the sky
I think about it every night and day
Spread my wings and fly away
I believe I can soar
I see me running through that open door
I believe I can fly
I believe I can fly
Oh I believe I can fly[3]
(Kelly, 1996)

Julia: Who can tell me what the meaning of "I believe I can fly " is?
Julieta: I believe I can do anything!
Julia: Congratulations! Yes! That is the meaning of it! So what were we talking about yesterday?
Many students at once: Goals.
Julia: Yes, goals. So it's about believing in yourself. You believe that you can do anything.

(Field Notes, 9/23/08)

In the discussion that ensued, students discussed the intentional choices that they made every day to come to class and study English. They talked about how difficult it was to attend to work and family responsibilities in addition to studying English, but that ultimately it was their responsibility to learn the dominant language in order to reach their goals of getting better jobs and achieving personal economic success. These kinds of discussions were a recurrent theme throughout the year and were often punctuated by exhortations to assume responsibility if life in New York (including learning and using English) was more trying than initially expected. Both teacher and students encouraged each other "not to complain so much" about how hard life in the U.S. was for immigrants and instead to focus on what they could do as individuals to learn English and better their lives.

The EL/Civics classroom was indeed a space of competing discourses and models of identity, as students positioned themselves in varying ways vis-à-vis the civics curriculum—oftentimes taking up neoliberal ideas about the value of English. At the beginning of the winter session of classes, one of the civics-related activities that all EL/Civics teachers implemented was a letter writing campaign to newly-elected President Obama to express students' support of increasing federal funding for adult literacy programs. Within the context of this lesson, Julia again posed the question about the opportunities that learning English would afford them:

Julia: The idea is that if you learn English…what's gonna happen to you?
Alejandra: You have more ehhh…opportunities…
Juan: That's the only thing…you know, you have more opportunities….better job…
Julia: You have better opportunities in your job…ok…
Maricruz: You have two life…
Julia: Ok, you have two lives…OK, if you get a better job, what's gonna happen to

[3] Complete song lyrics can be found here: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/rkelly/ibelieveicanfly.html

you…
Rosana: More money!
Maricruz: Yes, more money! [Other students nod in agreement.]
Juan: Maybe you're gonna have more money and work less.
Julia: Ok, more money…so what are you going to do with that money? Buy a house?
Rosana: Travel!
Maricruz: Take a vacation!
Julia: Travel…take a vacation…So this whole thing is about learning English, right? If you learn English, a lot of doors will open for you…in the future. Right?

(Field Notes, 1/15/09)

Other students chimed in with material things they might purchase with more money such as a new house, new car, and some even joked that they might buy the teacher some expensive jewelry. Thus, a neoliberal concern with making money and participating in leisure and consumption effectively overshadowed the broader aims of the civics lesson, which sought to engage students in advocacy efforts and making demands on the state. This particular discussion was then cut short as the teacher felt the need to move on to the grammatical and stylistic elements of a formal letter—missing out on the opportunity to further explore students' roles as advocates and having a collective voice in the public and political sphere.

Students also drew on neoliberal notions of entrepreneurship and flexibility as they positioned themselves in relation to English and a neoliberal agenda characterized by "the imperative to create hierarchically conditioned, globally oriented state subjects – i.e. individuals oriented to excel in ever transforming situations of global competition, either as workers, managers or entrepreneurs" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 388). In an interview, Daniel expands upon his personal goals for learning English:

> Quiero ser una persona independiente, quiero…crear mi propio negocio… incluso ahora tengo mis ojos en una oportunidad, lo que es de aprovechar …entonces cuando yo reciba un buen capital yo puedo, aparte de estar trabando acá y beneficiarme a mi mismo y, puedo también hacer otro tipo de inversiones…en el futuro yo quiero llegar a eso…algo que me de mas flexibilidad…tener un paquete de inversiones y que eso sea mi solvencia económica para el futuro. (Interview, 2/8/09)
>
> [I want to be an independent person, I want to…start my own business…in fact, right now I have my eyes on an opportunity, which I should take advantage of…and so when I gain a good amount of capital, I can, in addition to working here and benefitting myself, I can make other kinds of investments…because in the future I want to get there…something that gives me more flexibility…to have a set of investments on which I can become economically solvent for the future.]

Many students were unemployed and underemployed, while others held jobs in the service industry making minimum wages. They saw English as a way to not simply get a better paying job, but also to as a way to achieve economic independence. The goal to start your

own business and become economically independent was a common theme, as other students expressed similar desires:

> Es súper mas fácil visualizarlo que en Ecuador….poner mi compañía se me hace mas fácil aquí que allá. (Ernesto, Interview, 3/28/09)
>
> [It's a lot easier to visualize it here than in Ecuador…to start my own business, it would be a lot easier here than there.]
>
> Mi plan es posiblemente empezar un pequeño negocio con my esposo in tal vez 2 o 3 años. Ahora estamos hacienda un análisis del mercado en varios locales para ver donde podemos abrir un "booth" de joyería. (Julieta, Interview, 12/09/08)
>
> [My plan is to possibly start a small business with my husband in maybe 2 or 3 years. We are currently doing a sort of study of the market in various locations to see where it would make sense to open a jewelry booth.]

In most of my interviews with students, they also expressed the desire to learn English for competitive advantage in the transnational market and made specific references to being "marketable" both in the US and their home countries. They described a desire for mobility across borders and in many ways expressed a desire for a "flexible citizenship" that could afford them both the economic and symbolic capital needed to attain it (Ong, 1999).

As the data demonstrate, classroom actors positioned themselves vis-à-vis enduring narratives of immigration and neoliberal discourses of choice, responsibility, and flexibility as hardworking individuals who were investing in English in order to pursue their own renditions of the (neoliberal) American Dream and attain a more "flexible citizenship." Within these discourses, students' struggles to learn English and to find a space and place in the United States (and more specifically New York City) were connected to the struggles of immigrant generations past and to their potential economic and individual success in the future. Working hard, believing in oneself, taking advantage of "opportunities," and working toward economic independence and transnational flexibility were discursive themes that at times obfuscated the civics-oriented aspects of the curriculum and undermined the potential to engage in more collective and action-oriented activities. Narrow conceptions of civic participation emerge in these interactional moments, as neoliberalism redefined citizenships "as the civic duty of individuals to reduce their burden on society and build up their own human capital-to be "entrepreneurs" of themselves" (Ong, 1996, p. 739)

FINDINGS II

Interrogating Neoliberal Narratives in Interactional Spaces of Authoring

As elaborated above, the EL/Civics classroom was a figured world where enduring narratives of immigration and neoliberal discourses of choice and individual responsibility shaped the ways in which students negotiated identities. However, this was also a social world characterized by contradictory and competing discourses and spaces in which immigrant students challenged dominant narratives and assumed authorial stances, positioning themselves and each other in multiple and unpredictable ways. In the following

section, I demonstrate how students appropriated the curriculum through improvisational moves to make meaning and position themselves as knowledgeable and agentive learners. In these spaces of authoring, leaners drew on their lived experiences in New York City to challenge and interrogate neoliberal narratives of opportunity, personal responsibility, and the value of English as more than just linguistic capital for the labor market. Students questioned the legitimacy of the American Dream and the myth of meritocracy, as they point out that opportunities in the U.S. are, in fact, limited and immigrants face structural barriers to participation. In classroom activities, students appropriated the curriculum and brought up issues of racism, linguistic discrimination, and immigration status that affected their social and linguistic exchanges outside of the classroom.

On the one hand, immigrant students encounter prevailing discourses and ideologies that value equality and self-determination, and, on the other hand, they often face structural barriers and discriminatory practices that conflict with these values. Thus, immigrants bring their lived experiences—rich social, cultural, cognitive, and intellectual resources—to the educational programs in which they participate, and these experiences figure prominently in the figured world of the EL/Civics classroom. Students drew on these lived experiences to question and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about working hard, learning English, and achieving success in the United States. They also effectively disrupted neoliberal notions of personal responsibility by emphasizing the role of the state in providing educational and economic resources for immigrants. This finding is well illustrated by student discourse and practices around a classroom event at the outset of the academic year, the "Time Capsule Activity."

The Time Capsule Activity required students to get into small groups and to collectively come up with a list of items that they would put into a time capsule. Their task was to think of items that "represent life in America today." Julia introduced the time capsule activity to the class in the following way:

> Do you know what this is? Time Capsule. Do you know what a time capsule is? So we will get into groups of 5. You will have a time capsule. Time capsule in your imagination…You need to put in that time capsule, things you want to keep as a…to show as a historic…so let's say if the world ended tomorrow, the time capsule would be kept and let's say in a thousand years from now, someone finds that and they can figure out important things from your, from America. I'm going to give you a list of things.
> (Field notes and audio-recorded data, 9/24/08)

She then went over a list of items that might be included in such a time capsule: a movie ticket, a football helmet, a pair of jeans, a test tube, a telephone directory of New York, etc. Students were divided into groups of four and asked to discuss what items they would want to put in the time capsule and come up with one list collectively. I sat with one of the groups that included Rosana, Jing, Sanjib, and Alejandra. The following is an excerpt of the discussion that ensued in this small group.

Rosana: We need a good law for immigrants.
Rosana: Ok, I need…
Jing: We need…
Rosana: Yes, we need a good law for immigrants.
Jing: We need a good new law.

Dina: Why do we need a good law for immigrants?
Alejandra: For the travel, for be legal.
Jing: Yes, a new law for immigration.
Dina: Great, so you will put a new law for immigration in the box.
(Field notes and audio-recorded data, 9/24/08)

As is illustrated in the above excerpt, students interpreted the task in a remarkably interesting way. They were asked to think of things that are symbolic of America and that would fit into a time capsule, but instead they used it as an opportunity to have a discussion about the social and political conditions for immigrants in the US and what was needed to improve it. Rosana started the discussion by proposing that what was needed was "a new law for immigrants." What is also worth noting is that students took on a collective voice during this activity, assumed a pan-ethnic immigrant identity, and used this subject positioning to make demands on the state—in this case to legislate the legalization of all immigrants. As the rest of the transcript shows, students continued their work on this task in a similar vein, brainstorming ways that the government could provide educational and economic resources and opportunities for immigrants.

Dina: So what is something else you might put in the box?
Sanjib: How the president help? We need peace. No more war.
Dina: Ok, a law for peace.
Jing: New president change the law.
Rosana: So, ok. Number one. Law for immigrants. Number 2. No more war.
Sanjib: And a law for no more discrimination.
Rosana: Reason? Love and peace.
Dina: Great. So now you have two laws in the box. What other things or items do you want in the time capsule?
Alejandra: Maybe a T.V.
Jing: This for the future?
Dina: Yes, it's for when people in the future open the time capsule and see things that represent the United States in 2008.
Jing: We need a book. We think maybe the government gives free books. Maybe cheap books.
Rosana: We need books for education.
Alejandra: Laptop computer.
Jing: Oh yes, we need computer, too.
Rosana: Reason? (Looking at the next question in the worksheet they must fill out)
Jing: We need! Because technology is up…and we need always we need a computer in life…whatever…we need a computer…please!
Rosana: Ok, everyone need? Or only one in the box?
Dina: I think Jing says everyone needs, right?
Jing: Yes!
Alejandra: Yes, technology is up.
Sanjib: Yes, and we need more government jobs. Right now there is no jobs. We need better government regulations for better jobs.
Dina: Yes, so you think right now the economic conditions are bad. What can you put in the box that will represent this?
Jing: The government job is for citizen. If you not citizen, you cannot take

government job.

(Field notes and audio-recorded data, 9/24/08)

Students challenged the Opportunity Narrative and the notion that all it takes is individual effort to succeed in the United States. The students pointed to the social, economic and political constraints that exist for immigrants in the United States—particularly for undocumented immigrants—and highlighted the role of the government in addressing these disparities. The students' appropriation of this activity did not conform to the guidelines set forth by the teacher, and in fact, as Julia walked around conferencing with each group, she commented that the group seemed to be off-task given the list that they had generated. "I'm not sure they understood the instructions," she said to me as she passed us by.

As it was nearing the end of the class session, Julia asked all the groups to wrap up and told everyone that we would finish up the following Monday. I walked up to Rosana and asked why she had brought up the idea for including a "good law for immigrants" in the time capsule activity. She told me in Spanish that she thought "it's the most important thing." She went on to say, "Hay tanta gente aqui sin papeles…sin poder avanzar, entonces necesitamos que las leyes cambien, no?" [There are so many people here without papers…who are not able to advance…so we need for the laws to change, no?] This example of classroom discourse and interaction highlights students' agentive and improvisational moves that challenged neoliberal tropes and interrogated their positionality in US society.

Though Julia did not take an explicitly critical or Freirean approach to the EL/Civics curriculum, students appropriated the curriculum in creative ways that questioned power relations in the U.S.—possibly reflecting a desire to engage in problem-posing education. According to Freire (1970),

> In problem-posing education, people develop their power to *perceive critically* the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a *reality in process*, in transformation. (p. 83, italics mine)

The 2008 elections were a political and historical backdrop during the first semester of classes, and Julia used the presidential campaigns as a resource for lesson planning and classroom activities. The objectives of these lessons were to educate students about U.S. democracy and political processes, a critical component of the EL/Civics policy and curriculum. Julia taught students about Republican and Democratic parties, the voting system, and the Electoral College. She also provided students with opportunities to share their thoughts and opinions about the presidential elections. It was often during these instructional moments that students steered the lessons in creative and unpredictable ways. The conversations and dialogues that emerged went beyond the stated goals of the lesson, as students drew on their lived experiences in New York City to think critically about their positionality as language learners and immigrants. Though not engaging in a purposeful Freirean approach per se, during these interactions, students became effective problem-posers, as they brought up issues of racism, linguistic discrimination, immigration status, and critiques of US foreign policy to question the extent to which immigrants could meaningfully participate in the US political process:

> "I think Obama [should] win because too much racism and discrimination for immigrants. We need to change. "
> Rosa, in response to the question *"Who do you think should win the presidential election?"*
> Other students chimed in and provided examples of being discriminated against in stores and government offices. (Field notes, 10/30/08)

> Here you need papers. No papers, no rights. They deporting you. (Juan, Field notes, 10/30/08)

> Here, in this country, all the money for war…for killing…we need more money for education. (Selva, Field notes, 11/3/08)

It was during these moments of improvisational problem-posing that differences in positionality among students surfaced and the notion of unfettered opportunity and neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility for success was disrupted. Students were well aware of how they were differentially racialized in the United States, and the issue of having or not having "papers" became a recurring theme throughout the academic year. In one of these interactions, Juan and Maricruz, who were both undocumented, talked about the differences between European immigrants who come "with papers" and undocumented Latin American immigrants. Maricruz had discussed an incident in which she had felt discriminated against by a Russian student in one of her other ESL classes. Juan responded in the following way:

> I think what happen is that most of the Spanish people come here without papers…and all the people…person from Europe, from the country the other side…they come with papers…This is why they racist because they come with papers, everybody come legally… (Field notes, 11/3/08)

In the weeks leading up to the presidential election, it had become clear that most of the students were excited about the possibility of Obama winning the election. Rosa's comments after class one day captured the sentiments of the majority of her classmates: "Obama say he want change and maybe we see good change…for immigrants. Verdad? [Right?] That we hope!" It was no surprise to me then how engaged students were in class discussions the day following Barack Obama election as President of the United States. After an activity that required students to use information from newspaper articles to fill out a worksheet on the results of the presidential election (such as the number of popular votes each candidate received versus the number of electoral votes), Julia facilitated a more open-ended dialogue about the election outcome:

Julia: Any other thoughts that you'd like to add about this election? Anything else?
Selva: More opportunities….
Julia: for what?
Selva: for immigrants…
Julia: Ok, more opportunities for immigrants…
Marjan: Visa for family immigrants…
Julia: Ok, for families…but what do you mean by more opportunities for immigrants…tell me Selva…
Selva: More jobs?

Julia: More jobs? But right now there's no jobs for anyone…
Maricruz: In the first language in the United States is Spanish, teacher.
The class erupts into laughter.
Gladys: No, never….that never….they never have to change
Juan: That's impossible…
Maricruz: Now United States has lot of people Spanish…
Julia: You know the United States doesn't have an official language…
But if they change to Spanish, I have no job?
Abiba: What about me…I don't speak Spanish.
Maricruz: Spanish very easy.
Julieta: Ay Maricruz!
Julia: (*Wanting to move on*) Ok, anything else? That's it right?
Maricruz: Stop discrimination…
Juan: Uh huh, the racism…
Maricruz: stop racism…better economy…more jobs…
Julia: Better economy, more jobs…and no more racism
Juan: (*reading from his worksheet*) Stop the deportation….
Julia: Stop the deportation of immigrants? Good luck on that one…(laughs a bit)
Juan: Approve the 245i Law….dos cuarenta y cinco
Julia: What is that?
Juan: That is the law that says the immigrants can make residence without have to go out of this country.
Julia: Why, because now you have to go out?
Juan: You have to go out if you come illegally to this country…if you come legally with visa, you can make without go out. Now and they put the law if you stay illegally for one year then you have stay illegally, then you have to stay ten years in your country.
Julia: Really?
Juan: If they approve 245i law, everybody can make residence…and not go out…doesn't matter come here legal or illegal, whatever.
Julia: So wait, if you came into the Unites States illegally, through Mexico…you have to go back to your country to get your papers.
Juan: Exactly, or you can't do anything…for example I have a nephew who is marry with one citizen for 2 or 3 years, and they have small daughter like one year….and he cannot do anything...he's working with his authorization to work only because he cannot do anything because if he apply…have to go back to my country and have to stay 10 years…
Julia: alright that's a good idea.
Selva: I would like... finish war…all war…the U.S. spend too much time in war other countries.
Julia: Yes, to end the war….
Maricruz: Yes, a long time now war…for 5 years…

(Field notes and audio-recorded discourse, 11/5/08)

There are a number of things to unpack in this data excerpt. First, Selva opened the discussion by connecting the election results to the potential implications for immigrants in the United States. "More opportunities for immigrants," she said. Her comment prompted Marjan to volunteer her opinion on the specific changes (more visas for immigrant families)

she envisioned as a result of the election. Immigration status again emerges as a primary concern. Second, Maricruz used humor to challenge dominant ideologies about language when she jokingly commented that Spanish should be "the first language in the United States." Though Julia did not choose to engage with Maricruz's joke in a more in depth way, it is nevertheless an illustrative moment in the interaction, as Maricruz questioned the value of English in a country with a high Latino and Latin American population. Further on in the discussion, Maricruz brought up the issue of racism, which prompted Juan to talk about deportation and legislation that was under consideration in Congress. Here, Juan assumed the role of educator in the discussion, as Julia didn't know about law 245i. He proceeded to share his knowledge with the class on the law, which he described as allowing undocumented immigrants to adjust their status without leaving the country. Juan also provided a very personal example (his nephew's case) to illustrate the implications of the law. Finally, Selva ended by critiquing the U.S. government's investment in war. We see here how students claimed interactive space in the EL/Civics classroom and used it to interrogate systems of power and inequality in the United States. These classroom interactions also highlight ways in which immigrant education and access to English is framed around broader issues of civics and political participation. These counter-hegemonic perspectives stood in contrast to neoliberal narratives position English as way for individuals to become marketable, mobile, and flexible workers. This analysis helps reveal "the ideological and political possibilities that are foreclosed when neoliberal hegemony is theorized as seamless and complete, rather than partial and vulnerable to disruption" (Morgen & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 219).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article has demonstrated how neoliberal discourses and enduring narratives of immigration were taken up in the context of an English Literacy and Civics Education program for adult immigrants. Students drew on a variety of available cultural resources to position themselves as language learners and immigrants. These resources included widely-circulating neoliberal discourses of choice and individual responsibility, local resources such as class texts that depicted fictionalized accounts of the immigrant experience, and enduring narratives of immigration such as the American Dream. What this meant at the interactional level of classroom life was that conversations about civic and political participation vis-à-vis the learning of English were often framed as the individual responsibility of students. It was incumbent upon each student to work hard to learn English and take initiative to access economic mobility and political rights. Thus, integrating into American society was less a matter of assimilating into a dominant cultural norm, but rather "creating oneself as a neoliberal subject" and "entrepreneur of the self" (Ullman, 2012, p. 467).

Findings shed light on the reproductive powers of neoliberal discourses, while also taking into account the spaces for agency and self-authoring. Students drew on their own lived experiences to contest neoliberal discourses, which assume that all subjects are equally positioned to make rational and successful choices in an even political and economic landscape. Though not prompted by the teacher or curriculum, students claimed interactional space in the classroom and brought up issues of racism, linguistic discrimination, and immigration status that challenged the notion that all they needed to do was work hard to learn English, and the American Dream would be within arm's reach. These findings make evident that "neoliberalism is not an enduring, inescapable hegemony"

and that there is, in fact, hope for critical interventions within educational spaces (Chun, 2009, p. 112).

EL/Civics programs—with their emphasis on English for participation in the broader realm of civic, social, and political life—have the potential to offer a powerful alternative to the neoliberal model of adult English language education. How can we begin to rethink programmatic and curricular EL/Civics approaches in order to effectively draw on students' lived experiences and resist the essentializing narratives of neoliberalism? A partial response to this question might begin by looking to the work of Howard and Patton (2006) who argue that "civics educators and advocates of civics education must be explicit about the political values driving their initiatives, lest these programs be inadvertently absorbed into larger political discourses of the day, such as neoliberalism" (p. 469). Such values might include a vision of a radical democracy in which all can meaningfully participate and in which a market ideology does not reign supreme. An EL/Civics approach that is committed to this kind of vision would provide opportunities for students to deconstruct and analyze their own positioning within the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the U.S. EL/Civics teachers might consider taking a problem-posing approach that helps connect students' personal problems with larger social and political and systemic issues. In addition, such an approach would necessitate tackling the neoliberal model head-on by problematizing neoliberal discourses of choice, opportunity, and flexibility as well as dominant narratives such as the American Dream. As Chun (2009) notes, "pedagogical interventions through critical interrogations of neoliberal discourses can open up spaces for alternative subject positions in contesting ideologies of neoliberalism" (p. 119).

At a programmatic level, EL/Civics courses could make stronger connections with collective action and immigrants' rights movements outside of the classroom. The prevailing assumption is that key American institutions are functioning equally for all populations and that students must simply become literate and knowledgeable as individuals in order to gain access to them. An EL/Civics program that goes against the neoliberal model would challenge this assumption by acknowledging that state institutions have historically not functioned equally for everyone based on race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, and language. It would also provide opportunities for students to engage in collective action to hold these institutions accountable. Thus, forming partnerships with local grassroots organizing groups and advocacy organizations would be an important component of the program. At the level of state policy, this would mean making civics and community outcomes—rather than post-secondary education and job training outcomes—the primary measures by which EL/Civics programs are evaluated. Qualitative data collection and analysis of these outcomes would also allow programs to learn from each other and would provide fodder for critical dialogue on what it means to link the teaching of English with civics education. In addition, removing the financial literacy requirement for local programs would allow program coordinators to focus their efforts on civics-related goals. Given the diversity of contexts in which EL/Civics programs are implemented, a prescriptive, one-size fits all model is not the ideal, but program planners and educators might consider a critical and participatory approach that is clear about its commitment to civics education and resistance to a neoliberal agenda. Inclusive dialogue among policymakers, educators, and immigrant language learners is needed in order to critically examine taken for granted assumptions about English language learning, immigrant integration, citizenship, and civic participation. Within such a space, teachers and students can figure a world in which English

is not simply an economic commodity, but a tool for transformative collective action and meaningful civic participation.

REFERENCES

Angrosino, M. V. (2006). *Doing cultural anthropology: Projects for ethnographic data collection*. Longrove, IL: Waveland Press.

Ayers, D. F., & Carlone, D. (2007). Manifestations of neoliberal discourses within a local job-training program. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *26*(4), 461–479.

Ball, M. J. (2009). Learning, labour and employability. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *41*(1), 39–52.

Bansel, P. (2007). Subjects of choice and lifelong learning. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *20*(3), 283–300.

Bartlett, L. (2007). Bilingual literacies, social identification, and educational trajectories. *Linguistics in Education, 18*(3-4,) 215-231.

Baynham, M. (2006). Agency and contingency in the language learning of refugees and asylum seekers. *Linguistics and Education, 17,* 1, 24-39.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power.* Cambridge, U.K.: Harvard University Press.

Burns, A, & Roberts, C. (2010). Migration and adult language learning: Global flows and local transpositions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44 (3), 409-419.

Chun, C. W. (2009). Contesting neoliberal discourses in EAP: Critical praxis in an IEP classroom. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *8*(2), 111–120.

Flores, N. (2013). The unexamined relationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism: A cautionary tale. *TESOL Quarterly*, *47*(3), 500–520.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum International Publishing.

Gibb, T. L. (2008). Bridging Canadian adult second language education and essential skills policies: Approach with caution. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *58*(4), 318–334.

Gledhill, J. (2004) Neoliberalism. In D. Nugent & J. Vincent (Eds.), *A companion to the anthropology of politics* (pp. 332–348). Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.

Gouthro, P. A. (2009). Neoliberalism, lifelong learning, and the homeplace: problematizing the boundaries of "public" and "private" to explore women's learning experiences. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *31*(2), 157–172. doi:10.1080/01580370902927733

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Hantzopoulos, M., & Shirazi, R. (2014). Securing the State through the Production of "Global" Citizens: analyzing neo-liberal educational reforms in Jordan and the USA. *Policy Futures in Education*, *12*(3), 370–386.

Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism* (1st ed.). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Holland, D., Lachiocotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Howard, C. & Patton, S. (2006) Valuing civics: Political commitment and the new civics education in Australia. *Canadian Journal of Education, 29*(2), 454-475.

Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1998). Educational aspirations among minority youth. *American Journal of Education, 106,* 349-384.

Kelly, R. (1996). I believe I can fly. On *Space Jam (soundtrack)*. New York: Warner Sunset/Atlantic Records.

Kjaer, P. & Pedersen, O. K. (2001). Translating liberalization: Neoliberalism in the Danish negotiated economy. In J. L. Campbell & O.K. Pederson (Eds.), *Neoliberalism and institutional analysis* (pp. 219–248). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kopecký, D. (2011). Foucault, governmentality, neoliberalism and adult education - Perspective on the normalization of social risks. *Journal of Pedagogy / Pedagogický Casopis*, *2*(2), 246–262.

Lemke, J. L. (2000). Across the scales of time: Artifacts, activities, and meanings in ecosocial systems. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 7(*4), 273-290.

Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York: Routledge.

López, D. (2012). Immigrant identities in transnational contexts: The figured world of a New York City English Literacy and Civics Education classroom. In D. Urias (Ed.), *The immigration & education nexus: A focus on the context & consequences of schooling* (pp.189-209). Boston, Massachusetts: Sense Publishing.

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Mitchell, K. (2003). Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 28*(4) 387-403.

Mitchell, K. (2006). Neoliberal governmentality in the European Union: education, training, and technologies of citizenship. *Environment and Planning Society & Space, 24*(3), 389–407.

Morgen, S., & Gonzales, L. (2008). The neoliberal American dream as daydream. *Critique of Anthropology, 28*(2), 219-236.

Morrow, R. A., & Torres, C. A. (2000). The state, globalization, and educational policy. In N. C. Burbules, & C. A. Torres (Eds.), *Globalization and education: Critical perspectives* (pp. 27-56). London: Routledge.

Ong, A. (1996). Cultural citizenship as subject-making: Immigrants negotiate racial and cultural boundaries in the United States. *Current Anthropology: A World Journal of the Sciences of Man*, *37*, 737-762.

Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press Books.

Peck, J. & Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode*, 34: 380–404.

Piller, I., & Cho, J. (2013). Neoliberalism as language policy. *Language in Society*, *42*(1), 23–44.

Powrie, J. (2008). Civics education and adult biliteracy. In K. Rivera & A. Huerta-Macias (Eds.), *Adult biliteracy: Sociocultural and programmatic responses* (pp. 155-177). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Reiff, T. (1989). *Hopes and dreams*. Belmont, Calif: Fearon/Janus/Quercus.

Reiff, T. (n.d.) *Hopes and dreams*. Retrieved from https://sites.google.com/site/tanareiff/home/hopes-and-dreams

Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ullman, C. (2012). "My grain of sand for society": neoliberal freedom, language learning, and the circulation of ideologies of national belonging. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, *25*(4), 453–470.

Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wortham, S., Mortimer, K., & Allard, E. (2009). Mexicans as model minorities in the new Latino diaspora. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 40*(4), 388-404.