

# Telling and Retelling the Story: Positioning Mexican Immigrant Students as English Language Learners in Community and School

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As current trends in immigration to the United States continue, many communities face unprecedented linguistic and demographic shifts. Communities are challenged to make sense of their new immigrant neighbors, and accounts of who immigrants are and how they will affect the community circulate at the level of national public discourse as well as locally. These categorizations can affect how immigrant groups are treated in the community, how immigrant students are taught in schools, and can eventually affect students' chances for success after graduation. This paper explores how circulating storylines about Mexican immigrants in the community of New Marshall<sup>1</sup> are [re]produced, modified, or transformed in a local high school and English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Once mostly white and African-American, New Marshall is now home to a rapidly growing Mexican immigrant community, and the young Mexican English language learner is now a common student "type" in local schools. Various perceptions of who the Mexicans are circulate throughout New Marshall, with institutional reproduction of these categories being especially powerful. We use ethnographic and discourse analytic methods to examine how one ESL teacher identifies and positions her Mexican students, how they take up or resist these positionings, and how these positions are related to characterizations of Mexicans in storylines that circulate in the larger community. We then consider how these positionings may come to bear upon these students' academic trajectories.

## Introduction

Recent debates about immigration in the US have sharpened the focus of mass media and daily public discourse on who immigrants are, what they are like, what they do, and why they are here. Everyone, from politicians to local store owners, seems to have an account of the new immigrants, about where and how they live and

<sup>1</sup> This and all names of people and places are pseudonyms.

work, how they speak and act, and what effect they will have on the local community and the nation. These accounts, which circulate at the level of national public discourse as well as at local levels of community and institution, provide a resource for groups and individuals to draw upon as they make sense of each other in daily interaction. The reproduction and transformation of these accounts within educational institutions such as schools are particularly consequential for immigrant adolescents. Individuals', particularly adults', understandings of who students are, what skills and experiences they have or do not have, and what purposes and potentials they have in school can have powerful effects on student outcomes and identities (Wortham, 2005, 2006). Characterizations of immigrant students, therefore, have potentially powerful consequences for their learning, as well as for their life after school, and a deeper understanding of this process of social identification and its relationship to learning is important for improving education for immigrant students.

Following positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994), we understand experience and identity to be, in part, discursively constructed through the provision of subject positions in various "storylines" that assign meaning, as well as characterological traits, to participants in conversation. This paper examines what "storylines" about Mexican immigrant youth are [re]produced, modified, or transformed in a local high school and English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the community of New Marshall, a suburban town in the Eastern US where enrollment of Mexican immigrant students is at an all-time high. As part of a larger, ongoing ethnographic study together with Stanton E.F. Wortham, we have examined narratives circulating in the larger community: stories told by longtime, as well as more recently-arrived residents, about the various groups of people who live in New Marshall, how they came to live there, and how they interact with each other (Wortham, Allard, & Mortimer, 2006). The characterizations of people in these narratives are a resource upon which residents draw to understand each other in daily interaction, reproducing, reinforcing, and transforming them in the process. In this study we use microethnographic methods to analyze interaction in an ESL classroom and we find evidence that the positioning of Mexican immigrant students is consonant with subject positions made available in narratives circulating in the wider community. We examine the ways in which students take up or resist positioning moves by the teacher, and we consider how, over time, such positioning may affect (1) students' and teachers' experience of each other and (2) Mexican immigrant students' trajectories through school.

### *Theoretical framework*

Originating in social psychology, positioning theory holds that whenever people converse, they locate themselves and others as "co-

herent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994, p. 362). A "storyline" refers to a typical sequence of events that happens to a particular kind of person, and the people in the story occupy subject positions, that is, locations that entail particular sets of traits, entitlements, and obligations. In this sense, storylines place people and events in relation to each other, much the way narratives function in the construction of selves (Wortham, 2001) and in shaping people's understandings of each other (Wertsch, 2002).

People implicitly or explicitly reference storylines in interaction, and by taking up positions in the story, interlocutors locate themselves in relation to each other. These relations often include differentials of power, competence, moral standing, or other attributes (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). Participants are thus defined in relation to one another, often in unequal ways. Positioning occurs on several levels: 1) the speaker positions himself/herself as taking some part in the storyline, 2) the speaker positions himself/herself as the type of person who thinks X about that storyline, 3) the speaker positions himself/herself in relation to person(s) s/he is speaking to or about<sup>2</sup>, who is also positioned in some way in the talk (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). As Davies and Harré (1990) note, positioning is only consequential when it is "taken up" by other participants in the conversation, that is to say, when subsequent speakers continue referencing a given storyline and participants' positions in it. Alternatively, speakers may introduce a new positioning or a new storyline or transform the one currently in use. Participants come to have a sense of who they are and what they are doing in a given interaction through their use of the three mutually-constitutive elements of discourse: positions, storylines, and speech acts (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991).

Positioning is an aspect of interaction that is interesting to examine in depth because positions and their associated storylines give meaning to individuals' selves and actions. Positions and storylines offer people means for the constitution of selves, as well as choices among various selves. As a theoretical construct, positioning allows for participants' agency, as well as for contradiction among multiple discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990). It is also a process by which cultural stereotypes are appropriated, used for individual purposes, sometimes transformed, and returned to the public space (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994), such that we can see how abstract notions of personhood are manipulated in interaction in dynamic, rather than static, ways. In an educational institution, in particular, positioning in interaction is important because it is "a process by which certain trains of consequences, intended or unintended, are set in motion" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 51). The identities people construct for themselves and each other in conversation influence their understandings of themselves. For students, these self-identifications

<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the concept of "interactional text" discussed by Wortham (2001).

can have bearing on the trajectories that they take in school. Finally, not all people are able to position themselves and others with the same degree of deliberateness; rather, they derive their capacity to position, in part, from institutionally sanctioned locations, such as “teacher” or “student.” This process is thus a rich source for understanding how it is that teachers and students in interaction can influence who they are and who they understand each other to be in the moral order—the system of positions and associated rights and responsibilities—of the classroom, as well as that of the larger community.

### *Research Questions*

With an understanding that positioning is part of the production of social meaning in a group and part of the production of a micro-level moral order in a context such as a classroom, we see it as a locus for social action that may have important consequences for how students learn. The research reported below examines positioning in one ESL classroom composed predominantly of Mexican immigrant high school students and their Anglo-American teacher. A class discussion on the topic of immigration is examined in detail in order to answer the following questions: (1) How are the Mexican ESL students positioned by their teacher, both as a group and as individuals, in micro-level interaction? (2) How do the students position and reposition themselves in relation to the storylines referenced by their teacher or in relation to other storylines? (3) What elements of storylines circulating in the wider community are evident in those employed in this classroom? Finally, we consider the educational implications that these discursive practices may have beyond this particular discussion, beyond this classroom, and beyond the school.

### *Setting, Participants, and Circulating Narratives*

The town of New Marshall is a suburb of a large, Eastern US city, and it is home to an ethnically and racially diverse community of approximately 31,000 people. Over the past few decades, New Marshall has undergone a significant demographic shift. Between 1990 and 2000, the documented Latino population in New Marshall went from 2.7% of the total borough population (0.1% Mexican) (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990) to 10.5% (with around 6.2% Mexican) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These numbers do not include the many undocumented immigrants who live, work, and study in New Marshall. Interviews with residents, white, Latino, and African-American, also reveal a perception that the number of Mexican immigrants to the community has continued to grow steadily in the years since the last census. In a relatively short period of time, what was once a predominantly Anglo- and African-American town has become home to a large, visible Mexican immigrant community.

Though it is the county seat, New Marshall is significantly poorer than other parts of this suburban county and faces problems more often found in depressed urban centers. Some inhabitants blame the city's social and economic woes on the dramatic demographic shift that has occurred in the past ten years. One contributor to the local newspaper in September 2004 complained that the "thousands of illegal immigrants" in New Marshall were taking their toll on the city, "not paying their taxes...using social services and sending their children to school" (Anonymous editorial, 2004). This resident's comments revealed a storyline in which immigrants are illegal and in which they partake in the benefits of residency in New Marshall but do not fulfill their obligations.

Yet this is certainly not the only storyline that features the Mexican immigrants. Participant observation, interviews with community members<sup>3</sup>, and document analysis have uncovered others (Wortham, Allard, & Mortimer, 2006). In narratives of the town's history and current condition, non-Mexican residents often use comparisons with other groups in town as a means of defining who the Mexicans are. In some, the new Mexican arrivals are likened to the Italian immigrants who arrived in New Marshall in the 1950s: newcomers who arrive with little, but through hard work and persistence achieve economic success and social mobility. Some distinguish the Mexicans from previous immigrant groups, saying that Mexicans do not learn English as quickly or that they view their stay here as temporary. Some perspectives see the immigrants as a key to the revitalization of the town, fueling the local economy and establishing small businesses, or as particularly family-oriented and religious. In another perspective, expressed by some Anglo- and African-American community members, Mexican immigrants are in competition with African-Americans for jobs and there is tension between the two groups.

Many narratives depict Mexican immigrants as victims of exploitation and crime, often helpless and unable to defend themselves. For example, in some narratives, employers and landlords exploit Mexicans' needs for jobs and affordable housing and Mexicans are described as afraid and unable to complain because of their undocumented status. In another common storyline about "payday muggings", Mexicans are mugged and beaten when they carry around large amounts of cash because they cannot open bank accounts, again because of undocumented status. Elsewhere with Stanton E.F. Wortham (Wortham, Allard, & Mortimer, 2008) we trace this helpless-victim positioning through narratives of payday muggings throughout the community, and we examine how this positioning is part of the social identification of Mexican immigrants in New Marshall. We also find that the "silenced, victimized immigrant" is a common position allocated to Mexican immigrants, not

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<sup>3</sup> While discourses in town come from various sources, including Mexican immigrants themselves, we focus here on interviews with and documents produced by non-Mexican residents of New Marshall because they are currently the most visible in public life.

just in discourse throughout New Marshall at the community level, but in mass-mediated discourse at the national level (Wortham & Mortimer, 2007). Here we examine how this particular storyline of victimization is especially relevant in one teacher's positioning of her Mexican high school students.

Suárez-Orozco (1998) describes two competing accounts of who immigrants are that circulate in national-level public discourse in the U.S. These he calls the "pro-immigration script" and the "anti-immigration script." The pro-immigration script casts immigrants as positive ideal-types: "humble, hard-working folk, killing themselves to become proud and loyal Americans" (p. 290), people who, in their embodiment of the American Dream, reassure the general public that the U.S. is still young, determined, and limitless. In the anti-immigration script, however, immigrants are cast as menacing and predatory, criminals or even terrorists, who threaten to steal jobs and unravel the nation's cultural integrity. Suárez-Orozco writes that, in these negative scripts, "immigration articulates powerful anxieties about 'losing control' or 'losing boundaries'" (p. 292) in a globalizing and increasingly unpredictable world. As Murillo (2002) notes, both pro- and anti-immigration scripts cast Mexicans in narrow and essentializing frames.

While both pro- and anti-immigration scripts are in evidence in the community of New Marshall, the storylines in which people characterize the Mexicans in town are not so dichotomous. They tend to be more complex and sometimes contradictory accounts that include positive and negative evaluations and combine various characterizations in complex ways. The characterization of Mexicans as victims, for example, often accompanied their characterization as hard workers, family-oriented, and religious. But sometimes it was combined with more negative views of Mexicans' behavior and of the trajectory of the town since their arrival. This is to say that members of the community reference various cultural models (Gee, 1999) of who the Mexican immigrants are in dynamic and complex ways, and it is interesting to look at how these circulating storylines show up or are modified in school.

New Marshall High School (NMHS) is a large high school situated in a quasi-rural section at the border of New Marshall and a nearby township. It schools students from the greater area and thus includes students from the city's somewhat depressed urban center as well as middle class students from the nearby rural and suburban towns. The student population has traditionally been approximately 50% white and 50% African-American, but these proportions have been slowly changing with the growth in the Mexican community. In 2003-2004, 46% of NMHS students were African-American, 44% white, and 8% Latino.<sup>4</sup> The high school as a

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4 While the high school still has a relatively small population of Mexican students in relation to its student body, the large numbers of Mexicans in the elementary schools foreshadow greater demographic changes at the high school in the next 5-10 years (personal communication with ESL district coordinator, district records).

whole seems to have been caught off-guard with the influx of Mexican students who require English language services and support. Though they have built up their ESL program well in a short amount of time, there are still few teachers who are trained in second-language teaching or accommodating second-language learners and even fewer who speak Spanish. The senior ESL teacher has reported to us that one huge barrier they face is that most of the teachers at the school are monolingual and cannot empathize with the language-learning challenge that their Mexican students face. One way that the school has met this challenge is by increasing the number of class hours within the sheltered ESL program<sup>5</sup>. In the academic year in which we conducted this study, most ESL students only had one class (science) that was not taught by an ESL or sheltered ESL content teacher, and thus many students spent up to half of their school day with the same teacher.

The particular classroom examined in this paper is an upper-intermediate ESL class<sup>6</sup>. The students, eight boys and three girls, are all Mexican except for one new male student from Honduras. Their teacher, Ms. Howson, is an Anglo-American woman in her thirties. She is the most senior ESL teacher at the school and, by students' reports, enjoys good rapport with them. During the classroom interaction discussed below, they are considering the question of "outsiders" as the first part of a new unit on immigration that involves exploration of both famous immigrants' stories as well as students' own experiences as immigrants. She tells them that as a culmination of the unit they will all have the opportunity to tell their immigration stories. There is a poem to read, a worksheet to fill out, and a discussion in order to generate answers to the worksheet questions (See Appendix). Our analysis focuses on the class discussion of outsiders before they begin reading, and on the discussion following the reading in which Ms. Howson asks the students to identify parts of the reading that were meaningful to them. The duration of this activity is about forty minutes, including time in which the students write down their answers in silence.

### *Methods*

As part of a larger ethnographic study, observations in this paper are grounded in 16 months of weekly participant observation at NMHS, interviews with teachers, students, administrators, and other school staff, collection of documents, and ethnographic analysis (following Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In order to analyze classroom interaction more closely, we videotaped several hours of class time in ESL classrooms at various points throughout our data collection. The class session we analyze here has been selected for taping because the topic that was to be covered in discussion, immigrants' experiences, was likely to illumi-

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5 Sheltered ESL courses are those in which all ESL students are grouped together and taught content area subjects in English, but in classes containing no English dominant students.

6 Students in the ESL program are grouped by level of English proficiency, not by grade level. The students in this class are of various grade-levels. English proficiency was determined using a standardized assessment instrument.

nate relevant positioning of students and the teacher. Tapes were then reviewed, video-logged, and instances that seemed particularly interesting were subjected to ethnographic microanalysis. While positioning and other phenomena may be studied without the analysis of micro-level interaction, these methodologies can only serve to explicate the claims made in more traditional ethnography (Erickson, 1992, p. 204). Microethnographic methods are useful in looking at something like positioning, in order to show exactly *how* the participants achieve the positioning that they do. This study aims to provide a record of how positioning is accomplished at the micro-level in this classroom. The analysis utilizes the tools of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1968), the study of activity structure (Levinson, 1992), and borrows from work on embodiment (Goodwin, 1980; Streeck, 1993).

### *Analysis*

Evidence of positioning in conversation is found in the words that speakers choose that involve images, chosen from all available images, that presuppose some storyline, chosen from all available storylines. Autobiographical moments of conversation are a primary site in which to find these telling words and images (Davies & Harré, 1990).

The segments of video transcript analyzed below include several such moments. They represent portions of a teacher-led discussion and a collaborative worksheet completion activity that marks the beginning of a new unit on immigration. During this activity, all eleven students sit at individual desks, which they have placed in a circle at Ms. Howson's request. Ms. Howson is also sitting at one of the desks in the circle. Following some initial grammar review at the beginning of class, she introduces this activity as constituting the "real lesson" for the day, part of a unit that they will work on for the rest of the school year and that will culminate in a final project on their own experiences as immigrants. During the activity, their focus is alternatively on the current speaker or on the worksheets that they are filling in with the answers generated during the discussion.

The purpose of the activity is two-fold. The primary student goal is to fill in the worksheet, as evidenced by the repeated requests for information about what number they are on, and what to write. The primary teacher goal is to get students thinking about immigration and their own personal experiences, as evidenced by Ms. Howson's repeated questions about their own experiences. Levinson defines activity as "goal defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting and so on, but above all on the allowable contributions" (1992, p. 69). This discussion is "socially constituted" because the students and teacher have particular roles. For example, the teacher leads, and the students are expected to contribute to the conversation by answer-

ing her questions, but not move to new topics. The contributions from the students are bounded by unspoken rules, which become evident during the activity when students attempt to cross these boundaries. For example, there are certain things that the students are not allowed to say. While they are invited to personalize the discussion and to make jokes, they are not allowed to do so by saying anything negative about other students in the class. They are also not allowed to say “bad words.” When they try to, Ms. Howson either explicitly sanctions them by saying something such as “that’s inappropriate” or “stop” or by ignoring them or cutting them off. For example, in Transcript 1 she manages what is said in several different ways. In the discussion preceding this clip, they have been talking about what types of people are considered outsiders in the United States. Ms. Howson (MH) has posed this question as a kind of warm-up discussion before they read a poem about an immigrant student who feels like an outsider. Here, she is eliciting more examples.

Excerpt 1

- 1 MH<sup>7</sup>: Juan Carlos, you said something earlier about so- a group of people  
 2 JC: (1.8)  
 3 MH: For- you asked me about with gender (1.0)  
 4 A: Los homosexuales, y eso wey.  
 Homosexuals, and that, man.  
 5 S: Gays.  
 6 MH: Ok homosexuals. They (.) aren’t they treated like outsiders?  
 7 Ss: Yes.  
 8 ?: °No no no no.°  
 9 MH: ‘kay  
 10 A: President<sup>8</sup>  
 11 Ss: ((low laughter))  
 12 L: The faggots?=  
 13 MH: =Hey. That word is not OK.  
 14 R: °No:°  
 15 JC: Yes, that’s not OK. [((laughing))That’s good word but it’s not OK.  
 16 L: [( )]  
 17 MH: [ ( ) No. it’s not.  
 18 J: Miss that’s (a good) word, but it’s not [OK.  
 19 MH: [It’s- It’s not. Yeah.  
 20 JC: ( )  
 21 MH: [Gay, homosexual, those are words that you could say.=  
 22 Ss: [((murmuring low))  
 23 ?: Como?  
 What?

7 MH denotes Ms. Howson. R is one of the researchers. All other initials denote students. When several students speak together, they are denoted by Ss. Translations from the Spanish are given in italics.

8 This refers to student Vicente (V), who many of the students call The President because he carries a briefcase-like bag to school, studies hard, and doesn’t share his answers with other students (a rather common practice). Juan Carlos has previously offered Vicente as an example of an outsider, but Ms. Howson told him that he was wrong and that Vicente is not an outsider because Vicente is Mexican, male and in this class, just like Juan Carlos.

- 24 **MH:** =If you said that, that's derogatory, that's ( )=  
 25 **A:** Que dijiste, wey?  
*What did you say, man?*  
 26 **MH:** =Like if you said that to a homosexual person, they would be very angry.  
 27**L:** °No, but what is that (supposed to)°  
 28 **MH:** It's a bad name for a- right. It's a bad name for a gay person.=  
 29 **JC:** Oh wey, dile eso a [hh- ( ) a decirle (como )]  
*Oh man, tell that to [hh-( ) to say it to (like )]*  
 30 **MH:** [ = Yes. Right. 'kay?  
 31 **Ss:** ( )  
 32 **MH:** Not a good- not a good word to say. [Alright? We try not to say that word.  
 33 **A:** [(Pero) que dijiste? What did he say?  
*(But) what did you say?*  
 34 **MH:** He said (.) a bad word.  
 35 **L:** Na, it's not a bad word.  
 36 **MH:** I- it- I'm [telling=  
 37 **R:** [It really is  
 38 **MH:** =you it really is

In this interaction, Ms. Howson manages what is said by explicitly telling the students what they are allowed to say (e.g., lines 17, 26, 34). She also establishes what words or contributions are acceptable by what words she repeats or does not repeat. In line 6 she repeats the words “homosexuals,” whereas in later lines she does not repeat the offending “f” word. In this way, she displays that “homosexuals” is the word she was looking for in her prompt, and that “f-----” it is not an acceptable word to use. In addition, she puts stress on key words that emphasize this evaluation (as in lines 13, 21, 32). Finally, she ignores or reinterprets comments that do not fit in with her interpretation. In lines 15-20, Juan Carlos (JC) is trying to make a joke that “f-----” is the right word to refer to a homosexual, but that being homosexual is not an OK thing to be. He continually repeats himself and names Ms. Howson in order to get acknowledgment of his comment. However, Ms. Howson disregards his intent and reinterprets it by repeating “It’s not OK” referring instead to the offending word. Using these tools, Ms. Howson establishes/maintains conversational constraints. She positions herself through these means as typically a teacher does in reference to her students: she holds the authority, leads discussion, and has evaluative rights regarding what the students say and do. The sequence of the activity also maintains Ms. Howson’s rights to manage the discussion. The preferred sequence is 1) Ms. Howson poses a question 2) Students give answers that conform to the constraints of the activity 3) Ms. Howson evaluates these answers and summarizes the main points. In this way, she often has the last word on any of the discussion questions.<sup>9</sup> She positions the students, both as a group and as individuals, as respondents

9 This sequence is similar to the IRE sequence (Initiation- Response- and Evaluation) typical of much teacher talk (See Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979)

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to her questions (rather than questioners, themselves) and their words and actions as subject to her evaluation.

When positioning herself and her students in reference to a storyline about immigrants in the US and in the school, Ms. Howson utilizes many of the same conversational and structural tools that she does to establish her authority in the interaction. She is explicit about the storyline that she is referring to, and about her own position and her students' position in relation to that storyline. After getting some acceptable contributions to her pre-reading discussion question of "What is an outsider?" (e.g., "immigrants," "black people," "Indian people") and one unacceptable contributio, which she rejects, Ms. Howson summarizes the key points of the definition. She says:

Excerpt 2

- 1 **MH:** An outsider is someone who is different and cannot fit in to the group. Someone  
2 who either maybe thinks different, looks different, does not belong. Ok? So write  
3 your own definition. What does an outsider mean. What is the definition of an  
4 outsider. Who- who can we say are outsiders in the United States.  
5 **JC:** Otros  
*Others*  
6 **G:** Us.  
7 **JC:** Immigrants.  
8 **MH:** OK, immigrants, not just- Hispanic, right. All kinds of immigrants right are  
9 outsiders

Here the students define immigrants as outsiders and she affirms that this is the answer she was looking for by repeating it and saying "OK". This is the first element of the storyline she is referencing. In the next segment she elaborates on it.

Excerpt 3

- 1 **MH:** America is full of (.)((putting her fingers in quotation marks next to her head))  
2 "outsiders"((puts both hands to chest))]; don't consider them outsiders, right?  
3 And oth- but other people- some people do.  
4 **G:** °Afro americanos°  
*African-Americans*  
5 **MH:** Right, they're not from here, and that's- so they don't understand the culture=  
6 **G:** °( -anos)°  
7 **MH:** =and they're not part of (.) America. So they could be considered ((nods head in  
8 one accented beat on the accented syllable in "considered"))];outsiders.  
9 **G:** [Outsiders!

Here she adds that most people don't accept immigrants and reject them as part of the nation, and, just after the above text, she goes on to affirm a student's contribution that an outsider is a "person who has

differences" in religion, customs, race, gender, or language, with particular text stress on *language*. Both verbally and embodied in her behavior, she positions herself as not the kind of person that thinks of immigrants and others as outsiders. In lines 1-2 she traces quotation marks in the air in order to show that what she is saying is reported speech rather than her own words. She achieves this same effect by stressing "considered" in line 12 and nodding her head on the accented beat of the same word. The storyline that she is referencing and the positionings therein can be summarized as follows. *Immigrants to the US are considered outsiders by most Americans and are made to feel like they don't belong. These students are immigrants and are therefore made to feel like outsiders. Ms. Howson, however, is not the kind of person who feels this way or makes them feel this way.* The majority of the students "take up" this storyline in their contributions to the discussion. Gabriel's (G) soft-spoken comments in Excerpt 3 (lines 4 and 9), for example, reinforce or take up this positioning. He says the names of two groups that he thinks consider immigrants outsiders. This perspective on rejection and abuse of Mexicans by African-Americans in New Marshall is prevalent among the students and teachers and fits into the storyline presented by Ms. Howson. Here we see surface a common position allocated to Mexicans in storylines circulating in the New Marshall community, in general: Mexicans as victims, particularly of crimes by African-Americans.

Thus far, Ms. Howson has positioned the students as outsiders, a subject position designated by people including Ms. Howson, but excluding the students themselves. Some of the students ratify this positioning. However, as the conversation unfolds, Ms. Howson's remarks reveal a more complex storyline than the one she has explicitly referenced so far. The following two excerpts speak to these further complexities.

After the pre-reading discussion of outsiders, Ms. Howson reads a poem to the class. In the segments below, the class is responding to this poem written by a ninth grade Cambodian immigrant. The poem catalogs the many hardships she went through at school because of negative reactions other students had to her different style of dress, non-native accent, low proficiency in English, and other typical new immigrant characteristics. After reading the poem aloud, Ms. Howson asks each student to think of a time when she/he felt like an outsider. She refers to times when the students have told her "about how people don't treat [them] well," again linking outsider status with mistreatment by others. In Excerpt 4, student Javier (J) says that he relates to the part of the poem that describes a non-native accent causing trouble in school.

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### Excerpt 4

- 1 **J:** ((reading)) When you don't pronounce the words correctly  
2 **MH:** So you're worried that people will laugh at you.  
3 **J:** Yeah.  
4 **MH:** Is that why you all are so quiet when you go to [other classes with American  
5 students]  
6 **Ss:** [Yes yeah  
7 **MH:** Have you, have you had students laugh at you?  
8 **Ss:** Yeah, yeah  
9 **?:** Los (moyos)  
The blacks  
10 **L:** That's true.  
11 **MH:** They do laugh?  
12 **?:** Yeah  
13 **MH:** Everyone?  
14 **A:** Not everyone but-  
15 **MH:** Some. So then once someone laughs at you, then you don't talk anymore, do  
16 you?  
17 **JC:** La- (de las) alemanes son las que [( )  
The- (of the) Germans are the ones that [(  
18 **MH:** [Because evr- the teachers they tell me, ' Oh  
19 they're so quiet' and I'm like, 'Who! Not in my classroom'  
20 **JN:** Heehee  
21 **MH:** But here it's different so in the other class (.) we don't talk that much. Do you try  
22 to get your pronunciation to be better ...<sup>10</sup> So, that means here is the time to  
23 practice. If this is where you feel comfortable then this is where I want to hear  
24 you talking

Ms. Howson elaborates the storyline in which she is positioning herself and her students. In it, she extends the rejection of American society to the mainstream school classrooms, and she locates the ESL classroom as a place where the students are safe from the ridicule and rejection that they face in America and in the school. While in other classes, students laugh at immigrants for having non-native pronunciation, the ESL classroom provides a refuge from this poor treatment. In her last statement above (lines 21-24), she stresses the word "here" to emphasize the difference between the two types of environments and in the same line uses "we" to refer to the students, referencing the solidarity she feels with them, and reinforcing the self-positioning that she introduced earlier. By voicing (Bakhtin, 1935/1981) the other teachers and herself, or speaking in the voice of this kind of person, starting at line 18, she calls attention to the difference between herself and the other teachers. She knows the real ESL students, whereas other teachers only know a silenced version.

The students in this storyline are positioned as having little agency, at least until their English is better (e.g., lines 21-22), and they are characterized as being silent and passive except when in the safety of the ESL community. This position is very much like the "silenced, victimized immigrant" position present in community narratives. Students were less likely to take up this aspect of the storyline than the more general one discussed above. They agree that sometimes they are laughed at, but

when individuals try to elaborate (e.g., Angel in line 14) or change the subject (e.g., Juan Carlos in line 17), Ms. Howson finishes their sentences or interrupts them. In the following segments, students resist both Ms. Howson's school-specific storyline and their own positioning therein. In various ways, some subtle and some more explicit, the students resist being positioned as helpless victims and attempt to reposition themselves as active and self-defending. Below, Javier (J) introduces a storyline in which *all* teachers leave the English language learners behind.

## Excerpt 5

- 1 ? : That's so sad.  
 2 MH: It is sad.  
 3 S: Yeah.  
 4 MH: Fo:- What parts of this did you ever experience yourselves=  
 5 J: =When your teacher don't understand=  
 6 MH: Javier?  
 7 J: = ((reading))go to the lower class or get lost  
 8 MH: Good, so can you give me an example of a time you felt like you didn't  
 9 understand and the kids were like, 'Ugh' (1.4)  
 10 'He's so slow.'  
 11 J: Yeah, like the teacher (.) speak fast and you like don't understand but they don't  
 12 stop, I mean  
 13 MH: Not this year, right,=  
 14 J: ((raises his eyebrows))  
 15 MH: =but before? Maybe the first year you were here. Most of your classes were not  
 16 ESL.

While it is hard to appreciate without seeing the video itself, Javier's raising of his eyebrows clearly denotes his disagreement with Ms. Howson's statement that the teachers this year (who are all ESL) never speak too fast or leave him behind. Javier tries to get the conversation back on track by saying "Yeah, like the teacher..." to clear up Ms. Howson's confusion that he was talking about the students. But Ms. Howson, not realizing perhaps that a new storyline has been introduced, continues with hers in which only the mainstream teachers could do this. The way she phrases line 13 as a negative statement with a tag question does not encourage a response from Javier. By latching lines 13 and 15, she does not give Javier a turn in the conversation to explain his statement. Moreover, since the sequence of this activity very often ends with Ms. Howson making some kind of evaluative or summarizing comment, it would not be preferred at this point for Javier to add any more. In these ways, an alternative storyline is blocked from becoming part of the discussion, and the silenced, victimized immigrant positioning remains dominant.

In another example, the positioning offered by Ms. Howson clearly makes one student, Simon (S), uncomfortable, but he seems unable to do anything about it. Simon is a socially adept character. He is friendly with everyone in the ESL class, with the teachers and the researcher and spends lunchtime with mainstream Mexican students who are no longer in ESL,

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some of whom never were. Positioning him as a helpless immigrant, thus, appears to be particularly uncomfortable for him. In Excerpt 6 below, Ms. Howson suggests that the two places that new immigrants are most helpless are in the bathroom and the cafeteria. Many students agree that they were unable to ask for food in the cafeteria when they first arrived so they went without eating. However, most have resisted her proposal that the bathroom is also a difficult place for a new immigrant.

### Excerpt 6

- 1 **MH:** Bathroom and cafeteria, right?  
2 **G:** No, bathroom ( )  
3 **S:** Na ( )  
4 **MH:** No, ((pointing at S)) your story, remember? Yours, was so: sad. He wrote,  
5 'member what you wrote for Mrs. Battenberg's class?=  
6 **S:** ((turns away towards back door))  
7 **MH:** =He wrote how=  
8 **S:** ((turns back to face Ms. Howson and other students))  
9 **MH:** =his first day here he was in my class and I gave him (.) a test=  
10 **S:** ((shoulders raise in laugh, smiling))  
11 **MH:** =and after the test he wanted to go to the bathroom and he didn't know how to  
12 ask so he was- just sat there=  
13 **S:** ((points at Ms. Howson and looks at camera, laughing)) She's trippin'  
14 **MH:** =and then he said, what else-and then  
15 **S:** Ah, yo-  
*Oh, I-*  
16 **MH:** You had no lunch, right?  
17 **S:** ((laughing, embarrassed))  
18 **MH:** You were hungry: and I didn't- I didn't send him to lu:nch. I let him be hungry.  
19 So very sad.  
20 **S:** ((laughing, embarrassed))  
21 **MH:** [Ms. Howson felt very bad about that  
22 **A:** ]((laughing))She hate you.  
23 **S:** ((smiling)) I know she hate me. ((shakes his head briskly))  
24 **MH:** Oh, stop it.

Here, Ms. Howson narrates a previous version of herself that was unaware of the needs and difficulties of her immigrant students. She maintains her self-positioning as a caring, sensitive advocate, however, through her comments about the incident in which she evaluates her previous mistake. She "felt bad" and now sees that what happened was "so sad." She positions her student here as helpless and entirely dependent on her. He lacked the English proficiency to pursue even his most basic needs. He "didn't know how to ask" so he "just sat there" and she "let him be hungry." Particularly salient in this characterization is Simon's silenced status, as in the positionings of Mexicans in community narratives. In this positioning, Ms. Howson or other community members hold all of the power and the students or other Mexican immigrants none because they are unable to communicate their needs or defend their rights.

Simon is clearly uncomfortable with this positioning. In line 6, he turns around, away from the center of the circle and away from the conversation when most of the others are focused on him. He looks towards the

door at the back of the classroom, either to suggest that he wants to escape or as if to look for the person about whom Ms. Howson must be talking. His nervous laughter also expresses his embarrassment. When he talks to the camera and says, "She's trippin'," he expresses to the researcher his disdain and embarrassment, but he does not directly express this verbally to Ms. Howson or to the class. One of the many reasons for this could be structural. Throughout her narration of his story, Ms. Howson leaves almost no transition relevance place (Sacks et al., 1974), or moment when transition to another speaker is possible, in which S can talk. The one spot, in line 19 is preceded by a statement with a tag question at the end. Tag questions generally assume that the statement is correct and the preferred answer is either nothing or a back-channel like a nod or "Uh huh". Therefore Simon's opportunities to respond and tell his own story, to keep it to himself, or to reposition himself, are significantly limited by the interaction. He is positioned as helpless, not only in relation to the storyline, but also in the current interaction. He is unable to resist her positioning even though it makes him uncomfortable. This is a good example in which the storyline may be exactly what happened (Simon wrote about it himself) but in which the interlocutor still dislikes being positioned within it in this way. Interestingly, though he is unable to resist his own positioning as helpless, Simon and Angel (A) do challenge Ms. Howson's positioning as a caring individual who just didn't know better. At the end of Excerpt 6, they say that Ms. Howson didn't let Simon go to the bathroom or eat, not because she was unaware, but instead because she hates him (lines 22-23). Though this is a joke, it is one way of turning Ms. Howson's story on its head, and resisting her account in some way.

One student who is able to resist the helpless victim position, and indeed, to reposition himself as self-defending, is Angel (A), who says that if people laugh at his English, he will fight them. In the talk that follows the transcribed segment below, some of other boys give positive backchannels and Lucas (L) makes a fist and hits it into his other palm, signaling their support of this resistance.

## Excerpt 7

- 1 **MH:** Anything else?  
 2 **A:** ( ) ((smacks fist into other hand))  
 3 **MH:** Would you?  
 4 **A:** For real. I did last year.  
 5 **MH:** Really?  
 6 **A:** ( [ ] )  
 7 **MH:** [So if everyone else is laughing at you and you're by yourself, you don't  
 8 just ((puts hands near face and crouches towards them)) quietly and hope that  
 9 they stop? You would say something.=  
 10 **A:** = I'd tell 'em to stop, yo. If they keep doing it and I get mad then I smack 'em in  
 11 the face and (that's the)  
 12 **S:** [(laughing)]  
 13 **MH:** Well that's not what I normally see. I see most times that we just shhh ((crouches  
 14 forward)) get real quiet and hope that people stop looking at us.

Here again Ms. Howson tries to insist on her storyline and the silenced, victimized immigrant position by interrupting Angel in line 7. But Angel resists by latching his next comment at line 10 to the end of her talk in line 9. By interjecting in this way, he presses his self-positioning as one who can defend himself, and he is able to be heard. Though Ms. Howson reiterates her storyline in lines 13-14 both verbally and in her gestures, Angel does not take up the passive positioning and continues talking about fighting after the end of this clip. Ms. Howson, however, says “OK, that’s enough” and then moves on to another question. In this excerpt, Angel’s resistance to being positioned by Ms. Howson as a helpless victim is particularly clear. He repositions himself as a fighter not once, but twice, and despite Ms. Howson’s refusal to ratify this repositioning, other participants, his classmates, do ratify it with positive backchanneling.

The silenced, victimized immigrant position that is so common in community narratives in New Marshall surfaces in multiple ways in the interaction between Ms. Howson and her students. In various ways Ms. Howson draws upon this characterization to identify her students, and as we have shown, her students take up this position at times, and resist it at others, sometimes subtly, sometimes more stridently.

### Conclusion

As the preceding analysis has illustrated through a micro-level analysis of segments of the discussion activity, Ms. Howson positions herself and her students in the following storyline, a school-specific variant of the “immigrants as victims” storyline circulating in the town: *Immigrants to the US are considered outsiders by most Americans and are made to feel like they don’t belong. This also happens in this school in the mainstream classes. There these immigrant students are not welcomed and are silenced and passive recipients of ridicule and bad treatment. Ms. Howson, however, is not the kind of person who feels this way or makes them feel this way. She and the other ESL teachers/classes provide these students with a refuge from the rejection and insensitivity of others and a safe place to be themselves.* She achieves this positioning in several ways, through the sequential structure of the activity, through the way she manages what is said, by the way she phrases questions, and in what she summarizes and how she evaluates student contributions.

Students express different degrees of cooperation with this storyline, and many seem to resist parts of it. Javier tries to express that all teachers at times make him feel lost and apart. Angel asserts that he will not be a passive recipient of any ridicule from other students. Simon seems powerless in the interaction to resist her positioning him as a helpless new immigrant in the storyline though it clearly makes him uncomfort-

able. However, partly because of the structural constraints of the interaction, few of the students are able to assert and maintain an alternative storyline and position. Other reasons for this failure could include insufficient English ability to rephrase their perspective, a deferential attitude of respect towards Ms. Howson that prevents them from challenging her ideas, a cultural difference in their openness to discuss this issue, or gender issues that play between the boys and their female teacher. Further analysis and research would be necessary to ascertain if any of these variables affect student uptake of positioning.

The possible educational implications of Ms. Howson's positioning of her students this way and of their inability to assert alternative positionings are various. The positioning of the ESL teachers as caring advocates for Mexican students might establish or reinforce a sense of safety and trust in Ms. Howson and the other ESL teachers, which could enhance opportunities for learning and contribute generally to students' positive experiences at school. In a study of several high schools, Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) found that the presence of in-school advocates for Latino language minority students enhanced their academic and social experiences. Ms. Howson and her colleagues could easily be classified as advocates for their students and undoubtedly, their efforts on behalf of their immigrant students result in some positive outcomes.

Alternatively, insisting on storylines in which mainstream teachers and students are cast as insensitive and intolerant of immigrant students, and Mexican students as helpless to defend themselves outside of the ESL community may also disempower students. This positioning might foster a sense of dependence on the ESL teachers and program, and students may therefore be less motivated to meet exit criteria to move out of ESL into mainstream classes. As other research has shown (e.g., Olsen, 1997), high school students in isolated language support programs, like this one, are often removed from the networks of support that allow them to access higher education, and other routes to economic advancement. Moreover, the rigor of content courses within ESL programs has also been questioned (e.g., Valdes, 2001). Thus, emphasizing the safety of ESL versus the hostility of mainstream classrooms is likely to disadvantage students in the long term.

The positioning explored here may also color the way students approach other classes and teachers. Van Langenhove and Harré (1994) describe the process by which elements of cultural stereotypes in circulation in public discourse become internalized, taken on as part of a personal stereotype. These elements can then "be brought into the public arena again by speaking about it, discursively displaying it, or behaving in an appropriate way" (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994, p. 365), so as to convey conformity or non-conformity to the storyline. In this process, what is constructed publicly has bearing on what is constructed privately—one's sense of self and subsequently, how one decides to behave

accordingly. As they note, the question is not whether a storyline such as “immigrants-as-victims” is reflective of “reality” or not, but rather whether this storyline, of all others in circulation, might emerge among these participants in this kind of context—and what are the consequences of its use there?

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that what teachers say as well as the ways in which they interact with their students—how they manage student contributions to class discussion, how they phrase questions and evaluate student contributions—all function to position students and teachers as particular types of people who have particular roles in relation to one another. In our analysis, the positioning that emerged as most dominant cast immigrant students as helpless victims of anti-immigrant sentiment inside and out of school and their ESL teachers as their guardians and advocates, positioning that threatens to disempower students in the long term. Because of the constraints on classroom participation established in this context, students had few opportunities to challenge this positioning, even when they disagreed, and thus alternate storylines and positions went unheard. It is important, then, for educators and other advocates for immigrant students to consider the ways in which we interact with our students, and how we manage students’ contributions in class so that we both allow students to feel welcomed and safe but also empower them take ownership of their educational experiences.

#### *Acknowledgment*

The data used in this analysis were collected jointly with and under the supervision of Professor Stanton E.F. Wortham. As part of a collection of analyses in a larger, ongoing, ethnographic project, this analysis has benefited greatly from his guidance. We are grateful to him for this, for his supervision of our work on the New Marshall project, and for his permission to use this jointly collected data in this paper.

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