

Hannah Emery

Cultivating Global Citizens: Parents' Choice of Foreign Language Immersion

Move1 *Abstract: According to the child-rearing model advanced by Lareau (2003), parents who use the*
step2 *time-consuming “concerted cultivation” method with their children do so for reasons that are almost unconscious. However, even if the broad techniques of child-rearing are implemented unconsciously, the specific mechanisms chosen by middle- and upper-middle class parents in their search for cultivation vary from one family to another – and making a choice between enrichment methods is a process that would seem to operate on a highly conscious level. To*
Move2 *answer the question of what conscious motivations parents bring into play when choosing how*
step1 *to cultivate their children, the author interviewed parents who had all chosen a similar*
step2 *cultivation method: enrollment in foreign language immersion schools. When asked why they*
step3 *chose these programs over other types of school enrichment, parents acknowledged bilingualism’s practical benefits, but spoke at much greater length about the desirability of a multicultural identity. These findings suggest the potential need for an extension of Lareau’s*
step4 *paradigm: while the particular enrichment choices made by parents undoubtedly have some basis in desires for instrumental outcomes, the role played by identity formation clearly warrants further study.*

In her account of the rise of “concerted cultivation” practices among middle-class families, Lareau (2003) claims that for parents from all class backgrounds, “child-rearing practices [appear] to be natural. Like breathing, child rearing usually [seems] automatic and unconscious” (2003:239). Whether the population under consideration is working-class parents inclined to follow the laissez-faire approach that Lareau dubs “the accomplishment of natural growth” or middle-class parents focused on their children’s active development and “enrichment,” Lareau’s model suggests that overarching philosophies of child-rearing are drawn largely from parents’ collective class habitus, and generally seen simply as the right way to parent. In practice, however, parenting can rarely be unconscious: when approaching the question of how best to provide opportunities for one’s child, overarching philosophies do little to help parents choose among specific enrichment options. Even for a class of parents united in the belief that active cultivation is the way to raise their children, the question of finding the “best” way to practice this technique is not answered automatically.

One powerful example of this “choice of cultivation” challenge can be seen in the rising prevalence of school choice programs. While parents have long had the option of “customizing” their child’s education with private schools, in the last few decades, even public school systems have increasingly offered a range of different programs, a phenomenon that encompasses the rise of charter and magnet schools as well as specialized tracks within “regular” schools (see Archbald 2004, Finn et al 2000, Davies & Quirke 2005 and others for further discussion). In many urban school districts, as an effort to reduce school segregation, the parents of rising kindergarteners are expected to rank a list of city schools – potentially, but not necessarily, including their neighborhood school – and then take their chances in a lottery system. Given this increasing pressure to choose the right school, the question of what factors parents weigh in the school choice decision-making process seems poised to shed additional light on the practices outlined in Lareau’s concerted cultivation model. For parents seeking to use school as a means of cultivation, large urban districts provide a multitude of options. In the San Francisco Bay Area, parents can look into public schools with a focus on science or the arts, or to private schools that emphasize religion or offer single-sex instruction. In this paper, I examine a particularly specialized form of enrichment school: foreign-language immersion.

In some ways, immersion schools are not much different from other magnet programs. As is the case with most magnet schools, these programs are often founded and overwhelmingly patronized by highly educated, middle-class families seeking an opportunity to “cultivate” their children by promoting a skill viewed as having significant cognitive and “multicultural” benefits. In fact, districts often place their public immersion programs in “failing” schools for just this reason, banking on the influx of middle-class parents to help reverse a school’s downward trajectory (Linton 2004). However, by their very nature, immersion schools include risks that go

above and beyond other forms of “enrichment.” In immersion, native English-speaking students receive half-day or full-day instruction in all subjects in a second language, an approach which positions children to spend their first two to four school years learning fundamental concepts in an unfamiliar language. In an age where district, state and national funding decisions are increasingly based on school test scores (Borkowski & Sneed 2006, Diamond 2007 and others), parents might be expected to balk at the risks of their children’s “falling behind,” even as they consider the benefits of the immersion process. It is this seeming contradiction that I explore in this paper: *How do parents come to choose immersion schools as the best option for their child?*

My paper does not propose to draw conclusions about qualities that might be unique to immersion parents, or to compare the choice of immersion schools with other specialized school programs. Rather, like Swidler (2001) in her study of how married couples talk about their experiences, I sought to examine the different ways my participants justified a course of action that had led them all to the same outcome. My research encompassed interviews with parents from six different Bay Area immersion programs; in an effort to capture the diversity of the immersion school population, my sample was drawn from three public and three private schools, and included families who had chosen Spanish, French, Mandarin and Cantonese immersion. I anticipated that there might be some differences in justification across these different school types, but given the uniform way in which the schools lauded themselves as beneficial to children and families, as well as the similar backgrounds of the families choosing the programs, I also suspected that my sample population would have many similar motivations.

School Selection, Middle Class Success, and Identity

Interactions between parents, teachers, and the school play a significant part in Lareau’s construction of the concerted cultivation model: as she acknowledges, middle-class parents are

substantially more likely than their working-class counterparts to be actively involved in “tailoring” their children’s day-to-day school experiences. While working-class parents view education as primarily being the job of the school, Lareau argues, middle-class parents “believe that education is a shared responsibility between teachers and parents, they have extensive information about their children’s schooling, and they are very critical of the school, including the professional performance of their children’s teacher(s)” (2000:8). Lareau suggests that middle-class parents see the educational process as a site for parent-teacher collaboration, with parents having the final say when it comes to the details of their child’s school experience. However, the question of *selecting* a specific school is not specifically addressed in her model.

While the range of school choice options has widened dramatically in recent years, the idea of alternatives to mainstream public education is hardly a new one. The literature suggests that school has long been seen as a place not merely where children are educated, but where family values are reinforced; from the earliest days of organized education, religious schools have offered an alternative to the “corrupting” influence of public school (Bryk et al 1993). More recently, home schooling has provided a refuge for widely diverse groups of parents who felt that public schools were not meeting their children’s needs (Stevens 2001). This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by school professionals: as Davies and Quirke (2004) document, when wooing prospective parents, small private schools are as inclined to emphasize their personal touch and “tailored educational experience” (2004:542) as test scores or other more quantitative measures of quality. Prior research also suggests that different groups of parents may seek different things from their schools. Particularly for middle- and upper-middle-class parents, a school deemed “good” is most apt to be one with a “good feel,” and one that complements the “particular proclivities, interests, aspirations and/or personality of [the] child” (Gewirtz et al 1995:28).

While working-class parents may be inclined to choose the school that is most convenient, closest to home or safest, middle-class parents want more.

In addition to reinforcing parents' inclination to tailor their children's educational experience, the rise in specialized school programs might also be seen as speaking to another aspect of American middle- and upper-middle-class culture, one pointed to by Lamont (1992) in her study of the values of French and American upper-middle-class men. In the view of Lamont's American respondents, one of the most important goals for an individual to pursue was "self-actualization," the process of developing "[your] potential to its maximum" (99). These men placed great value on "doing [something] with your life" (98), and sought to pass these sentiments on to their children as well. Adopting an attitude reminiscent of that later echoed by Lareau's "concerted cultivators," Lamont's respondents viewed themselves as projects to be developed. However, as in Lareau's work, the question of how respondents go about selecting a means of self-development remains unexplored for Lamont.

One possible answer is provided by Gross (2002): in his work exploring how graduate students select an academic trajectory, Gross emphasizes the power of " 'self-concept' – the more or less stable narratives thinkers use to understand who they are" (2002:53). While he acknowledges that practical features – in this case, status aspirations – undoubtedly play a role in students' selection of one subfield specialty over another, he goes on to suggest that with all other things being equal, individuals are drawn toward those options that resonate most strongly with their own self-concept. To apply Gross's analysis to the immersion school choice process, it is necessary to consider two elements: the ways in which parents' choice of an immersion school might serve to reinforce their own self-concept, and the possible influence that parents would view immersion school as having on their children's self-concept and identity.

When considering how parents might justify their commitment to immersion schools in terms of their own self-concept, one factor to consider is the way in which “global-mindedness” has increasingly been framed in American culture. As Binder (2002) details in her examination of attempts to implement Afrocentric and creationist curricula in public school systems, the push for multiculturalism and the inclusion of “minority voices” in the “mainstream” is increasingly pervasive, and viewed as carrying substantial political and moral weight. Michaels (2006) argues that regardless of political stripe, modern middle- and upper-middle class Americans have been socialized into believing that a comfort level with “diverse” individuals (most often used as a euphemism for race) is a necessary part of success in the modern world. Given the strong popular association between “multiculturalism” and “forward-thinking” political values, for individuals trying to maintain a self-concept of forward-thinking liberalism, a public commitment to multiculturalism would seem to be a necessary part of the package. Thus, I expected that some parents might justify their choice of immersion school in terms of the “boost” to their own liberal credentials. However, given what Ferree (2003) might label the “resonance” of certain discourses in the arena of parenting, and of school choice specifically – particularly the emphasis noted by Davis and Quirke (2004), that of school choice as an opportunity to further the specialized experience of the “priceless child”(Zelizer 1994) – I suspected that the majority of parents’ justifications would focus on the way in which their choice benefited their children.

As explored by Ferree (2003) and Binder (2002), the way in which a movement frames itself can have a powerful influence on how it is viewed by the cultural mainstream. Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) examine the same phenomenon from a slightly different angle with their concept of “group style,” the idea that each social setting encompasses particular rules and norms that constrain both the manner in which participants talk in the setting and the subjects that are

deemed acceptable conversation. Although the field of immersion schools is quite diverse, with the Bay Area alone containing more than a dozen private and more than three times that number of public immersion schools, the promotional literature on the self-proclaimed benefits of immersion follows a remarkably uniform pattern from one school to the next. School websites inevitably have a section purporting to answer some version of the question “Why immersion?”, which carefully lays out what might be called the instrumental advantages of bilingualism, its cognitive and academic benefits (which appear to be fairly well-documented: see Stewart 2005 for more information on these findings). However, the front pages of these websites hold a different message. The site of my study’s French private school is emblazoned with the slogan “At Home in the World”; the Spanish private school’s carries the bilingual message “Two Languages – Many Cultures – One World.” While these schools are prepared to address parents’ instrumental concerns – the practical limitations acknowledged by Gross to play a key role in the decision-making process – the emphasis is heavily placed on bilingualism’s expressive value.

Previous research on families who pursue bilingualism for their children has found that parents tend to draw on both rationales to justify their choice: bilingualism provides an *instrumental* benefit to children’s brains, as well as something to put on their college application essays; but it also provides them the *expressive* benefit of a broader sense of the world (Craig 1996, Linton 2004, Giacchino-Baker & Piller 2006, Potowski 2007). However, the majority of these existing studies have been survey-based, focusing almost exclusively on public schools and on Spanish, and very few have asked parents specifically to retrace the process through which they came to select immersion for their children. Methodologically, my study draws most closely on the interview-based work of King & Fogle (2006), who found that parents rarely justify their choice in terms of specific academic studies on immersion’s instrumental benefits; rather, “[t]he

most pervasive (and persuasive) source of data in shaping family language policy were (*sic*) parents' personal experiences with bilingualism, biculturalism or second language learning" (704). Whether this was a positive experience – fulfillment stemming from parents' own bilingual or bicultural experiences – or a negative one, as a monolingual parent desiring a broader experience for their own child, in this more in-depth study, strictly instrumental virtues and the authoritative word of "experts" took a back seat.

In her work on how couples talk about love, Swidler argues that culture is less a unified whole than "a bag of tricks or an oddly assorted tool kit" (2001:24; see also 1986); individuals can and do hold as valid seemingly contradictory cultural elements, each of which is prevalent in the ambient "wider culture." In approaching the question of how parents talked about the choice of a school for their children, I expected to find a similar set of seemingly contradictory views. In part, Lareau suggests, parents pursue concerted cultivation for their children from fears of losing ground in the increasingly precarious middle class of the 1990s (2003). The increasing emphasis on specializing children's educational experiences can easily be framed as a 21st-century augmentation of the same phenomenon; in fact, a recent *New York Times* article used foreign language study as one tongue-in-cheek example of the increasing padding of children's resumes: "You've already enrolled your teenagers in advanced-placement Mandarin, retained a \$9,000-a-year college admissions consultant to help refine their applications, and sent them off to Kyrgyzstan to dig irrigation ditches for the summer" (Williams 2007).

Lareau's existing theory would suggest that instrumental mechanisms inevitably take precedence. In her examination of parental explanations for their actions, she claims that middle-class parents saw childhood as "a chance to develop talents and skills that could be valuable in the *self-actualization* processes that take place in adulthood... [Parents] worried about their own

economic futures and those of their children. This uncertainty made them feel it was important that children be developed in a variety of ways in order to enhance their future possibilities” (2003:249, *italics mine*). However, when holding Lareau’s work up against Lamont, I suspected that there might be additional cultural elements at work for the parents in my study. For Lamont’s respondents, the self-actualization process had less to do with productivity than with moral superiority; these men “[equated] self-actualization with showing proof of moral character” (1992:100). Thus, choosing an “enriching” school environment for one’s children might be simultaneously viewed as enhancing children’s resumes and improving their character.

Methodology

In order to gain the most comprehensive picture of the Bay Area immersion community, I elected to sample from schools that offered the region’s most popular immersion languages: Spanish, French, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Since immersion schools were roughly equally represented among the Bay Area’s public and private school sectors, I also sought to represent both these populations within my respondents. I chose to limit myself to a set list of schools in an effort to balance comprehensiveness with some control over variation in participants’ experience; by recruiting five participants from each site, I hoped to be able to isolate the motivational factors that might be based on the specifics of each school from those focused on the perceived benefits of immersion generally.

While Spanish was far and away the most widely available immersion language – with more than forty programs available in public schools around the Bay Area³ – each of my sample languages was offered in at least three Bay Area schools. Mandarin and Spanish were both accessible through public and private programs, while French was available only in private schools and Cantonese only in public. Accordingly, I assembled a sample that included parents

from public and private Mandarin programs, public and private Spanish programs, and one French and one Cantonese school, for a total of six. In an effort to obtain the widest possible range of interviewees, when given a choice of multiple programs, I tried to choose the most established. In addition to using the schools as discrete populations of potential interviewees, I also toured each school, and, when possible, conducted interviews with administrators.

[[Table 1: School Demographics]]

Participant recruitment was initiated entirely through informal channels, combining snowball techniques with posts to parenting discussion groups. In total, I interviewed 29 parents⁴: for the most part, my respondent demographics mirrored school demographics, and also aligned with the literature's model for immersion parents. My interviewees were predominantly white (82%) and middle- or upper-middle-class (90%); nearly all were part of two-parent households (82%), of which the vast majority (92% of 24 households) were dual-earner. The area in which parents most solidly reflected the literature's predictions, however, was in education level. Every one of my interviewees had attended at least some college, with all but three (90%) having a four-year degree and nine (31%) holding advanced or professional degrees.

[[Table 2: Interviewee Demographics]]

For more in-depth discussion of recruitment and site selection, see the methodological appendix.

The Immersion Decision

As is often the goal in open-ended interviewing, when first approaching my respondents, I tried to frame our interview as “a conversation,” an opportunity for parents to talk about their motivations for choosing immersion for their children and about their school experiences thus far. If Lareau's theory about instrumental motivations for choosing specialized school environments were dominant in my parent population, I would expect that parents would have initially justified their choice with the rhetoric of multiculturalism so prevalent in the school

literature – bowing to the “group style” of the immersion community – but then, when pressed for more details, would turn the conversation to more practical, goal-oriented rationales.

However, while nearly all my respondents (26 of 29, or 89%) made some reference to these instrumental benefits, the vast majority of respondents’ utterances (105 of 172, more than 60%) dealing directly with the question of why parents chose an immersion school were focused on immersion’s cultural benefits. Regardless of what language parents chose or whether their program was public or private, the question of using school to secure a particular ideological and cultural identity for their child remained paramount throughout our discussion.

Narrowing the Field: The Choice of a School

As stated above, parents making a school choice in the Bay Area have a multitude of options. In San Francisco alone, at the time of writing parents could choose among seventy-two public and sixty-seven private programs⁵. Of course, not all these programs are appropriate or even feasible for every family: thus, for all my respondents, the first step in the school choice process was filtering their options. The sorting process was initiated in one of two ways, divided almost equally. In thirteen of my twenty-nine cases (44%), parents stated they had first heard about their chosen school through word-of-mouth, from a friend or family member whose child was enrolled in the program. In the remaining sixteen, slightly more than half the sample, parents found their school through a more active research process: perusing books or websites with information on test scores, class size, demographics and other quantitative measures of quality, or attending formal school fairs in San Francisco or the East Bay. Regardless of their specific search method, however, parents described the process in much the same fashion: “shopping” for school. Like the parents in Lareau’s study, and Gewirtz et al’s “privileged/skilled choosers” (1995:28), my respondents wanted to get the best return for their investment.

If you're paying \$20,000 a year for your child to be at school... it needs to be the best school for that child. (Leona Prentice, Jardin [private/French])

I actually ended up touring twenty-seven schools... I cast out a wide net, because I didn't really know what the schools had to offer. And I'm one of those shoppers that reads Consumer Reports, and all the other things, and figures out all the data to make sure I get the best car. (Glen Shealey, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

While not all parents were as ambitious as the father quoted above, touring at least a short list of schools was a component of the selection process in every single case – and as Gewirtz et al might expect, in discussing the factors that were most important to them in making the final decision about their school, overwhelmingly, parents spoke about being drawn to the “atmosphere”: the sense of community emanating from teachers and other parents, the student artwork on the walls, even the architecture. These are hardly concrete instrumental reasons.

In all but a few cases, parents considered exclusively public or exclusively private schools. For private school parents, the rationales given for this decision were two-fold. Across all three schools, parents talked about the “predictability” of the private school option – with both WCA and Jardin offering instruction at the Pre-K through 8 level, and MU intending to continue adding one grade per year until it had reached the same level, parents only had to go through one application process before their child was ready to apply for high school. However, parents were also candid in expressing their negative opinions of urban public schools.

We have lots of really good friends whose children are having amazing educations in the public school system... but we felt like we didn't have the tenacity to deal with the vagaries of public school administration and school

district problems. [The district] is really troubled. And we just didn't have the bandwidth for that. (Louisa Fickett, WCA [private/Mandarin])

In a trend that speaks to the power of “group style” to shape expressions, the somewhat apologetic tone of this quote was evident throughout my sample of private school parents. Three of the fifteen parents whose children were enrolled in private schools explicitly stated that they had wanted to send their child to public school, but that their partner had felt strongly that the public educational system was an unacceptable option. The general consensus among these parents seemed to be that sending one’s privileged middle-class child to public school was “good for society” – as one mother claimed, “I thought we should go to public school, because if *people like us* go to public schools, maybe they’ll get better” (emphasis mine) – but that it remained a good deed perhaps best performed by other people.

Notably, many of the public school parents expressed similar views. Of the fourteen parents in my sample who had chosen public school, seven (50%) dismissed private school out of hand as unmanageably expensive, leaving public schools as the only reasonable option. For the other half of the public school parents, their commitment to public education was expressed as a social and ideological one. As one mother put it:

When [a district loses] the middle class ... [the schools] just end up with a harder-to-teach population and a more troubled population. If you're in a classroom where doing well in school is a bad thing, because it makes you seem uppity, nobody's going to do well in school. [But] if you're in a classroom where half of the kids come from families where doing well in school's a good thing, then that'll make other kids think it's a good thing. (Marian Hall, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

However, even for those parents who spoke at length about the necessity for middle-class families to stay invested in the public schools – and who framed the experience as beneficial for their children, in that it exposed them to peers from diverse racial and, especially, class backgrounds that they might not otherwise come into contact with – immersion was acknowledged as having benefits that other types of public schools did not. These findings, similar to those of Crozier et al (2008) in their examination of British middle-class school selection, suggested that even parents with ideological commitments to public schools were not willing to let their child be thrown into the generic public school experience. Both groups of public school parents were highly critical of the public school curriculum, viewing it as not challenging enough; they also spoke, in language reminiscent of their apologetic private-school peers, of some of the struggles their children faced with these “highly diverse” public school peer groups. In this context, immersion was discussed as a two-fold way of “gaming the system.” By being taught in a second language, as one mother put it, “at least [my daughter’s] learning something”; and by learning in an immersion classroom, children were statistically far more likely to be surrounded by peers whose families valued education. Like Stevens’ (2001) home-schooling parents, or the parents who chose Catholic schools to ensure the promotion of their religious values (Bryk et al 1993), my respondents were concerned about the peers that their children would be associating with.

Lareau’s work suggests that middle-class parents are often highly involved in the life of their child’s school, and this finding was certainly reflected among the parents I spoke with. 15 of my 29 respondents were formally associated with the school community – as parent association leaders, admissions tour guides, or classroom volunteers – and the others told me stories of participating in parent groups that painted classrooms, ran extensive fund drives and

helped teachers set up classrooms for the new school year. For immersion schools, this high level of parent involvement was not only recognized but counted upon: in fact, both Beecher and Dwinelle were chosen to receive immersion programs as part of district efforts to bring additional parent resources into a “failing school.” Whether schools were public or private, active parent commitment was expected as part of the package: as a prospective family was told during my tour of Irving, “you’ll be asked to donate to the school in some capacity, whether that’s financially or through your time.” Parents who were not willing to make these commitments, I was told, were unlikely to “stick with” immersion programs.

However, even as they discussed these “normal” demands on their time, which “you’d have no matter what,” my respondents simultaneously acknowledged the particular challenges of immersion. In many cases, I heard stories about children experiencing delays in their studies, of parents having to step in and supplement classroom instruction with extra work at home. In fact, most respondents saw the choice of immersion as reasonable only with the understanding that they as parents were expected to monitor their children’s academic progress.

[Our son’s] English reading suffered. I ended up teaching him to read [English] myself... because he wasn’t getting enough [English] in school to get through the “cat sat on the mat” type books. (Celia Landin, Westland [private/Mandarin])

Parents spoke matter-of-factly about taking this burden of education on themselves, of reading books at home, building science projects in the backyard, and taking other steps to keep their children from losing any ground that might be sacrificed in exchange for immersion. In immersion schools, education was at least as much the job of the parent as the teacher.

The idea of parents’ sacrificing to promote their children’s well-being is hardly revolutionary; as Lareau points out, middle-class parents have long given up their evenings and

weekends to managing children's soccer games, piano lessons and other "enrichment" activities. The families in my study were no different in this regard: when I asked about children's activities, parents inevitably listed off a catalog of after-school sports and lessons even for preschoolers. However, the "inconveniences" of immersion would seem to go above and beyond those incurred by participating in standard extracurriculars. For these parents, the benefits of immersion were worth all the time and effort. As one mother put it:

[My partner] said, well, my kid will go to a private school... and [at first] I was like, oh, no, I want my kid to go to public school. But [finally] I said, I will concede and choose private school, but it has to be Jardin. Because then I will come out with something tangible. (Claire Rowlett, Jardin [private/French])

To better understand this "tangible" benefit, it is necessary to take a step back from the question of what drew parents to choose particular schools, and return to their explanations for how they came to the idea of immersion in the first place.

Immersion Benefits: "Citizens of the World"

Previous research on immersion schools has found that immersion's draw is twofold: its ability to give children a window into an increasingly multicultural world, and its cognitive and economic benefits. At a cursory glance, my findings would seem to roughly mirror this phenomenon. As stated above, of the responses given by parents to my most overt questions of "What appealed to you about immersion? Why do you think it's important for your child to have a second language?" more than sixty percent (105 of 172 coded utterances)⁵ drew directly on the rhetoric of multiculturalism. The remainder were split in a rather striking dichotomy, with roughly thirty percent of all responses discussing the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, and ten percent touching directly on its economic gains. As Gross's argument would suggest, parents were keenly aware of these more practical benefits, and took them into consideration: no one

expressed a desire for their children to become bilingual at the cost of mastering educational basics. However, when the time came to justify their choice, parents' largest focus, across all school types, was on how immersion would broaden their children's worldview.

It makes so much sense. San Francisco's a diverse [city], we live in a diverse world... How can my son be an ambassador of peace if he can't speak to people? I want my son to earn his keep on this planet. Not just financially. I mean, earn his right to be here. (Felicia Greene, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

I mean, God, the advantage of having two languages. Just the opportunities that it creates for a person... in the world today, in most countries, the children speak more than one language. They don't just speak English. And we wanted to be able to give that to our son – just so that he does know that we live in the world. (Karen Hatcher, Jardin [private/French])

Given the prevalence of multicultural themes in the schools' self-descriptions, as well as the increasing cultural links drawn by American society between “multiculturalism” and a liberal worldview, I was unsurprised that the “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) of immersion parents seemed to favor prioritizing these expressive rationales over the instrumental ones. Slightly more notable was the way in which economic benefits were specifically de-emphasized: while many parents brought up the cognitive benefits of immersion with pride, the majority explicitly denied that their choice had been economically driven.

A lot of people talk about how Mandarin will be the next big business language... but that was never as much of a factor for me as the value of being able to relate to other people, and to understand another culture, and to appreciate other cultures more deeply. (Glen Shealey, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

I think that for a lot of people, bilingualism is about having a leg up in the business world... and if my son wants to be a business person, and this'll help him, that's great. But that, to me, is not what this is about. It's about being able to have really rich travel experiences, and have a lot of options about where he can live in the world. And being able to interact with people that he would never otherwise be able to talk to. (Tina Fleming, MU [private/Spanish])

Even as they acknowledged that “a lot of people” choose immersion out of a desire to further their children’s economic opportunities, my respondents never claimed this rhetoric as their own. While the other indelicate sentiment shared by a great many parents as fueling their choice of a specialized magnet program – the inferior quality of public schools – was seemingly “allowed” to be expressed, if in an apologetic manner, confessing to this most straightforward of instrumental motivations for immersion – better economic prospects – seemed forbidden.

Even in their more prevalent discourse around expressive benefits, however, my respondents went beyond the simple multicultural rhetoric offered by the schools. Many parents had concrete cultural rationales for choosing immersion as the enrichment method for their child. As King and Fogle (2006) might have predicted, a large number of the parents I spoke with had some experience with bilingualism and foreign cultures themselves. Many had lived outside the United States: I heard stories of parents teaching English in Costa Rica, spending years studying in Sweden, or “[picking] tomatoes in Greece – that’s *bad* work.” My respondents included three immigrants, one dual citizen, and two American nationals born abroad: including partners in the count, the number of immigrant parents rose by five more (thus encompassing 21% foreign-born parents in the entire sample of 53). However, of the eight families with a foreign-born parent,

only three had chosen to enroll their children in a language that a parent had grown up speaking. More commonly, parents cited the desire to instill a broader international understanding in their children, a concrete knowledge that there was a world outside the United States.

[MU's founders] had this really great vision about a school that emphasizes globalism (sic), that emphasizes respecting other countries' cultures, learning other countries' cultures. It's not just the language, it's the whole idea... In America, we're so ethnocentric, and I really liked the idea of a child really learning about and understanding other cultures, really embracing them. (Tina Fleming, MU [private/Spanish])

I think speaking a second language not only makes your brain work in different ways, it just gives you a different worldview. It's a really good thing to see the world from another perspective – America is such a myopic country... I am very, very glad that this is my culture, but I also think that you don't appreciate [its] blind spots unless you go outside of it for a while. (Marian Hall, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

For these parents, part of being a whole person was having an experience of community outside one's native context. Granting their children this opportunity was worth almost any sacrifice.

The specific role of bilingualism in facilitating this international connection went virtually unquestioned. The majority of parents were multilingual themselves: 17 of my 29 respondents (nearly 60%) were familiar with their children's target language, while 12 of 29 (41%) professed some knowledge of at least two languages other than English.

I studied Spanish... and then I moved on to Chinese and Japanese... [but] I'm not a very good linguist. Language is really hard for me. So that was part of the reason why I wanted my daughter in an immersion program, where she could kind of get that mapping early... (Annette Grantham, MU [private/Spanish])

The idea of immersion providing an eventual gateway to additional languages in the future was also a common theme, picked up by parents across all language options.

Part of the reason I thought Chinese (sic) would be good was because, hey, if she can learn a language as different and complex as Chinese, if she took Spanish in high school, that'd be a breeze. (Jocelyn Bargas, Irving [public/Cantonese])

Regardless of their particular language background, in their discussions of language and bilingualism as a shaper of identity, parents commonly drew on their own experiences to explain how they came to pursue bilingualism for their children. As in Annette Grantham's quote above, many parents who had become bilingual later in life discussed their love of a particular language and culture, and a desire for their children to be able to participate more fully and authentically in this experience. However, perhaps the most obvious rationale for immersion – straightforward maintenance of a heritage language – was almost entirely absent from my study. Among my interviewees, there was no family where both parents were native speakers of the immersion language, and only two where a parent had grown up speaking it as a first language.

Many households had at least one parent who was familiar with the target language. As can be seen in the table below, French and Spanish-immersion families were very likely to fall into this category; in fact, in three of the Spanish households, both parents had some working knowledge of the language. However, when the focus shifts to the Chinese languages, this trend declines sharply.

[[Table 3: Respondents' Language Backgrounds]]

While Mandarin-immersion parents were among the most likely to be familiar with more than one foreign language, the Chinese-language parents were far less likely than their European-language counterparts to be comfortable with their child's target language. This trend, when held up alongside the demographics of the Chinese-language populations, raises an interesting question about the nature of language as a tool to secure an international identity.

In my discussions with European-language parents, the issue of choosing the target language for heritage reasons was never discussed: while some parents explained a choice of French or Spanish because it was a language they were familiar with, I heard no rhetoric about the benefits of being able to speak to grandparents or return to a country of origin. For Chinese-language parents, on the other hand, heritage concerns were a frequent topic of discussion – but one that took a very particular shape. While nine of the fifteen Chinese-language immersion families in my study (60%) had children with some Chinese heritage, only one household was comprised of two Asian parents: the remainder had children who were either of mixed race or adopted from China into white or biracial families.

[When we adopted our daughter], we thought, we've got to make sure she has a bridge back... when she goes back [to China], I don't want her to go back and just go, "These people speak funny." I don't know whether it's going to be important to her... but I want her to have that [option] for going back. (Diane Hsu, Beecher [public/Mandarin])

Instead of Mandarin immersion, I'd say it was Chinese immersion. Because it's not just the language... I never wanted [my daughter] to look back and think, I

have no connection to my country of origin and my original language. Original culture. So I think it's like a bridge. (Julie Stoll, WCA [private/Mandarin])

This identical language, couching the study of Chinese language as “a bridge” to a child’s culture of origin, is powerful evidence of the preoccupation parents have with the question of identity.

For these families, language is a way to secure a legitimate claim to an otherwise elusive cultural identity (for more on this phenomenon as it pertains to interracial Chinese adoptees in particular, see Traver 2009, Thomas & Tessler 2007 and others). For multiracial families, the question of identity can be a complicated one: and although detailed demographics for most of the schools in my study are unavailable, a preliminary examination is enough to hint at a larger trend.

According to the California Department of Education’s statistics, the San Francisco Unified School District included roughly 41% “Asian” and 5% “multiracial” students in 2007-2008. In comparison, WCA’s published statistics on school demographics paint a very different picture. The population of Asian students is slightly higher – nearly 50% – but more noteworthy is the fact that multiracial students are listed as comprising fully one-third of the student body. These findings suggest that it is not just my interviewees who are seeking to use language as a stepping stone for strengthening their children’s identity.

While European-language families did not have the same overt heritage ties as many of the Chinese-language families I spoke with, this question of legitimacy was echoed by parents from all language groups. Parents spoke about identity as they discussed why they wanted their children to learn a language early, and why they hoped the children would go on to study other languages. For my respondents, early bilingualism was seen as giving children access to an identity that they might not be able to acquire in any other way.

It's great to be able to have an integration into another culture, and not be an outsider in that culture. (Celia Landin, WCA [private/Mandarin])

It only opens doors, and it only makes you more accessible, and it just broadens you... especially when you travel. And you realize - you really realize - wow, this is cool. (Jesse Chu, Irving [public/Cantonese])

My kids are doing this so that they'll speak better Spanish than I do... if you can communicate with other people, the world's open to you. I don't think that language is the only way to communicate, but it opens up the world. (Stephanie Drury, MU [private/Spanish])

For these parents, the perceived connection to the wider world offered by bilingualism was worth any inconvenience. By enrolling their children in immersion schools, they believed, they truly were taking an opportunity to make them “citizens of the world.”

Discussion and Conclusions: Where Do We Go From Here?

In analyzing the stories told by parents about how they came to choose immersion schools, I found that while the elements of concerted cultivation pointed to by Lareau – the importance of extracurriculars and “enrichment,” the high levels of involvement in children’s school life – continued to occur “as naturally as breathing” (2003:239), my respondents were highly conscious of shaping their child’s environment to gain specific advantages. Whether discussing the “diverse” nature of the peer group at their chosen school, the involvement of a particular teacher, or the way that having knowledge of another language would broaden their child’s intellectual and cultural horizons, parents had clearly given a great deal of thought to the educational path their children were walking. As Swidler might expect, my respondents

sometimes justified their actions with seemingly contradictory explanations, talking about both the importance of helping children prepare their resume and the fact that enrichment was valuable for its own sake. Parents were certainly concerned about ensuring a return on their investment, stressing the cognitive and even, insofar as the “group style” would allow, the economic benefits of bilingualism. However, parents spoke most about seeking reinforcement of their self-concept as proponents of cultural diversity, framing immersion as a tangible connection with another culture that would legitimate the multicultural identity they sought to promote and uphold for themselves and their children.

For these parents, regardless of their family’s particular ethnic or racial background, “true” multiculturalism, a “real” international worldview, was seen as something both worthy of pursuit and extremely difficult to obtain. In many cases, my respondents felt that this identity was one that had escaped them, or slipped through their grasp, and they were seeking to recapture it for their children. Like parents who were star athletes in college and saw their sports ability help to bring them success, respondents spoke of transmitting their positive experiences to the next generation, and of enabling their children to exceed parents’ own linguistic accomplishments. The prospect of a multilingual, multicultural identity was a benefit significant enough to compensate for the required sacrifices of time and money, the evenings and weekends spent filling “gaps” in children’s education. Seeking an explanation in Lareau’s work might lead us to emphasize instrumental incentives, to infer that immersion is merely one example of a new high-level form of concerted cultivation tailored to the era of globalization. Parents’ own accounts, however, seem to suggest that the story is more complex.

The justifications provided by parents in my study did include instrumental rationales, and demonstrated familiarity with and adherence to the prevalent “group style” surrounding

immersion education. However, parents also spoke at length about the way in which their choices shaped their children's identities, how bilingualism would help their child to grow into a particular kind of person. This use of the tools of concerted cultivation as a conscious means to secure membership in a particular group is something not yet examined using Lareau's framework, and would seem to suggest a possible expansion of her theory.

I freely acknowledge that my study cannot substantiate these critiques on its own. The study's focus on immersion parents certainly limits the generalizability of my findings: further research with a broader base of comparative cases is imperative to better understand the ways in which identity formation and the power of desiring a particular self-concept for oneself and one's children might impact the child-rearing process. Likewise, my choice of the Bay Area as a research site could be seen as potentially problematic. The region's school structure made it a unique setting to explore school choice. As alluded to above, even public schools require parents to undergo a complex application process, ranking up to seven schools: thus, the issue of school choice is one that every Bay Area family must consider. However, it is undeniable that the rowdily liberal "group style" of the region also influenced my respondents. More so than in other parts of the country, Bay Area residents might be inclined to paint themselves as motivated by enrichment or identity-based rather than instrumental rationales.

Despite these limitations, I would argue that my study stands as a powerful first step. Beginning with the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1994), sociologists have long known that parents seek to impart markers of distinction to their children, some status symbol that will indicate their membership in an elite group. However, my study suggests, in a manner more reminiscent of Lamont's findings, that perhaps not all markers pursued by parents have to do with maintaining class stratification. While bilingualism does provide children with an asset that will serve them

instrumentally in the increasingly global marketplace, it also serves as a social indicator of parents' and families' commitment to multicultural values and multiculturalism. By pursuing this type of identity for their children, parents are making sure that they grow up to be “the right kind of people,” a status which may have very little to do with economic outcomes.

Notes

1. In practice, “one-way” and “two-way” immersion programs follow similar patterns, with 75-90% of instruction taking place in the foreign language in the early grades, and English instruction increasing to 50% by third, fourth, or fifth grade. The principal difference is that two-way immersion programs place a greater emphasis on recruiting native speakers of the target language, and are explicitly designed to help these students learn English as well.
2. The schools used as recruitment sites in my study used similar rhetoric in their recruitment materials; however, to prevent possible identification of the schools and thus preserve confidentiality for my respondents, I elected to use outside materials as sources here.
3. Data on immersion school density obtained from the Center for Applied Linguistics (www.cal.org).
4. This number encompasses five respondents from each school except Dwinelle (public/Spanish), where after nearly a year I was able to obtain only four interviewees.
5. Public school data available from the Educational Data Partnership (<http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/>); private school data from the Online Guide to Bay Area Private Schools (<http://www.baprivateschools.com/sf.htm>).
6. For detailed coding scheme and data tables, contact the author.
7. Although private schools tend to be entirely immersion-based, the standard model in public schools is the “track” one, where one or two classrooms in each grade are dedicated to

immersion and the rest of the students are taught the standard English curriculum. Often, when a new program is brought into a school, it is implemented first with a rising kindergarten class with an additional grade level added in each successive year. This was the case at both Beecher and MU, where the programs were only a few years old.

8. While I concede that my data contains a significant over-representation of mothers, I would argue that this demonstrates less a failure in my sampling strategy than evidence for which parent commonly plays the more active role in the school selection and schooling-management process.

References

- Archbald, Douglas A. 2004. School Choice, Magnet Schools, and the Liberation Model: An Empirical Study. *Sociology of Education* 77: 4: 283-310.
- Binder, Amy. 2002. *Contentious Curricula*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Borkowski, John W. & Maree Sneed. 2006. Will NCLB Improve or Harm Public Education? *Harvard Educational Review* 76: 4: 503-525.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1994. Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field. *Sociological Theory* 12: 1: 1-18.
- Bryk, Anthony S., Valerie E. Lee & Peter B. Holland. 1993. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Craig, Barbara A. 1996. Parental Attitudes Toward Bilingualism in a Local Two-Way Immersion Program. *Bilingual Research Journal* 20: 3&4: 383-410.
- Crozier, Gill, Diane Reay, David James, Fiona Jamieson, Phoebe Beedell, Sumi Hollingworth, &

- Katya Williams. 2008. White middle-class parents, identities, educational choice and the urban comprehensive school: dilemmas, ambivalence and moral ambiguity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29: 3: 261-272.
- Davies, Scott & Linda Quirke. 2005. Providing for the Priceless Student: Ideologies of Choice in an Emerging Educational Market. *American Journal of Education* 111: 4: 523-547.
- Diamond, John B. 2007. Where the Rubber Meets the Road: Rethinking the Connection Between High-Stakes Testing Policy and Classroom Instruction. *Sociology of Education* 80: 4: 285-313.
- Eliasoph, Nina & Paul Lichterman. 2003. Culture in Interaction. *American Journal of Sociology* 108: 4: 735-794.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. 2003. Resonance and Radicalism: Feminist Framing in the Abortion Debates of the United States and Germany. *American Journal of Sociology* 109: 2: 304-344.
- Finn, Chester E., Bruno V. Manno, & Gregg Vanourek. 2000. *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gewirtz, Sharon, Stephen J. Ball & Richard Bowe. 1995. *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*. Buckingham, England, UK: Open University Press.
- Giacchino-Baker, Rosalie & Bonnie Piller. 2006. Parental Motivation, Attitudes, Support, and Commitment in a Southern Californian Two-Way Immersion Program. *Journal of Latinos and Education* 5: 1: 5-28.
- Gross, Neil. 2002. Becoming a Pragmatist Philosopher: Status, Self-Concept, and Intellectual Choice. *American Sociological Review* 67: 1: 52-76.

- King, Kendall, & Lyn Fogle. 2006. Bilingual Parenting as Good Parenting: Parents' Perspectives on Family Language Policy for Additive Bilingualism. *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism* 9: 6: 695-712.
- Lamont, Michèle. 1992. *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lareau, Annette. 2000. *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- . 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Linton, April. 2004. Learning in Two Languages: Spanish-English Immersion in U.S. Public Schools. *International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy* 24: 7/8: 46-74.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. 2006. *The Trouble with Diversity*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- Potowski, Kim. 2007. *Language and Identity in a Dual Immersion School*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.
- Stevens, Mitchell. 2001. *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stewart, Janice Hostler. 2005. Foreign Language Study in Elementary Schools: Benefits and Implications for Achievement in Reading and Math. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 33: 1: 11-16.
- Swidler, Ann. 1986. Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51: 2: 273-286.
- . 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Thomas, Kristy A. and Richard C. Tessler. 2007. Bicultural Socialization Among Adoptive Families. *Journal of Family Issues* 28: 9: 1189-1219.
- Traver, Amy E. 2009. Towards a Theory of Fictive Kin Work: China Adoptive Parents' Efforts to Connect their Children to Americans of Chinese Heritage. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 35: 1: 45-67.
- Williams, Alex. 2007. "And for Sports, Kid, Put Down 'Squash.'" *New York Times*, Fashion & Style, December 9. Retrieved 4/26/08
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/fashion/09squash.html>).
- Zelizer, Viviana. 1994. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Appendix: Methodological Details

As stated above, my primary method of data collection was in-depth qualitative interviewing. Like Swidler (2003), I pursued the process of in-depth interviews with a single demographic group because I was interested in how individuals who had reached the same outcome (in my case, choosing an immersion school for their child) might use different process descriptions to justify their choice. To pursue the question of what might make immersion school parents different from other groups, the addition of a control group would be essential: however, like Swidler, I would argue that my methodological approach provided the necessary model to answer my research question.

Site Selection and Observation: The Schools

My project involved participants drawn from six schools in San Francisco and the East Bay. These schools were chosen based on a variety of factors, first and foremost my effort to obtain a sample of schools teaching in the most popular immersion languages around the Bay Area. I also wanted to sample both public and private schools, to account for possible differences

in motivation between these two populations. In some cases, circumstances forced my hand: at the time of my study, the Bay Area offered parents a choice of only two public Mandarin programs, one private Mandarin program and one private Spanish program. Seeking to gain the broadest possible sample of parents, I chose the more established of the two Mandarin programs. My choice of a Cantonese-language program was similarly motivated: while San Francisco offered three different Cantonese immersion schools, one was significantly more established than the others. My largest selection pool came from the public Spanish programs: at the time of my study, there were seven available in San Francisco alone. However, after evaluating a range of different options, I chose a Spanish public school site that was approximately similar in size and style to my public Mandarin program: both were mid-sized schools with relatively small immersion “tracks,” and both had received their immersion programs as part of a district effort to raise test scores by bringing middle-class parents into a low-performing school. On the other hand, the Cantonese school was widely regarded by parents as being among the “best” schools in the city; even those who had eventually elected to send their children elsewhere frequently acknowledged having considered Irving as an option when selecting schools.

As a supplement to interviews with parents, I undertook an observation at each school. I attempted to arrange these through similar methods across all schools, by contacting the principal or head of school, briefly explaining the nature of my study and asking for permission to accompany prospective parents on an admissions tour, as well as exploring the possibility of meeting with an administrator for a semi-structured interview. Unfortunately, due to differences in policy across the schools, my experiences varied widely. Since not all of the schools offered structured admissions tours during their spring semester, I was able to attend formal tours at only three: Jardin, Irving, and WCA. My observations at the other schools were much more varied

and informal, with my MU visit being facilitated by the admissions director and leaving little room for questions, Dwinelle involving sitting in the back of a single classroom for an hour's morning observation, and Beecher being granted leave to "wander around" after a brief informational meeting with the principal. I acknowledge the potentially problematic nature of these varied observations: however, since they were strictly supplemental to my interview protocol, I believe that they served the purpose of giving me a general baseline on each school.

Recruiting

In practice, my efforts at parent recruitment combined snowball methods with "advertising." I began recruitment efforts by posting calls for participants to several online discussion groups. While this method proved very successful in recruiting parents from some schools, after a few weeks I had not yet received any responses from four of my six chosen sites. At that point, I moved to contacting parent associations, asking them to forward a copy of my recruitment notice to their members. Within a few days, I was contacted by the admissions directors at Jardin and WCA, offering to print my "blurb" in their school newsletter. Thus, in practice, my recruitment methods were a combination of advertising, gatekeeper-facilitated and snowball techniques. While online recruitment was extremely helpful in allowing me to bypass school gatekeepers partially or entirely, I acknowledge that this method also limited my potential contact with working-class families and others who might not have seen calls posted to the online medium. Despite this limitation, however, I believe that my methods were successful in allowing me to obtain a sample that was an approximate demographic mirror of the programs from which my respondents were drawn.

Tables

Table 1: School Demographics

School name*	Beecher Elementary	Dwinelle Elementary	Irving Elementary	Westland Chinese Academy	El Mundo Unido (MU)	Le Jardin
Type of school	Public	Public	Public	Private	Private	Private
Type of program	Mandarin (track) ⁶	Spanish (track)	Cantonese	Mandarin	Spanish	French
Enrollment	200 (school)/60 (program)	300 (school)/60 (program)	500	400	100	500
Grades served	K-5 (school)/K-1 (program)	K-5	K-8	Pre K-8	Pre K-2	K-8

All names of schools and respondents have been changed.

Table 2: Interviewee Demographics

Respondents (n=29)		Households (n=29)	
Male	4	Two-parent	24
Female ⁷	25	One-parent	5
White	24	School-aged children (n=38)	
Asian	5	Male	14
		Female	24
High school diploma only	0	White	20
Some college	3	Black	1
Bachelor's degree	17	Asian/Pacific Islander	5
Advanced/professional degree	9	Multiracial (white/black)	2
		Multiracial (white/Asian)*	9
Partners (n=24)		Multiracial (white/Latino)	1
White	18		
Black	1	Age 3-5	4
Asian*	4	Age 5-10	29
Latino	1	Age 11-15	5
High school diploma only	1		
Bachelor's degree	11		
Advanced/professional degree	12		

**Encompasses one multiracial family with an Asian Indian parent.*

Table 3: Respondents' Language Backgrounds

	Fluency in target language	Familiarity w/target language*	Facility in >1 foreign language
Spanish (N=9)	2 (22%)	7 (78%)	4 (44%)
French (N=5)	2 (40%)	4 (80%)	3 (60%)
Mandarin (N=10)	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)
Cantonese (N=5)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
Total (N=29)	6 (21%)	17 (59%)	12 (41%)

* Recounts "fluent" individuals

Copyright of Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association is the property of American Sociological Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.