Developing Bilingual Youth Social Capital: Voices of Biliterate Young Adults

Kristina M. Howlett & William S. Davis
University of Arkansas

Abstract
This study examines the perceptions of high school young adults who applied for and received a state biliteracy award recognizing proficiency in two or more languages. Through a grounded theory approach, the researchers collected 47 essays and interviewed 12 students to investigate how they perceived their biliteracy experiences. Through their voices, it became apparent that the support systems within the home, school, and local communities were foundational for students’ long-term academic and career goals. Findings resulted in six categories connected to the influential factors of youth social capital: Support Systems, Language as an Opportunity, Self-identity, Service, Beyond the Classroom, and Challenges. A theory of bilingual youth social capital emerged which demonstrated how students’ biliterate contexts enhanced the development of the youths’ social capital and overall well-being. The results were validated through the frameworks of social constructivism, Hornberger’s (2004) continua of biliteracy, and youth social capital theory.

Keywords: biliteracy, bilingualism, youth social capital, Seal of Biliteracy, language proficiency

Resumen
Este estudio examina las percepciones de los jóvenes de preparatoria que solicitaron y recibieron un premio estatal del bialfabetismo, que reconocen la competencia en dos o más idiomas. A través de teoría fundamentada, los investigadores recopilaron 47 ensayos y entrevistaron a 12 estudiantes para investigar cómo percibían sus experiencias de bialfabetización. En sus voces, se hizo evidente que los sistemas de apoyo en el hogar, la escuela y las comunidades locales eran fundamentales para los objetivos académicos y de carrera de los estudiantes a largo plazo. Las conclusiones dieron lugar a seis categorías que se relacionaron con los factores influyentes del capital social juvenil: Sistemas de Apoyo, Lenguaje como Oportunidad, Auto-identificación, Servicio, Más Allá del Salón de Clase, y Desafíos. Surgió una teoría del capital social juvenil bilingüístico que demostró cómo, para los jóvenes, los contextos bilíngües aumentaron el desarrollo de su capital social y bienestar general. Los resultados fueron validados por los marcos de constructivismo social, los continuos del bialfabetismo de Hornberger (2004), y la teoría del capital social juvenil.

Palabras clave: bialfabetismo, bilingüismo, capital social juvenil, Sello de Bialfabetismo, proficiencia
Introduction

Educators continue to seek the most effective practices for supporting bilingual youth, while communities look for solutions to increase acceptance of diversity in American society. What are the best approaches for educating bilingual youth and encouraging foreign language study? In Thomas and Collier’s (1997) seminal study, the field of ESL and bilingual education dramatically altered with findings showing how students in bilingual programs perform better in academic subjects than do native English speakers who receive no bilingual instruction. While there is substantial evidence supporting the advantages of bilingual education, American public schools remain primarily monolingual. This disparity between best practice and the current state of education poses a challenge for teachers who seek to create school environments that are culturally responsive, as well as for the students, families, and communities who understand the benefits of biliteracy.

Demographic and political changes have led to a reevaluation of the direction of multilingual education in America. With the growing number of linguistically diverse students in the U.S., bilingualism is a topic facing our nation. While the majority of Americans believe that diversity in the nation makes the country a better place to live (Pew Research Center, 2017), the educational and political landscape does not support bilingualism and foreign language study. There is a great need for policy makers, communities, educators, families, and students to understand the importance of supporting biliteracy and bilingualism. Arkansas is one of many states that has joined a national movement, The Seal of Biliteracy, to recognize and celebrate both native and non-native English speakers who have studied and demonstrated proficiency in two or more languages through the Arkansas Biliteracy Award.

Statement of the Problem

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that more than 60 million residents over the age of five, or about 20% of the U.S. population, speak a language other than English at home (Ryan, 2013). However, research from outside the federal government suggests that only about half that number, or 10% of the U.S. population, speaks a language other than English proficiently, and most are heritage language speakers. Of those who speak a language other than English at home, the majority are foreign born while the rest were born in the United States. The latter are primarily U.S.-born children of immigrants (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2016).

The importance of foreign language instruction remains overlooked and neglected. This is particularly apparent when looking at the percentage of K-12 students learning a foreign language at school. As of 2014-15, eight states – Arkansas included – have less than 13% of their students enrolled in foreign language courses, while the majority of states have a foreign language enrollment under 25% (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2016). This stands in contrast to the growing need for international communication and intercultural competence in American government and business. Being biliterate opens the doors to understanding multiple perspectives about the world and the possibility of developing relationships with people in a variety of communities and other countries. Additionally, developing a high level of proficiency in another language broadens and enhances an individual’s perspective. The encouragement, recognition, and celebration of biliteracy, especially in younger learners, is integral in expanding an individual’s life and career opportunities.
Purpose of the Study

This qualitative advocacy study sought to answer the primary research question, “How do students who received the Arkansas Biliteracy Award perceive their biliteracy experiences?” The researchers used a grounded theory approach that sought to develop a substantive theoretical model to explain the role of biliteracy in the lives of Northwest Arkansas youth. To answer this question, the researchers collected essays and conducted interviews with high school students who had recently received an award that recognized their bilingual proficiency. The official Seal of Biliteracy, not yet adopted in Arkansas, was a focal point of the study; therefore, it was a goal to advocate for state language policies and school district support to promote biliteracy and multilingualism for Arkansas students. Additionally, hearing directly from the students’ experiences would further support the literature regarding best practices for advocating and encouraging bilingualism at classroom, school, district, and state levels. For these reasons, the study is in the category of advocacy research as it shares “an allegiance to the values of social responsibility and community empowerment” (Given, 2008, p. 8).

Background

The Seal of Biliteracy

In 2011, legislation creating a California biliteracy seal passed, and California became the first state in the nation to establish a state level Seal of Biliteracy. In the spring of 2012, over 10,000 state biliteracy seals were presented to graduating seniors. In 2012, New York enacted legislation modeled after California to create a New York Seal of Biliteracy. The movement has grown and 32 states and Washington D.C. have now approved a statewide Seal of Biliteracy.

The purposes of awarding the Seal include promoting the development of biliteracy, recognizing the value of diversity, and providing employers and universities with a method of identifying and giving credit to those who are biliterate (Californians Together, 2017). Additionally, in the move toward better standards that will prepare students for future success, multilingualism has been included in curriculum frameworks that promote college and career readiness such as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (Manger, Soule, & Wesolowski, 2011).

The Arkansas Biliteracy Award

In the summer of 2016, the Arkansas Foreign Language Teachers Association (AFLTA) and the Arkansas Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ARKTESOL, an affiliate of TESOL) formed a partnership in an effort to implement the Arkansas Biliteracy Award. A pilot program was launched to recognize students who had attained proficiency in English and another language in order to gain evidence of the need for offering an official state Seal of Biliteracy. The Arkansas Biliteracy Award Committee, comprised of representatives from the state language organizations, the Arkansas Department of Education, teachers, and university faculty, began by looking at the criteria used in other states and discussed how the application would be publicized to students.

It was decided that to qualify for the award, students had to be enrolled in an Arkansas high school, have a grade point average of 2.0 in English Language Arts high school courses, and demonstrate proficiency in English and another language. Students were also required to submit
a recommendation letter from a school administrator, teacher, or counselor and a short essay describing how their biliteracy experiences had prepared them for their future goals and career plans. These two additional materials did not affect students’ chances of receiving the award. In addition to establishing the criteria and developing an application process, a website was created to publicize the award, and three high schools volunteered to promote the initiative and encourage students to apply.

In the spring of 2017, one hundred seventeen (117) applications were received and ninety-five (95) students met the selected criteria for receiving the award. Because 9% of the approximately 140,000 Arkansas K-12 public high school students are English-language learners (ADE Data Center; 2017a; 2017b) and the majority of award applicants and recipients were non-native English speakers, these 95 award recipients represent only a small portion of eligible biliterate high school students in Arkansas. This deficiency in applicant representation adds significance to the goals of this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Various terms denoting abilities in two or more languages (biliteracy, bilingualism, and multilingualism) are used in this study. Although similarities and differences exist between them, this research centers around the national initiative of the Seal of Biliteracy, which recognizes students for attaining proficiency – the ability to use language through reading, writing, speaking, and listening – in two languages. Hornberger’s (2004) continua of biliteracy was selected for the primary theoretical framework because it acknowledges biliteracy as a complex, multi-faceted skill in which individuals may have a diverse set of language strengths, backgrounds, and L1-L2 (first and second language) interactions. It provides an inclusive and acknowledging foundation for the heterogenous group of bilingual students that participated in this study.

Hornberger (2004) describes biliteracy as “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing” (p. 156), in which an individual’s biliteracy exists within a set of nested and interrelated continua (e.g., contexts, development, content, and media of biliteracy). Biliteracy, then, describes how that individual falls on a combination of these continua, such as monolingual-bilingual, micro-macro, vernacular-literary, and simultaneous exposure-successive exposure contexts (Hornberger & Link, 2012). In this way, biliteracy pushes against the common dichotomous conceptualizations of language and, instead, allows for placement on a range of linguistic competencies (Reyes & Hornberger, 2016). It is a complex characteristic that recognizes the diversity of language and culture while breaking down the privileges and power associated with one end of each continuum (e.g., monolingual over bilingual/multilingual). For example, some biliterate students may have developed as language learners through more oral production in a mixed exposure of L1 and L2 containing similar linguistic structures, while others may have learned a linguistically dissimilar second language by reading books and writing journals in a non-native setting.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism is essential to the study because the role of social interaction is critical to the development of cognition, language, and identity. Interaction in social, cultural, linguistic, and formed settings such as family, peer, and sports groups support these developmental processes. According to Vygotsky (1987), internalization denotes the process in which language moves from a social phenomenon to a mental activity. Every psychological function appears twice, first at the social level and then on an individual level. “Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into
the intellectual life around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). One of the most important findings of Vygotsky’s work is that learning takes place collaboratively with others, and that language is the most powerful tool that humans use to make connections to the world and heighten awareness of others and themselves. Vygotsky’s role of social interaction has been tested in numerous studies with bilingual children. In 1962, a critical study, conducted by Canadian researchers Peal and Lambert, studied bilingual children of the same age and socioeconomic status and compared them with monolingual counterparts in the areas of verbal and non-verbal intelligence. On most of the cognitive and verbal tasks, the bilingual children performed significantly better than their monolingual peers. The results suggested that the children’s bilingual experiences were positive, since they appeared to function at a higher level (González, 2008).

**Social Capital and Youth Social Capital**

During the coding process, it became evident that social networks, trust, and reciprocity demonstrated the formation of social capital in the students’ lives. Initial results led to further exploring the links between students’ biliteracy experiences and social capital theory. Bourdieu (1986) indicated that social capital is the aggregate of current or potential resources relating to existing permanent networks which can be based on institutional relationships of interpersonal respect and acceptance. Individuals can leverage relationships with others in order to achieve an employment or educational goal.

In contrast to Bourdieu, Putnam (1993) suggested that social capital should be for public good or for the benefit of individuals and mutually supportive relationships in communities and nations. Social capital, which Putnam defines as “networks and norms of civic engagement” (para. 25), allows members of a community to trust one another. Putnam (2001) later made a distinction between two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding occurs when one socializes with similar people, while bridging occurs when one makes friends with others who are different. While both forms of capital are important and strengthen each other, one needs the second type of social capital – bridging – in order to create peaceful societies in a diverse country. Putnam’s work is important to this study because the student participants engaged in both forms of social capital; first, by bonding with similar young adults and forming peer groups and friendships, and in the second form by bridging into second language groups en route to their future educational goals and adulthood. From an educational perspective, Coleman (1988) described social capital as the resources that parents use to advance their children’s academic success. Coleman’s work is important to this study because it reflects how children’s homes and families connect them to the broader community. Coleman also speculated that social capital moves beyond the family structure and is critical to youth development.

Boeck, Fleming, and Kemshall (2006) present a framework for social capital which they explain “contains those key features of social capital most supported by research literature ... and contains factors which were seen as related to social capital or which might influence the enhancement and development of social capital” (p. 8). These eight influential factors of social capital include sense of belonging, networks (bonding/bridging), feelings of trust and safety, reciprocity, participation, citizen power/proactivity, diversity, and values, norms, outlook in life and capture many of the principles of the previous social capital researchers and theorists. For these reasons, this study utilizes Boeck and Fleming’s (2005) social capital framework in the analysis of the biliterate students’ voices.
In order to situate social capital within the context of biliteracy in high school students, the researchers examined Bassani’s (2007) work in youth social capital. Her work not only centers individual youth as the context for social capital, but also provides the concept of resource mobilization. In the mobilization process, untapped social resources assemble into increased social capital and well-being. Within the analysis process, it became clear that students’ biliteracies played a key role in the mobilization of social capital factors as described in the work by Boeck and Fleming (2005). According to Billett (2012), “in order to conduct ethical youth social capital research, it is imperative that young people’s own voices are heard, their right to participate respected and their experiences acknowledged” (p. 43); therefore, this study examining the relationship between biliteracy and youth social capital is firmly grounded in young people’s voices.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Participants were juniors and seniors who received the Arkansas Biliteracy Award from four high schools in three public school districts in Northwest Arkansas, an expanding region and the home to a large population of Hispanic and Marshallese families. While the majority of award recipients demonstrated biliteracy in Spanish as their first language and English as their second, others were native English speakers who had learned Spanish, French, or German as a foreign language. Only a few students grew up in bilingual households and considered themselves to be nearly equally proficient in both languages. Of the ninety-five (95) students who met the selected criteria for receiving the award, forty-seven (47) provided consent for their essays to be used in the study and twenty-one (21) students allowed the researchers to contact them for an interview. The present study involves data from forty-seven (47) essays and twelve (12) interviews. Although the validity of this study is strengthened due to a high response rate (approximately 50%), it should be noted that these 47 students represent only a fraction of biliterate Arkansas students who did not have the opportunity to apply for the award due to lack of statewide recognition.

Data Collection

Data collection took place at three school districts in Northwest Arkansas in the spring and summer of 2017, after all of the Arkansas Biliteracy Awards had been presented. In order to include students’ essays and conduct interviews, informed consent and, if needed, parental consent forms were distributed to the students after they had received the award to avoid having students feel pressured to participate in the study. Participants had three options for taking part in the research (essay only, interview only, or both), and each participant was assigned a code number.

Instruments

Essay. As part of the application process for the Arkansas Biliteracy Award, students were required to submit an essay about their biliteracy experiences. Although a prompt for the essay was given (“Explain how your biliteracy experiences have prepared you for your future goals and career plans.”) and at least 200 words were required, participants’ essays varied in length and
style but all shared the theme of biliteracy. The essays provided the students with a narrative voice to describe their experiences as biliterate youth. According to Handy and Ross (2005), “written accounts can provide a valuable alternative to in depth verbal interviews and are currently a neglected resource within the lexicon of qualitative research techniques” (p. 41). Additionally, providing participants with an “essay only” consent option may have assisted in avoiding the inherent power issues of interviewing while still allowing for student voice (Nunkoosing, 2005).

**Interview Protocol.** The researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of fourteen questions, including:

- “Why were you motivated to apply for the Arkansas Biliteracy Award?”,
- “Tell us about how you went from a beginning language learner to biliteracy,” and
- “How does it make you feel to be bilingual/biliterate?”

As suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), a semi-structured approach to interviewing allows for the inclusion of “specific, tailored follow-up questions within and across interviews” to create a “unique and customized conversational path” (p. 154). The interviewer began by asking participants for permission to read their essay aloud. As part of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the researchers asked the participants to clarify and expound on what they had written, and the students often told stories relating to their biliteracy experiences and bicultural identities.

**Procedure for Data Analysis**

The question at the heart of this research was, “How do students who received the Arkansas Biliteracy Award perceive their biliteracy experiences?” This study required a qualitative, exploratory component (Creswell, 2009). Through the narrative inquiry approach and listening to students’ voices as they told their stories in the interview process and reviewing student essays, the researchers had the opportunity to listen to participants and build an understanding of the students’ biliteracy experiences and bicultural development. According to Creswell (2007), the researchers go through the data process “moving in analytic circles rather than used a fixed linear approach” (p. 150). The voices of the students, drawn from the essays and interviews, acted as the empirical indicators of the studied social phenomena. Following the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the aim was to create categories (themes) linked to different parts of the text (evidence in quotations) and written as the empirical corpus. An inductive analysis was used as the details and specifics of the data identified patterns, themes, and interrelationships.

The researchers triangulated the qualitative data from the participants’ essays and interviews in two ways: first, participants were asked if their essays could be read during the interview to encourage recollection and conversation; and second, any quotes from the essays that needed additional clarification, as well as personalized follow-up questions, were brought up during the interviews. To maximize interrater reliability, each researcher independently coded the interviews and essays multiple times to uncover relationships and themes, which were compared during frequent analysis meetings.

From the onset of data collection, the researchers looked for similarities and differences in participants’ accounts through constant comparative analysis. In the essays and interviews, students told their stories and constructed meaning (defined themselves) around their identity and biliteracy experiences in answering the questions of who they perceived themselves to be.
The coding process began after all essays and interviews had been collected and transcribed. The researchers conducted an independent and iterative open coding process in order to identify consistent themes and connections in the data. Then, these themes and relationships were considered against a range of theoretical perspectives. The developing theory was tested through theoretical sampling and the construction of a categorical evidence model of analysis. The model utilized quotes of the participants’ voices as evidence of the connection between the strongest themes from the data and the evolving theoretical framework.

Findings

The data was conceptualized by organizing key terms, which formed categorical themes of analysis. The researchers worked separately to code the interviews and essays and met together regularly to discuss the analysis. Six primary descriptive categories emerged from the essay and interview data.

Category One: Support System/Relationships. The evidence from the data revealed that the biliterate students had family support, received encouragement and made connections with teachers and staff members, and became part of community or youth-centered groups both inside and outside of the classroom. The students who were taking language courses formed bonds with each other and joined leadership clubs and organizations together, thereby strengthening the identification with the group. Many students indicated that a friend or other family member was available for social or academic support, and the closeness of these social, academic, and familial relationships facilitated greater trust and a sense of community. Zhou and Bankston’s study (1994) found that Vietnamese youth who had strong positive connections to their immigrant backgrounds can serve as a form of social capital promoting conformity in values and promising forms of behavior. This connection is apparent in the findings section; as students became more involved with their friends, peers, school, parents, and community, they began to experience an increased sense of positive values in self, trust, and drive. These expressed experiences produced additional healthy relationships and resulted in increased social capital for the bilingual youth.

Category Two: Language as an Opportunity. Students spoke of language as a benefit, advantage, and a blessing that would open doors to future educational and career opportunities. The students became aware that their resumes strengthened with the biliteracy award recognition and would make them more marketable to employers and educational institutions. Furthermore, language provided students with a means to serve their bilingual communities, both inside and outside of the school setting. They also described how biliteracy allowed them to build relationships with others, appreciate and become comfortable with new cultures, and break free of stereotypes and other societal restraints.

Category Three: Service. This category reflected students discussing how they had helped or inspired others through service using their bilingual skills. Although the prompt included no mention of how their biliteracy affected others, the majority of students expressed their biliteracy in terms of how it helped other people. Helping others provided the students with an outlet for compassion, empathy, growth, and development as civic-minded young adults. Communication and service to others formed the resources that proved critical to their well-being. The service opportunities fueled the students’ passions in further pursuing their language studies, so that they could be of greater help and service to others. One student discussed
returning to an immigration center so that she could further help families detained in border towns. Another student discussed how he wanted to improve his bilingual skills in order to help bilingual customers at his after school place of employment. This category may be conceptually related to Category One (Support Systems/Relationships) in that students are involved in receiving or providing support to others.

**Category Four: Self-identity.** Students often described their biliteracy in terms of how it shaped their identity, became an integral part of their lives, and made them feel more confident and aware. In similar fashion to viewing their language skills as an opportunity, many students felt proud and honored to speak two languages. Students developed a deeper sense of self-awareness in relation to their cultural identities, which came about through the connections that students made with their communities, families, teachers, and peers. Some students described language as an important personal connection to their heritage culture, while others illustrated their biliteracy as an example of how they belong to and move between multiple cultures.

**Category Five: Beyond the Classroom.** Students listened to music, watched movies and television shows in the target language, downloaded apps, and read books in order to continue improving their language skills. They sought out interaction with target language resources and speakers at their school and community. Some students had the chance to travel to their home or a foreign country and become immersed in one of their languages, while others turned to technology to make that language connection. While some students were thrust into bilingual settings through family situations, work, or travel, others sought their own “beyond the classroom” experiences. One student discussed watching bilingual and foreign films on Netflix, while another student described spending much of his free time watching entertaining videos in English on YouTube. Another student mentioned changing her mobile phone settings to have easy online accessibility in two languages. These examples provide evidence of how the students participated in self-directed learning and demonstrated an increase in both confidence and motivation for engaging in biliterate activities outside of the classroom.

**Category Six: Challenges (Isolation, Confusion, Frustration, and Homelessness).** When asked about their personal language learning history, almost all non-native English speakers articulated frustration and discouragement as beginning level language learners in a native environment. Both socioeconomic and sociocultural factors led to these negative situations such as isolation and depression. Some students felt disconnected from their peers due to cultural and language barriers, which led to lower grades, lack of interest, and giving up. One Hispanic girl was bullied in middle school because she was unable to build relationships with her peers. Another boy grew up as a migrant worker in a border town after leaving his home country at a very young age. While second language learning can be a frustrating and difficult, the biliterate teens persevered through sometimes daunting circumstances to become proficient in two languages and gain positive outlooks about their futures.

**Bilingual Youth Social Capital**

As a result of the findings, a theory emerged from the data demonstrating the positive impact of biliterate skills on youth social capital. Analysis exhibited how students’ biliterate contexts regulated the mobilization of influential factors (e.g., networks, feelings of trust, participation, etc.) into social capital and well-being. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this process. Bilingual youth social capital—what the researchers term the influence of bilingualism or biliteracy on the creation of youth social capital—acted as a catalyst that propelled
students to develop a stronger sense of identity, self-efficacy, and well-being. The effect is also cyclical and exponential; as youth social capital and bilingual social capital strengthen, so too do the initial influential factors described by Boeck and Fleming (2005). Students often described how their enhanced biliteracy and social capital led to greater social and civic participation, increased feelings of belonging, and positive beliefs about diversity. Students became distinctly aware of the powerful resources provided with the recognition of their bilingual skills. Some students relied heavily on family, school, and primary social networks, while others branched out into more extra-curricular venues such as employment, interpreting, or community service activities at home or abroad.

Figure 1. Model for Bilinguistic Youh Social Capital. Adapted from models presented in Bassani (2007), Boeck & Fleming (2005), and Hornberger (2004).

After receiving the biliteracy award, the students not only understood that there would be opportunities and doors opening to them in the future, but they also gained a stronger sense of their personal bicultural identities. Not one, but both languages and cultures resulted in providing students with a sense of empowerment, honor; and pride. Many students said that receiving the award was “proving to myself” that bilingual skills were worthy and valuable accomplishments. Through biliteracy skill development processes and personal experiences, students grew exponentially in terms of self-realization, service and connections to others, empathy, and a sense of purpose and future goals. Table 1 provides evidence of bilinguistic youth social capital by showing the relationship between the categories of analysis, participant data, and social capital theory.

Association with the teachers and staff mentors led to higher status within the school structural organization. It is not surprising that students who have strong relationships with their teachers and adult mentors can draw upon social capital for networking, career development, and academic advancement. In the case of the Arkansas Biliteracy Award recipients, the students perceived that they had more opportunities and advantages available to them due to their biliteracy skills. The teachers built strong relationships with students by investing their time and efforts to encourage further language studies of their students, thereby exchanging social capital within the organizational school structure.
Table 1. Categorical Evidence Model of Bilingual Youth Social Capital

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Evidence in Data</th>
<th>Connection to Youth Social Capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support System</strong></td>
<td>“I am very grateful for those teachers, friends, and my family that motivated me to learn and challenged me to look forward to a new world in which I could be successful due to learning different languages. These past years have been the best of my life.” (Essay #25)</td>
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<td>“My parents have always taught me the importance of speaking and writing in both languages. Being able to speak and write in two languages will keep me connected to my culture and also help me learn more about different cultures.” (Essay #17)</td>
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<td>“I’m thankful for the ones that helped me keep striving to learn more of the English language while still keeping my first language, Spanish. With this opportunity that I’m given, I will make this worth the while and make something great out of it.” (Essay #35)</td>
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<td>“I just started with the kids who were Hispanic, so I could have that connection. If something happened I could talk to them in Spanish, and if I messed up they were like, ‘No, this is not how you say it. This is how you say it.’” (Interview #8)</td>
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<td>“While that was happening, my English teacher convinced me to do a test to see if I qualify for AP English. I did not want to do it. I told him, ‘No! I’ll just stay in regular (English). No, no.’ And so the day of the test he got me out of the classroom and told me, ‘Look, if you keep on that attitude you’re not going to get far. You need to go and try to do the test.’ And then he told me, ‘You need to step up. If you don’t pass the exam, it’s fine. You stay in regular, nothing happens. But if you pass you get an opportunity. See how it goes. I’m pretty sure you’re going to do good.’” (Interview #8)</td>
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| Networks (Bonding/Bridging) | Values, Norms, Outlook in Life; Diversity |
| Networks (Bonding/Bridging); Reciprocity | Sense of Belonging; Feelings of Trust and Safety |
| Feelings of Trust and Safety | Values, Norms, Outlook in Life |
### Language as an Opportunity

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<th>Quote</th>
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<th>Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>“It wasn’t until I entered high school that I realized what an advantage being bilingual is. It has done nothing but benefit me. It is something I take great pride in.”</td>
<td>Essay #8</td>
<td>Values, Norms, Outlook in Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I’m equally thankful for those two role models that helped me pursue a higher education. I wouldn’t have recognized that language is such a key to success if it wasn’t for them.”</td>
<td>Essay #12</td>
<td>Networks (Bonding/Bridging)</td>
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<td>“One of the greatest advantages of being biliterate is being able to enjoy other cultures around the world. It has prepared me to be comfortable in any area that may be a place I’ve never been before and allows me to be comfortable and take in all of the many traditions and customs of a culture that is not like mine.”</td>
<td>Essay #15</td>
<td>Diversity; Participation</td>
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<td>“So getting the Biliteracy Award proved not only to them but to me that I’m capable of much more than what this society tells me I can. I’m capable of connecting not only to my culture but different cultures. I’m capable of getting a job and getting a salary because of my biliteracy skills. I’m capable of doing great things. I’m capable of going to college and believing that I can. I can become what I want to.”</td>
<td>Interview #8</td>
<td>Values, Norms, Outlook in Life; Diversity</td>
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### Service

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<th>Quote</th>
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<td>“It (biliteracy) will not only help me, but it will help many other people.”</td>
<td>Essay #3</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
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<td>“Ultimately, my main goal is to help out when someone is struggling to communicate with others.”</td>
<td>Essay #7</td>
<td>Citizen Power / Proactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When you know that you are helping someone, it is one of the best feelings that no one can take away from you.”</td>
<td>Essay #18</td>
<td>Values, Norms, Outlook in Life</td>
</tr>
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<td>“My career plan is to become an international travelling nurse. My dream is to have a career that allows me to pursue my two passions, which are helping others and traveling. My biliteracy experiences have given me the chance to converse with people of different ethnicities, learn more about different cultures, and allowed me to gain a deeper appreciation of the Spanish language and those who speak it.”</td>
<td>Essay #45</td>
<td>Citizen Power / Proactivity; Diversity; Participation</td>
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**Service (cont.)**

"Because I used to have trouble. I used to have people to help me, and I’m doing the same thing that they did to me. When a person came and they’re from like Mexico or El Salvador, and they barely say anything in English. I met a lot of people like that. It’s like, they came, they didn’t know anything, I’m like, ‘Okay, no worries. I got you.’ … and then after that it’s that feeling in my heart, that like I got a little warm feeling in my heart, and it’s like, ‘Aw!’ I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain that feeling. It’s a happy feeling.” (Interview #5)

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<th>Reciprocity; Networks (Bonding/Bridging)</th>
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<th><strong>Self-identity</strong></th>
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"Overall, being biliterate has molded me into a strong individual and a much more confident person.” (Essay #7)

"It (bilingual) has become part of my culture, and I wouldn’t want to get rid of it.” (Essay #4)

"I didn’t realize the importance of my native language until I started working in retail. When I help them, we don’t only share a language, but we share a connection that gives them a sense of comfort.” (Essay #11)

"I am neither one culture of the other entirely but a unique mix of both, giving me access to two separate worlds as well as advantages in these two worlds. I can easily say that I am very proud of my biliterate abilities. Knowing two languages has opened up two different cultures and in so doing has broadened my perspective and given me a great appreciation for any and all types of art.” (Essay #20)

"Learning another language has been one of the most transforming things I have done in high school. Never did I imagine just how much this language would evolve for me over the years.” (Essay #40)

"One of the things I have learned in my life is that it’s important to make friends everywhere you go. My friends over there help me with my Spanish, and I help them with English. Being biliterate is one of my favorite things about me, and I am so grateful my parents made me speak Spanish growing up. So, not only would I learn, but to keep my heritage intact, that I am proud of.” (Essay #41)

| Values, Norms, Outlook in Life |
| Diversity |
| Feelings of Trust and Safety; Sense of Belonging |
| Sense of Belonging; Diversity; Networks (Bonding/Bridging) |
| Values, Norms, Outlook in Life |
| Networks (Bonding/Bridging); Feelings of Trust and Safety |
**Self-identity (cont.)**

“I don’t know, I think I’ve always kind of wondered who I am, and like struggled with my identity. I’m not sure if I’m like, because I’m like 100% Salvadorian, but I’m also American. So I’ve always kind of struggled with that balance.... But I’m American because I was born here, you know. So I’ve always struggled with who am I and where do I fit in, because I’ve always felt like I’m not totally this but I’m not totally that, so I’m kind of like walking the line in the middle. And then so I’ve always struggled with that but finally I kind of like, I’ve re-alized that’s just who I am. I walk the middle. Better to just take advantage of both parts.” (Interview #10)

**Beyond the Classroom**

“I absolutely loved working in the immigration center. Being a translator, because I was biliterate, made me feel empowered that I was able to help these kind families. I will never forget this experience. This connection did not require an understanding of language, but an understanding of human-ity.” (Essay #9)

“I’m really, really interested in cultures and it’s fascinating to me. And just, I think once I started taking the first class, I re-alized how many doors had opened, because I’m on the soccer team and there are girls on the soccer team who would have conversations in Spanish on the sideline, and previously I had no idea what they were saying, and now I can understand them and converse with them.” (Interview #2)

“So I continued taking Spanish classes and my dad contin-ued taking me to Guatemala, so I’ve been four times to Guatemala. Just with that experience, the cultural experi-ence, plus the classroom experience, really helped me over-the-top excel which is awesome. And then this past Spring Break, my dad took me to Mexico and I did a lot of translat-ing. He was there for a business thing but he needed me to translate for him, so that helped a lot... I actually wasn’t planning on taking a language in 8th grade, but after my trip there was like definitely a purpose for me taking it because I know these people and I want to be able to talk to them.” (Interview #7)
### Challenges (Isolation, Frustration, Confusion, Homelessness)

- “I isolated myself and it reflected in my education. My grades were down very badly. I got so frustrated that trying seemed so hard and impossible... Being biliterate has taught me the importance of two languages, a diverse country, and the importance of pursuing a better future in this country.” (Essay #14)

- “Not having the ability to make friends, led me to a close-minded world where the only friend I could count on was God. By having the ability to speak two languages, I have experienced the feeling of proudness. Bilingualism improved my brain functions, like to ability to focus attention and perform mental tasks. My confidence has increased, by helping other people who, sadly, do not speak English. Being able to speak two languages helped me to improve as a person, and it also helped me to develop deeper by reducing my natural human biases.” (Essay #19)

- “I’ve always been the kind of student who likes to understand everything the teacher is talking about so I could do good. And it was frustrating for me to sit there and watch their mouth move and not know anything that they were saying. It was very frustrating for me. And then I gave up, I guess.” (Interview #8)

- “At first it was just really hard because I didn’t have no friends... The girls that tried to talk to me, but I just couldn’t understand them... I didn’t really have friends, not even the Spanish speakers.” (Interview #2)

### Diversity; Sense of Belonging

- Values, Norms, Outlook in Life; Reciprocity, Diversity

- Participation; Feelings of Trust and Safety

- Sense of Belonging; Feelings of Trust and Safety

### Recommendations and Implications

Bilingual youth social capital is a highly complex phenomenon illustrating the relationships between biliteracy, youth social capital, and cultural identities. Youth social capital can be viewed as both a contributor and an outcome of the participants’ developing bilingualism. This study supported Hornberger’s (2004; Hornberger & Link, 2012) framework for biliteracy and youth social capital theories (Bassani, 2007) which provided empirical data urging participants to draw upon all of the aspects of the continua, including both the micro (home) and the macro (school) settings. Students reported that home, school, and community support systems were instrumental in encouraging their personal biliteracy trajectories. These relationship variables were rooted in the family and school support systems and extended to the greater cultural communities, creating positive civic and social engagement experiences which produced bilingual youth social capital and increased the youths’ overall well-being. These findings support the work of Bassini (2007) who advocates for integration of the various groups of which young people are members.
In describing bilingualistic youth social capital in a conceptual model, it is the authors’ hope that, as a result of the findings, parents and educators can be provided with tools and resources so that they can continually cherish and preserve home languages and cultural practices and traditions. Bilingual families need affirmation that the home culture will strengthen, not diminish, their children’s identity and development, and educators need to reinforce this message. Educators also need to identify the ways to help children of all ages use their bilingual toolkit and access the resources to support long-term academic goals. Educational and pedagogical policies should treat children’s “bilingualism and biliteracy as part of the solution rather than part of the problem” (Cummins, 2000, p. 1). This perspective should become a key component of educational reforms, professional development, and educator preparation programs addressing students’ home linguistic capital with classroom discourses that increase social, emotional, and cultural capital for the nation’s bilingual youth.

The authors recommend systemic changes at the national, community, school, and family levels. At the national level, language policies related to multilingualism need to be designed, developed, and implemented. Additionally, the authors advocate for fostering and preserving students’ and their families’ national and cultural origins along with a strength-based approach to heritage language programs. There is a critical need to promote the goals of biliteracy while moving away from the ingrained dominance of a monolingual perspective “which typically neglects to explore how bilingualism itself may be an asset for youth in U.S. schools” (Proctor & Silverman, 2011, p. 62). Learning more than one language is a tremendous asset to an individual, community, and society, and it is a worthwhile investment to develop multilingualism in the nation’s schools. Children’s home languages need to be valued and supported by schools and communities, and foreign language education should be a requirement for all students. Through the Arkansas Biliteracy Award and the larger national Seal of Biliteracy initiative, showcasing students’ bilingual skills was a way to validate the accomplishments of young adults who were forging their personal identities. As expressed by one biliterate student, “Overall, being biliterate has molded me into a strong individual and a much more confident person.”

Students’ sociocultural emotional development was expressed through their descriptions of personal experiences, including both challenges and successes, which pushed students into taking ownership of their academic goals and developing plans for their futures. Many students exhibited self-efficacy with an “I can do it” attitude, stating that there would be opportunities for them as related to the increasing global demand for bilingual workers (New American Economy, 2017). Students’ social networks strengthened as they became involved in civic engagement and moved “beyond the classroom.” Moving into the civic engagement arena and experiencing helping others increased the students’ social capital, thereby increasing their bicultural identities. Increasing civic engagement activities and providing service learning experiences for students should be integrated into classroom practices. Young adults are more reliant on their primary group (family) and the school; therefore, community members need to network and build the bridges to create programs and opportunities to enhance the well-being of biliterate and multilingual youth. This process involves what Colvin and Volet (2014) refer to as positive intercultural interaction experiences.

Finally, this study found that bilingualism and multilingualism should be for all students, not just for non-native English speakers, as part of an agenda to promote foreign language study. For example, in the category beyond the classroom, the three student voices from English-
speaking homes resonate with how the students’ emergent bilingualism promoted their further foreign language study. Foreign language students involved in authentic communication or service to others explicitly described how they felt more motivated to continue language study. The authors advocate for policies that expand K-12 foreign language study at the national level and encourage foreign language teachers to implement international exchange programs such as German American Partnership Program (GAPP) in their own schools to promote feelings of participation, diversity, reciprocity, and bridging in their language learners.

Future research should look further into the sociocultural variables related to the zones of potential and proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that would explore why students from the same homes, schools, and communities are less adaptive to developing biliteracies. Additional research could investigate school models which do not provide bilingual education or dual language programs but are successful in promoting and supporting the biliteracy and the bicultural development of children and youth in their communities. Most importantly, it is interesting to note that students moved beyond traditional social networks – school and family – and branched into other social arenas resulting in positive experiences such as digital social networks, jobs, and service work. Considering the importance of technology to youth, this is one area that needs further exploration. In one case study, Lam (2009) offers the example of a Chinese immigrant teenager who had experiences in several languages and created new literacy spaces to communicate with friends back in China. The technologies of instant messaging and texting created rewarding means of communicating across cultures. Developing and advocating for bilingual and multilingual international technological networks for young adults could be a potential viable and promising platform for increasing bilingual youth social capital.

References


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