Language provides a convenient lens for investigating broader social issues. A person’s language is so closely tied to what social roles and positions they occupy that what students learn about language—beyond where to put the comma or what the word *amarillo* means—is in fact teaching them about more general beliefs connected to the existing social structure. Therefore, for this project I have been looking at language instruction in order to explore the more implicit things schools teach about language and education and how they create and reflect broader social structures and ideologies. Ultimately, language is not taught as a communicative activity in the first and third grades at Churchill Elementary. The curriculum presents language in decontextualized, regulated parts. This fosters a relationship to language that is characterized by a lack of fluency—a relationship that is not conducive to success with language in scholastic settings. These curriculums are responsive to certain widespread ideologies of language and education, such as the idea that written English is the most valued form of language and the need to regulate and constantly assess that is seen in the influence of standardized tests. Through language instruction in the elementary school, the students learn such a relationship to language as well as many of the ideologies of language and education that generate that instruction, both of which have implications for broader issues of social inequality. The issue lies then not with the teachers, but the fact that the very way that the curriculum is constructed—a curriculum influenced by specific ideologies of language and education—is not actually able to produce the universal scholastic success it strives for.

Michelle Morgenstern ‘09
“The Literacy Block is Sacred”: The Construction of Relationships to Language and Ideology in Elementary School Classrooms

Michelle Morgenstern
Graduating May ’09
Franklin & Marshall College
Department of Anthropology
Anthropology Honors Thesis
Submitted April 28th, 2009
Acknowledgements

First off, I would like to thank the members of my committee - Michael Billig, Jerome Hodos, and Monica Cable - for their extensive comments and help on the first draft of my thesis.

Thank you to my advisor, Katherine McClelland for the constant encouragement, the incredibly helpful academic advice, the occasional suggestion to take a deep breath and stop worrying and for assigning a reading by Heath in her Urban Education course two years ago, which introduced me to some of these ideas about language and education for the very first time.

Thank you to Simon Hawkins for his invaluable insights and real interest in regard to the topic of my thesis, for going above and beyond the call of duty in his continued indulgence of my questions and 61 emails despite the fact that he was not officially my advisor for the second semester, and for the occasional suggestion to take a deep breath and stop worrying - there is a theme.

Thank you to my friends and family, who now probably know more about language ideology, relations to language, and education than they ever wanted to.

I would also like to thank the principal and teachers of Churchill Elementary School for not only permitting my work in their classrooms, but also encouraging it. Their willingness to speak with me and have me around was essential to the accomplishment of this thesis.

Last, I would like to thank Mrs. Piper's first grade class and Mrs. Quincey's third grade class for their role in my research, helping me decide that I want to become an elementary school teacher, and for frequently making the gathering of my ethnographic data incredibly amusing.
1. Introduction

**Kid Writing**– 2/11/09
OBJECTIVE: Subject verb agreement, 3 sentence minimum, title.

fig 1.1

**Español** – 2/20/09
OBJECTIVE: Recognize the shapes in Spanish.

fig. 1.2

While schools frequently list abstract concepts such as creating good citizens, courteous young adults, or life-long learning as part of their mission statements, when it comes to language the goals often seem to be much more concrete – as is exemplified by the examples of “Lesson Objective” posters (fig 1.1-1.2). It has been made explicit that on Wednesday morning, the 11th of February, students will be learning how to write three sentences on one topic. Language classes seem to be about learning specific quantifiable skills. However, while the objectives of the lessons may be to teach the students that the title comes first in a story or how to translate the word “diamond” into Spanish, the students are also presented with additional, more implicit lessons.

Language provides a convenient lens for investigating broader social issues. A person’s language is so closely tied to the social roles and positions they occupy that what students learn about language—beyond where to put the comma or what the word *amarillo* means—is in fact
teaching them about general beliefs connected to the existing social structure. Therefore, for this project, I have been looking at language instruction in order to explore the more implicit things schools teach about language and education, and how they create and reflect broader social structures and ideologies. Ultimately, in the first and third grades at Churchill Elementary language is not taught as a communicative activity; rather, the curriculum presents language as decontextualized, regulated parts. This fosters a relationship to language that is characterized by a lack of fluency—a relationship that is not conducive to success with language in scholastic settings. These curriculums are responsive to certain widespread ideologies of language and education. Through language instruction in the elementary school, the students learn this distanced relationship to language as well as many of the ideologies of language and education that generate that instruction, both of which have implications for broader issues of social inequality.

Every weekday morning millions of children are rushed out the door and off to school where they will spend a significant portion of their day. Despite the focus on the transmission of practical skills and information that is the center of many lesson plans, the school is often seen as having a much broader function. The school as an institution is often conceived of as a site for reproducing the dominant culture. For Pierre Bourdieu, the role of the education system, specifically higher education, is to legitimize the dominant culture and reinforce ideas about the authority of academic language and those who use it (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). The idea of education underlying Harry Gracey’s discussion of “kindergarten as academic boot camp” is one of the school as a tool for socialization, citing Emile Durkheim in saying that education is “the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its own existence” (Gracey 1991). Some also discuss schools as locations where new identities are constructed. Amy
Stambach writes that for the Chagga, a people who live in the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro, educational success is generally viewed not as learning how to write an essay or solve algebra problems, but learning new ways of thinking that would translate into new identities such as the big city sisters or the *wazee wazima* – boys who develop new modern, and more western identities through education (Stambach 2002). As such, the school can play a significant role in the construction, maintenance, or amelioration of social inequality – an idea I kept in mind while pursuing this research.

Discussions about education—who is succeeding, who is failing, how to make it better—are carried out in politics, academia, and around the dinner table. For many, schools are seen to possess the power to shape the future – if only we do it right, every child can have the same opportunities and, ultimately, many social inequities can be rectified. The key phrase here being “if only we do it right.” Opinions vary wildly on what “right” is, what schools are supposed to accomplish, or how we should go about it; the only thing popular opinion seems to agree on is that however we conceive of education, for many students and for many schools, something is not working.

Frequently, teachers are seen as being the problematic element in student failure – they are lazy, unqualified, or unmotivated. A recent rallying cry of many educational reform movements has been to “hold teachers accountable!” However, during my time spent at Churchill Elementary I saw little evidence of any such characteristics. Just the opposite in fact; I was constantly impressed by the engagement of the teachers, how much they cared, and how much they tried to do for each and every student. Therefore, the critiques in this paper need be understood not as critiques of individual teachers, but of something broader. The issue lies then not with these teachers, but the fact that the very way that the curriculum is constructed – a
curriculum influenced by specific ideologies of language and education – is not actually conducive to the production of the universal scholastic success it strives for.

*Welcome to Churchill*

Churchill Elementary School, which hosts two classrooms for each grade, kindergarten through 5th, is one of thirteen elementary (K-5) schools in the School District of Lancaster (SDoL). For the purpose of maintaining their anonymity to the best of my ability, all names of students, teachers, and the school itself have been changed. According to the annual “community report card”, which is publicly accessible in both English and Spanish on the SDoL website, the district serves a diverse population of approximately 11,343 students:

55.9% Hispanic (primarily Puerto Rican),  
22.7% African American  
18.8% Caucasian  
2.7% Asian/other. (SDoL 2009)

Around 2,225 of these students are in the English Language Learners program (SDoL 2009). The only available demographic data for Churchill Elementary itself is that for the 125 students who took the statewide standardized test, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, or PSSA, in 2008. It records:

51.2% of the students are white  
21.6% are black  
24.8% are Latino/Hispanic  
2.4% are Asian or other  
9.6% are special needs  
57.6% are economically disadvantaged¹  
(SDoL Report Card 2008).

¹ “Economically disadvantaged” is defined as those students who qualify for free or reduced lunches. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, in Pennsylvania students from families with incomes of below 130% of the poverty level qualify for free lunches and those from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty level qualify for reduced lunches (Pennsylvania Department of Education 2009).
While it only includes the grades that undergo standardized testing (3-5), I am inclined to believe that this breakdown holds more or less constant when the populations of the K-2 grades are added, and thus can be seen as representative of the student body as a whole.

My introduction to Churchill Elementary School was through Mrs. Weiss and her English Language Learner (ELL) students. English Language Learner students are those students whose language at home is something other than English and whose tests scores suggest that they would benefit from the additional support the ELL pullout classes offer. Before I officially began my project I shadowed Mrs. Weiss for a couple of days, which included attending a conference hosted by the school district; acquiring a feel for the school; and meeting her students, the principal, and some of the other teachers. Subsequently, my first few days of actual observation took place in the English Language Learner classroom. Mrs. Weiss’ ELL classroom is not a typical one and is perhaps best not even described as such. “It’s more like a closet,” Mrs. Weiss informed me just before our first in-person meeting. There is no permanent ELL class; rather, those students who qualify are pulled out of their regular classrooms once or twice a week to spend a half hour working with the ELL teacher. Hectic is the theme of the ELL classroom and Mrs. Weiss frequently comments that there is never enough time to really focus and get done what she needs to with each fleeting group of students. (In fact, “not enough time” seems to be the unofficial motto of the school. Even teachers who do not change students every thirty—or twenty, if hallway travel time is counted—minutes have made comments along these lines.) After a week of working solely with Ms. Weiss, I chose to expand my investigation by following two of the English Language Learner groups, the first graders and the third graders, into their regular classrooms and this is where I spent most of my time. After the first few weeks I was no longer able to attend any of the first or third grade ELL classes due to conflicts with my own
class schedule; however, I continued to volunteer with Mrs. Weiss by working one-on-one with her fourth grade ELL student each week.

This year is Mrs. Piper’s first time teaching first grade. Her class of twenty has two English Language Learner students. For the first semester both were native Spanish speakers, coming from Puerto Rico and Ecuador respectively, but over winter break Nicholas, the Puerto Rican student, left and another ELL student, Enkai, a refugee from Myanmar, joined the class. Beyond the designated ELL students there are a handful of other students who have at least one parent who uses Spanish at home. Throughout my research I spent time each week with these first graders in their Literacy, Math, and Spanish lessons. Depending upon the activity, I would sit in the corner of the room and take notes on what I observed, help the students as a general classroom aide (particularly during Math or other chaotic lessons), or work one-on-one with a student at the teacher’s request.

Mrs. Quincy, the third grade teacher, has been teaching for longer; in fact, I worked with her and her students as part of my service learning for the Urban Education course I took two years ago. Her class of twenty-five has five ELL students—the highest number of any class in the school—all of who speak Spanish as a first language. During my time with these third graders I primarily observed Literacy and Spanish lessons and tutored Math after school for one of the ELL students.

Each week, depending on my schedule, the school’s schedule, the individual teacher’s schedule, and whether or not a snow day has decided to send everyone’s plans into tumult for a good three days, I spent between four to fifteen hours at Churchill Elementary School. I was constantly surprised and grateful at how willing the teachers were to talk to me, have me
volunteer, and even to just allow me to observe whenever I could fit it into my schedule. The teachers’ willingness was instrumental in the accomplishment of this project.

One of the first things I noticed upon entering Mrs. Piper’s first grade classroom was the sheer amount of words. Nearly every object in the room is labeled with an index card: window, book, desk, computer, shelf, thermometer, schedule, clock, chair, indoor recess games, carpet, teacher’s desk. These small index cards organize the classroom, naming and identifying objects and spaces. Along the length of one wall the alphabet creates a border and “commonly used words” that begin with that letter (Aa: also, and, at, etc.) are affixed to the area below. Other written material also decorates the classroom. For instance, the opposite wall is lined with baskets labeled with the letters A-J and filled with books of the corresponding reading level – “A” designating the lowest level reading books and “J” designating the highest level reading books. Books that are considered more difficult, which the teacher uses to read aloud, are propped up on the windowsill in the back of the room, next to the carpet where the children often gather in a circle to receive directions, listen to stories, or engage in group activities. These words are part of the process of introducing the students to a world defined by words, teaching them to think about their environments as bounded by the written word, and to learn to associate the written language with whatever manner of spoken language that they have already learned at home. However, in a world defined by written language, it is not just the students’ recognition of the written correspondent to the spoken word, but the type of relationship that the students have with that language of the classroom, of which these written labels are a part, that determines linguistic success in a scholastic setting.
The Language of School

Before discussing the relationship to language fostered by the literacy instruction at Churchill it is necessary to answer the question: the relationship to what language. The curriculum is not teaching a relationship to language in general or just any languages – it is teaching a relationship specifically to the language of the school. The language of the school is that form of language which is valued and promoted by the academic institution. That is, the language form that is considered proper to use in scholastic settings. Not all language variants are considered thus. This is exemplified by the controversy that arose over a resolution in Oakland, California that acknowledged Black Vernacular English (BVE) as a distinct language. This controversy highlighted the fact that American society has strongly held beliefs about what forms of language are appropriate for the classroom. While this resolution was only intended to help redesign curriculums so that students of BVE were conceived of as learning English as a second language instead of relearning a non-deficient form of English, the common perception was that BVE would have a legitimate place in the schools and instruction could take place in it (Silverstein 1995). This assumption resulted in a sizable amount of outrage.

What then constitutes the language of the school? According to Basil Bernstein, the language of the school is an elaborated code. He explains that there are two types of codes—restricted and elaborated. In a restricted code “the following interrelated characteristics may be found […]:

1) The status aspect of the social relation is salient.
2) New information is made available through extraverbal channels and these channels will become objects of special perceptual activity.
3) Discrete intent can only be transmitted through variations in the extraverbal signals.
4) The code reinforces the form of the social relation by restricting the verbal
signaling of differences (Bernstein 1964: 60).

For a child who uses only restricted codes “speech does not become an object of special perceptual activity, neither does a theoretical attitude develop towards the structural possibilities of sentence organization” (Bernstein 1964: 65). The language in a restricted code is used for “transmitting and receiving concrete, global, descriptive, narrative statements, involving a relatively low level of conceptualization” (Bernstein 1964: 66). “Extraverbal channels,” such as intonation, gestures, or the context of the conversation are necessary for the successful transmission of meaning.

In contrast, elaborated codes are characterized by allowing the speaker to put “into words his purposes, his discrete intent, his unique experience in a verbally explicit form” (Bernstein: 57). An elaborated code is thought to stand somewhat outside of context; through words alone the speaker is able to explain his or her point. These elaborated codes are valued by academic institutions. Bernstein states that “as a child progresses through a school it becomes critical for him to possess, or at least to be oriented toward, an elaborated code if he is to succeed” (1964: 67).

This language of the school is frequently considered Standard English; however, while that implies a sort of valueless norm, it must be noted that this “Standard” English is only standard insofar as it has been defined as such and taken up by the institutions of the middle/upper middle classes. In this way, the language of the school is already closely tied to social inequality, “it is considered that the normative systems associated with the middle-class and associated strata are likely to give rise to the modes of an elaborated code while that associated with some sections of the working class is likely to create individuals limited to a restricted code” (Bernstein 1964: 66).
The language of school refers to both the spoken language of the middle/upper-middle class and written language. The fact that the language of the school shares characteristics with the language spoken by the middle classes is unsurprising. It follows logically that schools charged with creating good citizens would strive to give everyone the language of those with the most advantages – or, more cynically, would at least encourage the reproduction of those who are considered the ideal members of society.

The language of the school is also characterized by its similarity to written language. The high value placed on the written word and its legitimized place in the academic realm is in response to the ideals that written language is seen to exemplify. Traditionally conceived written language is seen as embodying ideals of academia, education, and intellectual thought and thus is appropriate for schools. In the beginning of his book, *Social Literacies*, Brian Street explains the popular beliefs surrounding written versus oral forms of language. Oral societies are conceived of as more “primitive” than those that are literate. The development of written forms of language is seen as arising in conjunction with the development of more advanced types of thinking (Street 1995). While Street is ultimately (and, in my opinion, correctly) arguing against any such “great divide” in the cognitive processes that accompany written verses oral forms of language, this perception is a popular one. The written word seems to be tied to ideas of progress, truth, and intelligence. Writing does require us to utilize some tools or parts of our environment beyond our own bodies. This can be a printing press and paper or something as basic as a sandy area where one can draw. Either can be categorized as technology of some sort and thus, physical evidence of the progress of human mental abilities. In addition, there seems to be a connection between the concepts of permanence, reliability, and truth and written language. Prior to the age of Youtube, written works were often seen to be more reliably replicated than
oral works. While written works are created by a person as much as any oral works are, the fact that the person does not have to actually be there to transmit the content of the written work allows for written language to often be conceived of as more detached from its author. This detachment carries with it connotations of increased objectivity and truth because it appears not as if a specific person (a subjective entity with feelings and opinions that could affect the message) is giving the information, but rather it is simply being given. Furthermore, written language tends to be viewed as more intellectual. It is quite common to hear complaints of people watching too much television or listening to too much music and not reading enough books. However, I am sure that it is possible that more “advanced thinking” is required for any number of critically acclaimed television shows than many of the recently popular book series. Nevertheless, written works tend to be categorized as intellectually superior to other forms of media, no matter the content. In addition, listening to audio books, which are generally giving the exact same information as their written counterparts, are often seen as less rigorous.

As written language is conceptualized as such, it follows that a language that is seen to reflect the written form is most valued in the school.

“Communication [in the classroom] is conducted through a spoken word dominated by the written word, as is shown by the great value set on the rules of written expression and literate stylistics, which tend to be imposed on all utterances regulated and sanctioned by the university institution” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 120).

This is illustrated repeatedly in the spoken language employed by the Churchill students. During the literacy block the first graders spend a great deal of time working on phonics and reading

---

2 This, of course, does not hold true for all conceptions of written language across time and space; however, I maintain that it is a common modern perception of written language in American/Western society.
aloud, both of which are oral activities. However, this is still not quite teaching students to engage with words in a typically oral\(^3\) manner. Phonics and reading aloud are something very different from speaking. It is verbalizing the written word and is associated with a very different set of characteristics than those associated with speech, such as naturalness and being unlearned.

Reflecting the idea above, even the spoken responses that the students are asked to give in non-literacy lessons (such as social studies or science) reflect traditionally written structures. One such characteristic of written language noted above, is that of context-independence. Written language is often perceived as standing on its own, apart from the author and other interaction. As such, it should be accessible to someone who has not been privy to the preceding conversation. That is to say, an essay is expected to repeat the question or prompt itself in some manner, to explain the context, so that someone who has not necessarily seen the question can still completely understand the answer. This skill is practiced in the classroom when students are asked to write a short response to such a question as “If you could have your dream house what would it be like” by beginning with “If I could have my dream house it would…” Restating the question is a fundamental part of learning how to write at the elementary school level. However, it is not necessary to structure a spoken interaction in quite the same way. The assumption is that the participants, and any observers, are present for the entire exchange; thus, restating the question or context would become redundant. Nonetheless, this is exactly what happens in the following exchange during a first grade social studies class.

\(^3\) It should be recognized that the terms oral/written/spoken/literate are all problematic and not as discrete as they are often conceived of as being. Multiple scholars have, I believe aptly, broken down the dichotomy of written and oral. However, as has been mentioned before, the objective truth of whether or not such a divide actually exists is not as relevant to this discussion as the fact that popular perception does see this divide.
In this situation the simple response of “China” was perfectly adequate; the addition of “we talked about” does not make the response more easily understood. Nevertheless, this is not an uncommon exchange within both the first and third grade classrooms where “the ideal is to ‘talk like a book’” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 120).

It should be noted that this designation of the language of school or standard language is not without its value judgments. There is no language or type of language use that is intrinsically better. Neither Black Vernacular English, Standard English, written English, oral English, Shakespeare’s English, Spanish, nor Mandarin have any innate qualities that make them more suited for use in the sphere of education. However, schools purport to teach the variant of language that is seen as most “correct” and “best”; therefore, this Standard language of the school variant is generally conceived of as “proper” and “best.” Thus, the students are not just learning the relationship to a neutral variant of language, but to the “best” variant, one that is in fact often not considered a variant, but has been naturalized as the true English (Silverstein 1995). This makes any other variants, by definition, deficient forms, variations from what is correct. Of course, no one really speaks the exact language of the school, but some variants are closer than others or, perhaps more accurately, some variants are more marked as explicitly not the language of the school than others (Hill 1993; Silverstein 1995). For example, in a reading group with speakers of African American Vernacular English “correction focused on stereotyped features of vernacular speech rather than equally pervasive, but less salient, non-standard usage” (Collins 1996: 209).
**Learning a Relationship to Language**

The point of interest is not just that the students are learning how to use the language of the school, but through the process of learning the language they are also, and I would argue, more importantly, learning a relationship to that language. It is this relationship to language, be it “reverential or casual, tense or detached, stilted or easy, heavy-handed or well-tempered” that plays a role in scholastic success (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 117).

Shirley Brice Heath examines the relationship to language that develops in three communities in Appalachia: a working class black community called Trackton, a working class white community called Roadville, and the middle-class community that she addresses as the townspeople. Both Roadville residents and the townspeople expend significant effort orienting their children to the written language of the school; however, they do so in rather different manners. In Roadville, the relationship to language is characterized by a strict adherence to the rules, or “hyper-correctness and proliferation of the signs of grammatical control” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 134). Students learn to conceptualize the written word as truth. Extending too far beyond the text is considered lying. In contrast, the children of the townspeople “acquire the habits of talk associated with written materials” and “come to act like literates before they can read” (Heath 1983: 256). Their young lives are characterized by engaging with stories and the literate word, not just being presented with it. Children are not only permitted, but encouraged to make up imaginary tales. This is highlighted by the difference in questions asked when parents read to their children. While reading a story, Roadville parents are most likely to ask concrete questions such as “What happened then?” or “What did he find?” that “request what-explanations” and there is “a [‘correct’] answer decided upon in the mind of the adult before the child answers” (Heath 1983: 227). Townspeople parents supplement those types of questions
with questions that encourage the abstract, imaginary story-making discussed above, such as
“Would you have liked to go fishing with Little Bear? What do you think you would have caught?” (Heath 1983: 250). The relationship to language cultivated in the families of Roadville is often sufficient for the first few years of schooling; however, after that they increasingly fall behind (Heath 1983: 343). It is no longer sufficient to be able to use language rigidly and as bound by the rules – to use it "right". Ultimately, the academic institution requires that the students are able to manipulate the language fluidly. It is the students of the townspeople whose relationship to language most closely reflects that which is ultimately desired.

Heath offers a look at the construction of relationships to language within the family and how this eventually plays out in a scholastic setting; James Collins extends this to the relationship to language that students learn in the classroom itself, reinforcing the idea of the necessity of a comfortable, not alienated relationship to the language of school for scholastic achievement. Collins looks at two reading groups in a third grade classroom that was relatively homogenous in its student population – the students were from a working class Black community and were speakers of African American Vernacular English. The main difference between the reading groups then was how they were ranked. One was considered a low-ranking reading group and the other a high-ranking reading group. Of particular interest to this paper are the corrections made and the patterns of “teacher-uptake” during the group guided reading sessions. While both groups made errors in pronunciation, the lower-ranking reading group was more likely to be corrected in regards to these mistakes (Collins 1996: 209). Teacher-uptake occurs when “a teacher’s question incorporates a prior response from the student’ (Collins 1996: 220). Frequent uptake portrayed the students more as engaged participants in a dialogue, whereas infrequent uptake portrayed them as subjects of an interrogation. “‘Poor readers’ acquire early
and maintain consistently a view of reading as fluent pronunciation of text. Conversely, ‘good readers’ acquire early and maintain consistently a view of reading as an interpretive process, a learning from text” (Collins 1996: 223).

It is through the process of acquiring the language of school, and the form that that takes, which fosters a certain relationship to language. According to Bourdieu and Passeron:

“The opposition between these two types of relation to language stems from the opposition between the two modes of acquiring verbal mastery, the exclusively scholastic acquisition which condemns the acquirer to a ‘scholastic’ relation to scholastic language and the mode of acquisition through insensible familiarization, which alone can fully produce the practical mastery of language and culture that authorizes cultivated allusion and cultured complicity” (1977: 119).

Subsequently, I turn my attention to Churchill Elementary and the language instruction carried out there in order to explore the relationship to language encouraged by that particular curriculum.
2.

“What Good Writers Do”: English Language Instruction at Churchill

Literacy, which includes topics such as guided reading, writing, spelling, and phonics, takes up more of the school week than any other single subject. The first graders start off the day, following the morning greeting activities, with an hour and a half of literacy related activities. When the third graders return from their early lunch at 11:00am, they begin their hour and a half of literacy. Unlike many other subjects, such as science or social studies, which are only taught once a week, the literacy block is a daily occurrence. The importance of these topics is rather bluntly stated by Mrs. Piper when she explains to me that on account of a snow day the teachers had to move some things around, cut some things out of the week’s schedule, “but not the literacy block; the literacy block is sacred.” This portrayal of literacy as “sacred” is not insignificant in understanding the distanced relationship to the language of school that the curriculum fosters. Something sacred is not something mundane and useful, which the students should have an easy, comfortable relationship with. It is distant and part of a greater authority.

As I mentioned previously, in addition to my role as observer within the school, I also offered the teachers my services as a classroom volunteer. The very first task I was asked to do in the first grade classroom was to help the students check over their writing exercises. In order to complete these writing exercises the students were required to write a few sentences about that day’s topic (Things You Like to Do Outside; What You Want to Be When You Grow Up; etc) and draw a quick picture if they finished in time. Once they believed they were finished with their writing, they were to call either Mrs. Piper or myself over to check their work. I was told to
make sure that the children correctly included capital letters and punctuation (where punctuation includes periods, exclamation points, and question marks—commas and other types of punctuation have yet to make it into their repertoire). Since then I have come to see that this focus on capital letters and end-of-sentence punctuation was not an isolated lesson for the day or even the week, but rather the focal point for every writing exercise that required the students to construct sentences:

“What do good writers put at the beginning of their sentences?” Ms. Piper asks as she passes out the students’ writing folders.
“Capital letter!” The students shout back in as close to unison as these first graders ever seem to get.
“And what do good writers put at the end of the sentence?”
“Period!”

This dialogue is recited, generally verbatim, before every writing exercise in which the students are asked to engage. It also forms the basis for corrections on work that has been handed in. Red pen underlines lower case letters at the beginning of sentences, circles absent punctuation, and corrects spelling. At no point were any remarks made about the content of the writing pieces. The students are learning that written language is the production of discrete, standardized pieces. It is not the production of ideas. Conceiving of language as a system of regulated parts that need to be done correctly, fosters an alienated relationship to language. It is not felt as something that is used to express oneself, a comfortable communicative tool. Rather, it is something to get wrong, to make mistakes in. This makes written language something foreign, something awkward, something that the students do not see as belonging to them.

This idea of language presented as discrete regularized parts can also be seen in other elements of the literacy curriculum. Beyond writing, the literacy block at Churchill also includes phonics lessons, such as learning the “sh” sound. In this lesson in the first grade classroom, the students’ learn how to make the “sh” sound and point out where in a word the sound occurs –
beginning (shoe), middle (rushed), or end (push). Phonics is about parsing words into small pieces, discrete parts of a language detached from context and meaning. It should be noted that the teaching of phonics is a rather fiercely debated topic, and while I am not yet positive to what degree it helps or hinders the attainment of reading skills during the beginning stages of literacy acquisition, it nevertheless reinforces the conception of the language of school as broken down into standard, rule-bound parts – a conception, which lends itself toward fostering that distanced relationship to the language.

Standardized Testing and the Formation of a Distanced Relationship to the Language of School

This idea is exemplified by the emphasis on specific Pennsylvania Department of Education standards. The motivations behind nearly every lesson are explicitly linked to the accomplishment of one of these regulated standards. For example, a display in the third grade classroom presented some of the students’ completed assignments from the last week. It is a colorful display, filled with student writing and the illustrations they drew to accompany it, and at the bottom corner there is a good-sized sign reading “PA Standard 1.4.7 C.” The implication embedded in this display is that the purpose of this assignment was not necessarily to engage the students’ thoughts about the most recent reading assignment, but rather it is an abstract goal of the institution, to accomplish “PA Standard 1.4.7 C”, whatever that entails. Additionally, the previously mentioned lesson objectives are expected to be directly responsive of one or more of the PA Standards for that grade level. This emphasis on standardized rules and regulations being the motivation behind the academic endeavors that take place at Churchill is reinforced by the decorations all throughout the school.
Like all public schools since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, standardized testing and district-wide standards play an integral role in the school experience at Churchill Elementary. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders are required to take the Pennsylvania System of Schools Assessment, more commonly known as the PSSA. In 2008, 60% of the students in grades 3, 4, and 5 scored proficient or above on the Reading section of the PSSA and 67% scored proficient or above on the Math section. On account of this, Churchill Elementary currently has a “warning” status in accordance with the guidelines set by NCLB as the necessary pass rates were 63% for Reading and 56% for Math. This means that they met the requirements (called Annual Yearly Progress or AYP) for the PSSA test last year, but did not do so this year and, thus, have another year to try and make AYP. If they do not do so the school will be placed in the category of “School Improvement I” and must offer school choice and develop an improvement plan (SDoL 2008).

Immediately upon entering the school the considerable role of the PSSA and district standards is evident. Churchill Elementary is brightly decorated with posters, bulletin boards, and even objects hanging from the ceiling, much of which highlights the importance of these standards. The decorations throughout the school fall into two main categories: student work and posters related to PSSA/district standards. The first bulletin board, in the prime location just outside the main office, is comprised of graphs and charts, which show each grade’s performance on the most recent PSSA and certificates for the years when AYP was made. Many of the individual classroom doors host bar graphs that chart student performance on standardized tests. In addition, small posters describing state academic standards can be found throughout the school. For example, the entrance to the ELL classroom hosts the following sign, printed on a normal sheet of 8x11 paper:
P.A. Standard 1.2.3 A
Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in academic areas

The library also hosts many of these signs, tacked up above the computers or between the stacks:

PA Standard 1.1.3 B
Identify the purpose and types of text.
Establish clear information goals.

PA Standard 1.8.3 B
Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.

This focus on PA Standard X.X.X Y reinforces the detached relationship to language. One uses the language of school not because it is a comfortable tool to communicate one’s thoughts, but because the standards ask for it—the language does not belong to the student, it belongs to the standardizing institution.

In all of these classroom activities, the students are not being taught the relationship to language that is favored by the school. Quite the contrary; they are learning to relate to language as something foreign, something other, and, bluntly, something scary.

Spelling Mistakes, Backward Letters, & Fluency: A Different Type of School

The above contrasts sharply with what I observed at Arthur LaVelle, a kindergarten through 8th grade school in another city in Pennsylvania. Arthur LaVelle is a public school assisted by a nearby university. The university not only subsidizes the school with about $1000 per student each year, but it also “provides student teachers in the classroom, professional development courses and workshops for staff, and enriched curriculum in literacy, math and science. [University] students from all across the campus serve as interns, tutors, pen pals, and
as the leaders of after-school clubs” (University website 2009). I had the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom at Arthur LaVelle for a few minutes. While the time I spent there was extremely limited and, therefore, did not provide me with the opportunity to thoroughly investigate the process of language instruction, I did have a chance to see some examples of the students’ written work, which were posted in the hallway outside of the classroom (a much different decoration theme than Churchill’s posters about standardized test scores). In these written pieces the students had composed short paragraphs about President Obama. In contrast to the carefully formed capital letters, the vigorously drawn periods, and the blurred letters marking erased spelling mistakes of the work of Mrs. Piper’s students, these paragraphs were full of randomly capitalized letters, multiple spelling errors, letters written backwards or upside down, and misplaced or completely absent punctuation. There seemed to be a great deal less concern about “getting it right.” This resulted in longer paragraphs (far surpassing Churchill’s “End of 1st Grade Benchmark” of writing three sentences on one topic) and more varied sentence structures – the writing samples from Mrs. Piper’s class all tended to follow a similar pattern (“My favorite color is gold. Porter’s favorite color is gold too. Penelope’s favorite color is purple.”)

It is not insignificant that those influencing the learning of language at Arthur LaVelle (Professors and graduate students of the nearby university) are decidedly middle/upper class – at least in their own relationship to language and education, if not monetarily. Graduate students are not known for their surfeit of funds in the moment, but they have certainly internalized these characteristics of the middle/upper-middle class enough to be succeeding beyond what is considered typical at institutions which reward and are ultimately trying to reproduce the characteristics of these social groups. Thus, although the students at Arthur LaVelle are made up
of a similar demographic as those at Churchill in regards to class (those who attend the school are those who live within the catchment area, an area that is beginning to become more gentrified – as a result of the school in some ways – but is ultimately an area with significant working class population) they are receiving a curriculum that is designed by the middle/upper middle class.

*The Motivation Behind the Curriculum*

Is this indicative of schools wanting to teach their students an uncomfortable, distanced relationship to language? I would argue no. From what I have observed, it is certainly not the teachers’ intention to do so. In fact, those activities the teacher has the most control over constructing and designing the curriculum for, that are least responsive to district standards (and, as such, are generally the first to go when time is short), are actually those activities where language is engaged with as more than just its isolated parts, as decontextualized collections of rules and pieces.

Whenever Mrs. Piper has the time, which, she ruefully acknowledges, is not that often on account of how closely they have to follow the district’s curriculum timeline, she forgoes the reading level books that the students are required to read. She told me that the reading level books “aren’t good literature. They oversimplify things” and that if such books are the only written material the students are exposed to it is quite evident. “You can see the difference in writing of those kids who don’t get read to at home,” she clarifies. Consequently, whenever she has the opportunity, she chooses her own books to read aloud to the students.

The discussions that take place during this reading and the questions she asks the students require a much different level of engagement with the story. The story is not broken down into pieces, focusing on, for example, words that have the “sh” sound or sentences with question
words. Instead, the students are asked to relate to this written text in a different, much less distanced manner. The students are often encouraged to draw connections to their own lives, and engage with the ideas presented in the story, not only the format and structure. During one reading session when Mrs. Piper was able to deviate somewhat from the curriculum, she read “The Empty Pot” by Demi to the class. Instead of focusing on questions about the structure of the story, such as “what happened in the beginning, middle, and end of the story?” or “What type of story is this? Fiction or non-fiction?” – both of which are not unusual questions to be posed to this first grade class – Mrs. Piper engaged the class in a discussion about what message they learned from the book, why did they think the characters acted like they did, what did they think the characters were thinking and feeling during certain sections of the story, and what would they themselves do if they were in similar situations. This type of interaction with the text fosters a relationship to the language that is similar to Heath’s account of the children of the townspeople. Unsurprisingly, Heath tells us that it is the town students who ultimately have the most scholastic success and whose relation to language is most advantageous in the academic institution (Heath 1983).

The fact that the teachers want their students to develop a comfortable relationship with the language of the school can also be seen in the first bulletin board that is encountered when one walks into Churchill Elementary. In the stairwell there is a display titled “Hopes & Dreams: The Vision of Excellence” where all the classroom teachers, specialists, and other staff have written a short paragraph about their hopes and dreams for the semester. Mrs. Piper writes: “I hope that all my students will love to read. I dream that all my students will realize their full academic potential.” Mrs. Weiss, the ELL teacher, also mentions reading, saying, “It is my dream that all students will be thinking and asking questions everyday. It is my dream that all
my students will *delight in reading books*” [emphasis mine]. Both “loving reading” and
“delighting in reading books” suggest a relationship to written language that is not characterized
by distance and discomfort. Therefore, it is evident that the teachers are not intentionally
attempting to foster an alienated relationship to the language of the school and, in fact, if left to
their own devices, will often engage in activities that foster a much different type of relationship.
Is it then politicians and educational reformers cackling to themselves as they deliberately try to
alienate students from the language that is most preferred in schools? Doubtful. The School
District of Lancaster’s website states that:

“The 2005-2008 Strategic Plan is based on the continued philosophy that all
students can achieve academic success. The District is committed to this belief
and will strive to meet and exceed the expectations laid out in our Strategic Focus
Areas. Our journey will not end until all students achieve at high levels.”

Something else must be the influencing factor for these curriculums. I propose that underlying
ideologies of language and education play a significant role in shaping the curriculum. In the
next section I will examine what these underlying ideologies are, their influence on the
curriculum and how students begin to internalize them into their understandings of language and
education.
3.

The Role of Ideologies of Language & Education in the Literacy Curriculum

Ideology is a problematic term with various uses (Woolard 1998); however, for the purposes of this paper I take the definitions as presented by Kathryn Woolard. Woolard explains that language ideology is the "shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world […] The cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Woolard 1998: 4). While ideology is often discussed in terms of a tool of power that is objectively false, I follow Woolard’s argument that the discussion “must concern itself not with the truth value of ideologies but rather with the way that they mediate meanings for social purposes.” For while I may find fault with some of the ideologies underlying the language instruction at Churchill, it must be acknowledged that I am finding fault from my own ideological perspective, which has no more objective truth than any other. Therefore, a criticism of the ideologies underlying language instruction at Churchill is not founded on the premise that they are inherently false, but rather that they encourage a curriculum that does not actually produce the outcomes the school wishes. While Woolard’s definition is one of language ideology, I would extend it to ideologies of education as well. That is, to use Woolard’s vocabulary, education ideologies capture the commonsense notions about the nature of education in the world.

First, the curriculum at Churchill seems to be responsive to an ideology of language as composed of discrete parts; the idea that mastery can most efficiently be achieved by breaking the language down into its component pieces and controlling those pieces. Parallels can be
drawn to Michel Foucault’s conception of ideologies of discipline for the body. Foucault describes such a process of classifying something as the individual elements it is made of in the context of controlling the body – specifically for the training of soldiers, workers, and students (Foucault 1975) – which can be seen in the classroom. Mrs. Piper frequently asks her class to behave as “good students” do and is explicit about the fact that this involves sitting still and upright in their chairs, hands folded, with their feet planted firmly on the ground.

Mrs. Piper: Why do we sit like that [hands folded, sitting up straight, feet on the floor]?  
Student: Because we are being good.  
Student 2: So we can’t touch other people.  
Student 3: So you are being good and put a mark in the report card.  
Mrs. Piper: Because if you sit up straight, hands folded, you do your best thinking, boys and girls.

I would suggest that this idea can carry over to the control and standardization of language as well. 1st grade benchmarks such as “spaces words appropriately” highlight the similarity between language as broken down into pieces and controlled in time and space and that of the body of the student. Many aspects of the literacy curriculum highlight the discipline of the students themselves in explicitly drawn connections with the pursuit of literate activities. For example, prior to beginning guided reading with a small group of students, Mrs. Piper presents the question of “What do good readers do?” She responds to her own question, telling the semi-circle of students that “we point and read the book.” The question of “fingers ready?” tells the students that they are now expected to place their fingers on the words and follow along as each is said aloud. This becomes part of what reading is.

Foucault’s discussion of modernity’s ideas of the benefit of constant assessment is also relevant. The ideal is “to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to
assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits” (Foucault 1975: 143). This ideal is evident in contemporary ideologies of education. There is a strong need to assess and quantify everything that occurs in the classroom. How else is it possible to know if students (and teachers) are being as productive and efficient as possible? That the “ultimate capacity of the individual” (Foucault 1975: 160) is being reached?

These ideologies produce and legitimize literacy instruction that, for example, breaks the sentence down into punctuation, capitalization, and correctly spelled words. Such a pedagogy works both toward the standardization of the language and offers a much easier avenue for assessment than an abstract concept such as “a fluent relationship to the language.” (How does one recognize and score fluency on a rubric?) Therefore, these ideologies offer some explanation for curriculums that may seem somewhat counterproductive to the goal of fluency. The curriculum is responsive to these ideologies about how education needs to be constructed in a modern world where everything needs to be supervised and everyone needs to be “held accountable,” to use some of the buzzwords of many current educational reform movements. However, such a curriculum does not necessarily (or even often) produce a fluent relationship with the language of school.

Another ideology that is present in shaping these curriculums has already been mentioned in the discussion of what constitutes the language of the school. There, I discussed how this ideology of the superiority of the written language and of its embodiment of certain characteristics gives it a privileged station in the academic institution.

It should be noted that the influence of these ideologies goes beyond the instruction itself. Not only do these deeply held understandings of language and education create a curriculum that fosters a hesitant relationship with language, they themselves are also learned by the students.
Collins discusses how the students in the low-ranked reading groups gain insight into the idea that literacy does not stand on its own, but is a matter of “scriptal practices embedded in social relations, often relations of domination” (Collins 1996: 224). By internalizing all of these ideologies, the students are learning something of how the authority, the “rightness” of language exists in something beyond its referential meaning, beyond the explicit content of the words (Mehan 1996). It is in the presentation, the format, and what the format refers to. This can be seen in the practice of raising a hand along with using language in the classroom. On more than one occasion during discussions in the third grade classroom a question was answered without the student raising his or her hand. Mrs. Quincey’s response to such shouted-out answers was to either ignore them or actually respond with “no,” even if the response being given is technically correct. She never said “yes, correct” and moved on to the next question unless she received a correct answer from someone whose hand was raised and who she had called on. Even if the student was only repeating an answer that had just been shouted out by one of the other children (or, on occasion, that he or she had just shouted out, only to get a negative response and then try again with a raised hand), this was still the only acceptable form of response. This implies that the manner of presentation actually affects the correctness of an answer. Simply responding with the factually correct answer does not guarantee that said answer will be viewed as a correct one. It needs to occur after the student raises his or hand and is called on by the teacher. Only then is it truly considered to be a correct use of language in this classroom. The students have certainly seemed to internalize the message. One day, two students told me that I had the wrong date written on my name tag because I had written it as 11/20/09 as opposed to 11-20-09. I was not seen as having written the date in the wrong way, but having actually written the wrong date.
Literacy classes are not the only times during the school day where explicit language instruction occurs. In the next section, I will examine Spanish language instruction in the classroom.
“¡Hola Español, Adios Ingles!”: Spanish Language Instruction at Churchill

Every Friday at 1:15 PM Mrs. Piper collects her papers, goes out into the hall, and leaves her first grade classroom in the seemingly endlessly energetic hands of Señora Pilano, the Español teacher, for the next 45 minutes. Clapping her hands to get the children’s attention, Sra. Pilano briefly explains the day’s topic then leads the children in a quick sing-along that concludes with a shouted chorus of “¡Hola español, adios ingles!” accompanied by the students’ enthusiastic waves of farewell to English as if the language were to actually leave the classroom and follow Mrs. Piper out into the hall.

Each day the times of 9:00 AM and 1:15 AM are occupied by Specials for the third and first graders, respectively. These specials, which rotate throughout the week, include Art, Music, Guidance, Physical Education, and Spanish. For the third graders, the first thing they do Thursday morning, after finishing up any of yesterday’s work that was not completed, is have their Spanish lesson. The first grader’s Spanish class is the second to last lesson of the week, on Friday afternoon. The lack of fluency and the distance from comfortable communication that characterizes the literacy classes in the first and third grade is seen to an even greater extant in these Español classes.

The Español Curriculum

During Español, in both the first and the third grade, the curriculum can be divided into two main categories: vocabulary units, which were the majority, and units that taught the
students about various locations where Spanish is the dominant language. The vocabulary units typically spanned two to three classes and the country/culture units a single class period. I was able to observe four distinct units (each lasting between one to three weeks) in the first grade classroom: colors, shapes, parts of the body, and Mexico. During the second semester of my ethnography I was able to make it into the third grade Español lessons, during which I observed three different units: numbers, animals, and the Dominican Republic.

In the first classes that I attended, the first graders were being taught the Spanish words for red, orange, yellow, purple, blue, green, white, pink, black, and brown. To start off the lessons Señora Pilano held up colored pieces of paper and the class called out the names of the appropriate color in Spanish (they had apparently been introduced to this vocabulary the week before I arrived.) The next activity, which began that day and concluded during the following week’s lesson, involved coloring in three-circle Venn diagrams. Using the primary colors the kids were asked to combine them and discover what additional colors were created. Ideally, they were to give these responses in Spanish. The final activity for this unit allowed the students to use their imagination. They were given a sheet of paper folded into eighths and required to draw an animal that was one of the colors they had learned in Spanish in each square. For example, the first square was *negro* (black) and so some students drew cats, others bears, and others ants.

This pattern continued throughout future units as well: introduction of the vocabulary, group activity that reinforced the vocabulary, then a more individual activity, which involved some sort of creativity on the students’ part—and frequently did not particularly require the use of Spanish. In the lesson on the parts of the body, Señora Pilano introduced the vocabulary by pointing to or moving a part of her body and then asking, “What is this en español?” The class mirrored her movements, tugging on their ears, pointing to their eyes, and wiggling their fingers
as they shouted out the corresponding vocabulary. During the next activity, the class did a worksheet on the overhead projector, which had images of different creatures. One had two heads, three arms, and ten eyes. Another had four mouths, six legs, and twenty fingers. Sra. Pilano would then recite the attributes of one of the creatures and the students would be required to figure out which of the monsters on the overhead she was talking about.

Sra. Pilano: This monstruo has dos cabezas, three brazos, and ten ojos. [she points to the first monster on the page] Is it this monster?
Class: NO.⁴
Sra. Pilano: [points to the next monster on the overhead] Is it this monster?
Class: NO.
Sra. Pilano: [points to a third monster] Is it this monster?
Class: YES!

For the last activity the students were asked to draw and color their very own monsters with unusual amounts of limbs and facial features. In the lesson on shapes, images of circles, rectangles, and triangles were pointed to and the students again asked to give the name of the object in Spanish.

Throughout the vocabulary lessons, these specific vocabulary words were the only words in Spanish that the students were required to produce. Occasionally the teacher and some students would use more Spanish, but not directly as a part of the lesson, which I will address later. In the curriculum itself, these were the only Spanish words that the students were required

⁴ When the class as a whole is described as saying a single word, be aware that I am taking some creative license and only transcribing what the majority of the class is saying. These are a group of energetic six and seven year olds and, thus, a more accurate transcription would also include a handful of “yes”es, “yes”es that become “no”s halfway through when they see what their classmates are saying, and a couple random nonverbal shouts made for the sheer joy of being able to shout. However, that is not immediately relevant to what I am describing, so I have gone with the neater option.
to learn. This type of curriculum differs dramatically from, say, that of the French 101 class I took last semester. In that course from the very first day we learned conversational basics such as “hello,” “how are you”, and “my name is…” These conversational phrases were taught before we learned the discrete elements that made up each phrase in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Ultimately, no vocabulary was introduced without a framework in which we could use it in conversation. For example, during a unit on food, the lists of French names for types of food were learned in conjunction with the phrases “I like ___” and “I dislike ___.”. Admittedly, the French 101 course at Franklin and Marshall College and the Español classes at Churchill Elementary School are aimed at vastly different populations; divided by age, the element of choice in taking the class, and experience in the academic world. Nevertheless, both groups begin with about the same level of subject specific knowledge. In fact, a handful of the first and third graders at Churchill Elementary can probably claim fluency in the subject matter. Nevertheless, they were not learning any aspect of the language that would allow them to communicate with each other, even in such a basic way as “I like X color” or “My favorite color is X.”

In contrast to the literacy classes, however, where the fluent relationship to language seems to be held as the ideal even if the curriculum fosters a completely opposite one fluency in Spanish does not seem to be the goal at all. The difference between tools such as vocabulary lists in Español lessons and those in literacy lessons highlight this idea. Ostensibly these are the same thing: a list of new words that the students are not familiar with. However, between the Literacy lessons and Español lessons both the types of words and what the students are expected to do with them varies dramatically. Let us first look at the kinds of vocabulary that are learned in the Español classes. As mentioned before, the words tend to relate to a specific topic, be it
parts of the body, colors, shapes, etc. Generally they are nouns: diamond, head, fingers, dog.

The vocabulary words for the literacy classes are of a drastically different sort. Words tend to be categorized by either phonetic sound/the spelling rule they follow, or the role they play in a sentence, such as question words or pronouns. Even the label that they are given, High Frequency Words, alludes to the fact that they are different from the decontextualized vocabulary of the Spanish words. Here the point is use. For Spanish to be similar, the students would be learning con, el, y, sobre, que, cuándo, etc. and not azul, cuadrado, and piernas. It is possible to communicate successfully in a language without the word conejo (rabbit), for example. In fact, I learned that word for the first time at Churchill and I managed to more or less successfully communicate without it for four months previously while living in Spain. The same is not possible if one does not learn words such as ‘the’, ‘and’, or ‘what’.

I had considered that these decontextualized vocabulary lessons were really just a way to build a foundation and then the next year the context would be added and they would be put to use as parts of more complex sentences. However, this does not appear to be what is happening, at least not in the elementary school. Every lesson Sra. Pilano brings a poster with that day’s objectives. One read:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count #s 21-30</td>
<td>3, 4, and 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize #s 21-30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell the days of the week in Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The title in the corner labels these objectives as those for third, fourth, and fifth grade. This implies that the students in fourth and fifth grade are not building upon knowledge from the
previous grades to slowly build up the tools necessary for communication. This raises the question: if the purpose of the Español lessons are not perceived to be about learning to communicate in Spanish, then what is the point of these classes?

The Purpose of Español

It would seem to me that, ideally, the curriculum would be responsive to the perceived purpose of language instruction whatever that purpose may be. If communication is the purpose, one would assume that lots of practice speaking the language and learning elements that are required for communication (such as dialogues and vocabulary and grammar that one might not fully understand, but can use in context of interaction) would be central parts of the curriculum. This can be seen in language classes at F&M, but not at Churchill. Therefore, what does the Spanish language curriculum at Churchill say about the understood purpose of learning Spanish?

During an early conversation, Mrs. Piper provided me with another rationale for Spanish language instruction in the elementary school. She mentioned how wonderful of an idea she thought the Español classes were:

“I think [the students] really like it. Particularly the ELL students. And the other kids who use it at home. It’s a way to, that they are validated for what they know. Bilingual kids. It should be like, ‘You’re bilingual?! That’s great!’”

Here Mrs. Piper offers an alternative explanation for the purpose of learning Spanish. It is not so much that it is a tool that students are being taught to utilize correctly, but rather, a platform in which the Spanish language, and by implication those who speak it, can be seen as valuable. Such motivation can be seen in multiple campaigns to include certain immigrant or indigenous languages in the curriculum (Hall 2002). Schools are places of legitimizing culture, places that
recognize and reward the appropriate forms of culture and language use (Heath 1996; Bernstein 1994) and reproduce them (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). It follows that this could be seen as a reason for parents and members of the school community, who wish for the value of the Spanish language (and the culture of its speakers) to be appreciated, to want to include Spanish as part of the curriculum. It is somewhat of a circular argument, but if the school is the location of legitimate forms of language, then those types of language that exist in the school should be seen as legitimate. (Cf the debate over Ebonics in Oakland). However, there does seem to be some implication that this promotion of the value of Spanish is a personal thing, for the Hispanic students themselves and perhaps not for the broader school community. This idea is reinforced by Sra. Pilaño’s quote on the “Hopes & Dreams: The Vision of Excellence” display that was referenced previously Sra. Pilaño’s paragraph reads:

Señora Pilaño, Español
My dream for this school year is to make my Hispanic students proud of their heritage and inspire my non-Hispanic students to learn the Spanish language.
5. Ideologies of Language in *Español* Instruction

The underlying ideology here is that of language as metaphor for a people. In order to validate the Spanish speaking students, validate the language. As was briefly mentioned in the introduction, perceptions of language are closely tied to perceptions of those who are seen as speaking the language. Multiple scholars have noted that characteristics that are attributed to a social group are projected onto the language or variant of language that they speak (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard, 1998). Discourses about the language then become veiled discourses about the people themselves (Hill 1993). This second type of lesson during *Español*, the culture-area lessons, where the students learn about countries where the majority of the population speaks Spanish echoes this idea. It makes clear that learning Spanish is not necessarily about the Spanish language in and of itself, but about the people who speak it.

The second topic that was covered during my observation of the first grade Spanish lessons was a unit on Mexico. The students wrote three facts (in English) about Mexico on the back of an anthropomorphic chili pepper:

“Mexico City is the capital”
"It is in North America”
"They speak Spanish there”

They then spent the rest of the class cutting out and coloring the googly-eyed, sombrero-wearing pepper as they saw fit—the abundance of blue and multicolored chili peppers suggested that realism was perhaps not the goal.
In one of the early Spanish lessons that I sat in on in the third grade classroom, the students were doing a similar activity about the Dominican Republic, albeit minus the cartoon chili pepper and with rather more significant, if a bit random, facts such as:

- Santa Domingo is the capital.
- The population is 9.4 million.
- The largest population of Dominicans in the United States is in Washington Heights.
- Some basic misconceptions about Dominicans in the United States include that they sell drugs, are poor, and are illegal. ("This is not true," Señora Pilano explains, "some are very educated, have lots of money, and have good jobs.")
- When someone dies they hold a velada, or a candlelight vigil with songs, prayer, and stories about the person who passed away.
- A lot of parents want their boys to be baseball players. ("Like A-rod, the one who dated Madonna," Señora Pilano says.)
- They start school at the age of seven and go through 8th grade. High school is not public and they have to pay for the courses they want to take.
- Many do not like to admit that they have African heritage. (Señora Pilano explains that this is related to "tensions between Dominicans and Haitians, who are a little darker, but that doesn't make them more African. It's a type of racism of sorts.")
- The religion is mostly Roman Catholic, but there is a small Jewish community in one town.

Not only do these ideas influence the curriculum, but the students begin to internalize them as well. This is exemplified by an exchange, which I regretfully only caught the tail end of, in the third grade classroom during Español. One student was scolding another by saying "don't make fun of her culture." This was in response something the other had said in regard to one of the ELL students who was having a conversation in Spanish with the teacher. Here, the first student is easily using “culture” as a synonym for “language”. Even in the first grade, this connection between a people and a language seems to be recognized. One of the students mentions during Español class that he “is part Spanish” because, he explains a few sentences later, “his mother speaks Spanish.” He does not identify himself as part Puerto Rican because his mother perhaps
comes from Puerto Rico, or Dominican because his mother perhaps comes from the Dominican Republic. Instead, his identity is drawn on linguistic lines. Even outside Español class the students see places, people, and language as inexorably intertwined. The day after a social studies lesson on China, the first grade teacher requested that the students tell her something they knew about it. The very first comment made was that “they speak Chinese.”

The Limits of Spanish

While this connection between language and people is made, and seems to be understood by the students, it is debatable whether or not it extends to validating the people as is intended. This can be seen in the limited use of Spanish in general, those times Spanish is used in the classroom, and encapsulated by how Spanish is located in such a specific time and place. Despite the ceremonial send-off of “¡adios ingles, hola español!” the beginning of each Español lesson by no means marks the last instance of English used during the next forty-five minutes. In the very first Español lesson I attended I was struck by how little Spanish was actually used, both by the students and the teacher. In the first two classes that I observed, the children were learning how to say their colors. Pieces of colored construction paper with the appropriate color written in Spanish on them were taped to the front board. First, Sra. Pilano pointed to each colored sheet paper in turn and told the students how to say that color in Spanish. The class enthusiastically repeated each word. Next, Sra. Pilano again pointed to a color, signaling for a response. Her gestures were generally accompanied by either a question of “¿Que color es?” or “What color is…?” (she alternated between English and Spanish) or by saying the color in English. Either way she presented the question about, for example, the color green, Sra. Pilano was looking for the same answer: verde. However, the students did not always respond in
Spanish. If Sra. Pilano pointed to the green piece of paper and said, “Green,” the majority of the students shouted “¡Verde!” back at her. On the other hand, if she pointed to the paper and asked them what color it was, in either English or Spanish, a slim majority of them answered, “Green!” Of course, there were exceptions—some of the students answered green the whole time, some answered verde, and some answered purple. It should also be noted that those who consistently answered in Spanish were not necessarily those students who spoke Spanish at home. Neither of the ELL students in the class consistently responded in Spanish.

This is exemplified by the previously mentioned activity that involved coloring in three-circle Venn diagrams. Using the primary colors the kids were asked to combine them and discover what additional colors were created. Sra. Pilano led the exercise on the overhead projector and continuously questioned the students about the colors. The responses received for this exercise echoed those of the previous activity. When she said the name of the color in English the students generally responded accurately in Spanish. When she asked what the color was she received a combination of English and Spanish, with slightly more English. However, when she asked the students what color was created by two other colors the response was nearly unanimously in English. For example a question of “What color do you get if you mix rojo (red) and azul (blue)?” consistently got the response of “Purple!” as opposed to morado. Thus, when students were asked to think, to provide answers that lay outside the realm of vocabulary, they rather “naturally”, without question, answered in English.

In the final activity of the unit, where, as I described in the earlier section, the students were drawing animals of the appropriate color, very little Spanish was used at all. The Spanish words for the color each animal were written on the top of each box on her overhead projection,
but the students were not required to copy them down and more often than not, when she was explaining each stage of the exercise, she used the English words for the colors.

“How about a fish? An azul, blue fish in the first box.”
“Alright, in this second box I am going to draw a cat. A black cat.”
“Rosado. I am going to draw a pink flamingo in this box.”
“A frog. A green frog next. You can draw any animal. An animal that is green.”

This continues with other lessons. In the first two lessons, when a question was presented the answer was more often in English, even if the students knew the correct word in Spanish. When given the English word, the students easily translated it into Spanish. The students seem to conceptualize answering questions, an activity that is very much what school is all about at this grade level, as something that is only done in English. The third section of the unit, making the monsters, or making people out of shapes, has very little Spanish at all. The students do not need to engage with it in any manner and even the teacher uses more English than Spanish in moments when Spanish seems not only appropriate, but the whole point of the lesson. These final lessons become lessons that focus more on skills of coloring, cutting paper, and creativity than practicing the new vocabulary.

It is possible to see the children’s continued use of English as simple laziness or lack of comprehension about the Spanish words; however, I do not believe that such an explanation is entirely adequate. It is a potential explanation for those students who are unfamiliar with Spanish, but it does not take into account the lack of Spanish used by Sra. Pilano, those students who speak a good deal of Spanish, and even those who speak Spanish better than they speak English. In such instances a lack of comprehension is certainly not the reason, nor is laziness, as some of these children struggle with English and, therefore, using Spanish would probably be a welcome break.
This has implications for the idea that English is the language of the educational institution and Spanish is not appropriate, and has less legitimacy, in such a sphere. Jane Hill makes an argument about the ways in which non-speakers of a language appropriate elements of that language. In particular, just because the language is in use does not mean it is being valued and upheld as something important (Hill 1993). While the examples are not identical; nevertheless, some of the decontextualized aspects of the Español lesson could be seen to relate to this idea. The routine of shouting “¡Hola español, adios ingles!” to start the class and “¡Adios español, hola ingles!” at the end locates the appropriate use of Spanish to a very specific, and quite limited, time and place. This could imply that Spanish is a novelty and is not sufficient for regular school activities, learning, and thinking. However, this does contradict some of what Sra. Pilano said to me about learning Spanish being about developing higher order thinking skills, something that is very much at place in the classroom.

The Spanish used during the vocabulary units is certainly limited; however, the Spanish use in the country profile units is nearly non-existent. Throughout both lessons no Spanish was ever used beyond the "Hola español, adios ingles" ritual at the beginning and the end of the 45 minute period and the word velada for the third graders in their discussion of the funeral practices of the peoples of the Dominican Republic. I have seen many language courses where new vocabulary, grammatical structures, or conversational phrases are learned in the context of elements of the culture that the language is seen to belong to (e.g. in a unit on types of food in my French 101 class we learned how to describe, in French, the types of foods that were typically eaten at each meal in France.) However, no Spanish was used in these lessons; learning about the culture of the people who speak it and other facts about the nation that the language is seen as belonging to was the explicit point of the lesson.
The exceptions: When Spanish is used in Español Lessons

This is not to say that Spanish is never used in the Español classes. The second Español class I attended took place during the elementary school’s “Fly on the Wall” week and this had a significant effect on the amount of Spanish that was used during the lesson. The “Fly on the Wall” activity allowed parents to come and observe their child’s class. On this Friday afternoon, Mrs. Fuentes, the mother of one of the first grade ELL students, Pepe, came in to observe the Spanish lesson. During this lesson I observed a significant increase in the amount of Spanish that was used, which seemed to imply that the first day had been unusual in the lack of Spanish spoken by both the teacher and the students. However, while the amount of Spanish used overall was greater this day, it did not replace English in any of the situations where English was dominant the week before. For example, Sra. Pilano used Spanish a good deal more in the following situations: to speak directly to Mrs. Fuentes, to make general comments about the class (“They all have such energy today”), or to gently tease (“Silly kids”) the children. In addition, at one point Mrs. Fuentes took a picture and a child asked what the flash was. Pepe, Mrs. Fuentes’ son, responded, “la cámara.” In response to something related to his mother, Pepe spoke in Spanish, and yet when they returned to the activity he joined his classmates in responding in English even when Spanish was appropriate. In this instance, when the topic of discussion is something that is connected to his life outside of school (i.e. his mother), Pepe is comfortable with using Spanish. However, when what is being said is clearly related to the realm of school and education English seems to be considered the more appropriate language to use. Near the end of the class, Sra. Pilano remarked upon his mother’s presence in the class (in English) and he responded in Spanish, which led to a short exchange in Spanish between the two. Thus, while I
observed that a significantly greater amount of Spanish was used, it was used in response to an additional element that had been added to the class and did not replace the use of English during the educational activities, but was rather used in entirely new types of dialogue. Of course, it should not be said that such exchanges are not entirely without value – they can reinforce a connection between student and teacher that might otherwise be lacking for ELL students.

The Español classes with the third graders reinforce some of these ideas. Initially, I was startled by how much Spanish seemed to be used during the first Español class I sat in on with the third graders. At first, this seemed to disprove any conclusions that I had teased out of my observations in the first grade Español lessons. It was not at all related to the perception of the Spanish language as having a limited role in the classroom and, thus, the academic sphere in general. The fact that Spanish was not frequently used was just related to the fact that the students are very young; it is an incredibly introductory group of lessons, so obviously too much should not be expected. However, when I looked closer at what exactly this additional Spanish consisted of, who said it, when, and about what, it, much like the example of the increased Spanish in the first grade lesson when Pepe's Spanish speaking mother was present, actually reinforced some of the patterns I had previously seen. While there was a lot more Spanish in the third grade lessons it normally fell into one of four categories: the vocabulary that was being learned, side conversations with one of the ELL students, short instructions directed at the students, or common words put into mostly English sentences (es [it], para [for]). The instances of Spanish use in relation to the new vocabulary were very similar to that of the first graders. When the day's topic was animals, the students used Spanish to say words such as cat, dog, horse, etc. However, it was in the next three categories that there was a drastic increase in the use of Spanish. The first thing I noticed was that Sra. Pilano occasionally interjected small
Spanish words or phrases into her sentences when she was talking to the class as a whole.

“Tenemos un caballo” (We have a horse.)
“Aquí hay 24” (Here is 24.)
“Consiguente” (Next.)
“Muy bien” (Very good.)
“Okay, clase.” (Okay, class.)
“Pick someone from that table para numero siete.” (Pick someone from that table for number seven.)

These were generally accompanied by hand gestures or an action that made the gestures clearly understandable whether or not the students were actually aware of the terms.

This increased use of Spanish in the third grade was highlighted by the fact that Señora Pilano occasionally gave instructions or asked a question completely in Spanish.

“Vas a la siguiente.”
(You go next.)

“Escribe en la linea.”
(Write on the line.)

“Vaya a la pizarra.”
(Go to the board.)

“Ven aca.”
(Come here.)

“¿Cuanto gente tu grupo?”
(How many people are in your group?)

This contrasted sharply with what I had observed in the first grade class. However, these Spanish instructions were actually more side comments, directed at one or two students and not said so the whole class could hear. Mrs. Quincey’s third grade class has five students in the ELL program, the greatest number of ELL students in the school and enough so that all but one of the seating groups has an ELL student. Many of these increased uses of Spanish were being directed at those students whose first language was Spanish.
Interestingly, the entire class did not always receive this increase in Spanish use warmly. During an *Español* class in the third grade, one student was sitting nearby when one of the ELL students had a short exchange with Sra. Pilaño in Spanish (that amounted mostly to a generic greeting and asking how the student’s week had been). The other student scolded the two, asking “could you guys please speak English?” Ultimately it seems that students are learning that the Spanish language is a metaphor for people, but as the Spanish language is limited in the classroom and cast as somewhat inappropriate (or at least, lower in value) in the scholastic realm, this casts the Spanish-speaking people in a similar light. Spanish is not the language for thinking, for asking questions, or even for communicating outside of the Spanish-speaking community.
4.

Conclusions

The Español classes foster the same alienated relationship to language as the literacy classes, albeit for different reasons. In the literacy classes, the breaking down of the elements of language into discrete parts is seen as necessary in the context of assessing and thus, standardizing and controlling the language and its use. On the other hand, in the Español classes a distanced relationship to Spanish is fostered because knowing and being engaged with the Spanish language in and of itself does not really matter in terms of scholastic achievement. Spanish is not seen as the language of academia; therefore, learning to use it with ease (which is still the goal for the literacy classes, despite the fact that it does not appear to be achieved) is not actually necessary for the realm of school. In this instance, the Spanish language is an extended symbol for the Spanish-speaking people and their culture. Its presence in the elementary school curriculum is a gesture toward cultural acknowledgement more than anything else. It is decontextualized because its role is to be an interesting collection of facts, so that the students can “learn something about” Spanish rather than “learning” Spanish.

The relationships to language that the students learn, as well as the other implicit messages carried in the curriculum, have consequences for broader issues of social inequality. The Español lessons have already been explained in this regard to some degree. The structure of the Spanish language curriculum encourages the conception of Spanish as not entirely appropriate for the academic realm, not something to be used for truly intellectual thinking. This reinforces hierarchies and stereotypes of language (and thus its speakers) that already exist in the wider society.
The literacy curriculum also has implications for social inequality. It follows that those students whose relationship to the language of school is characterized by tension and distance will typically not achieve as much scholastic success as those who use the language of school with ease and fluency as an extension of their own thoughts (cf the prior discussion of Bourdieu and Passeron). As academic success is closely linked to social mobility, this places those students with an alienated relationship to the language of school at a distinct disadvantage.

While my ethnography focused on a relatively limited group of around 50 children, in one elementary school out of thirteen, in a single school district out of a state full of districts, I would suggest that the situation of the students at Churchill Elementary is not entirely unique. Other communities share similar demographics with Lancaster and, on account of standardized testing, many elements of the curriculums are consistent statewide and nationwide. Therefore, it is possible to generalize the language instruction experience at Churchill to some extent; especially in the area of literacy instruction, which is particularly responsive to nationwide criteria implemented by No Child Left Behind. However, despite the presence of nationwide requirements, not all schools go about literacy instruction in the ways characterized in this paper – Arthur LaVelle, for example. Of course, if this relationship could be generalized to all elementary schools then it would not have any particular role in the construction of social inequality.

This raises the question: why do some schools have a curriculum like the one found at Churchill, that fosters this distant, uneasy relationship to the language of the school and others do not? The ideologies of the need for consistent assessment and regulation discussed previously are likely to be pervasive throughout the country; however, they have more weight and influence at some schools than others. I would argue that it comes down to anxiety about the language of
the school among all who are involved with the school. Anxiety about language use has been linked to social class by theorists like William Labov, who discusses the self-corrections the lower-middle class makes to their speech (1972). Beyond being responsive to nationwide mandates, implemented by politicians miles away, the schools are also responsive to the local community (parents, other family, teachers, local officials such as members of the school board, and administrators). Churchill sees itself as having a dynamic relationship with the surrounding community. It is not seen as an isolated institution, cut off from the local population. This is illustrated by the vision of “Together We Can” or “Juntos Podemos” that is written across the top of most documents, newsletters, and mission statements from the school. Subsequently, the relationship to language that is fostered by the schools can be seen as reflecting the relationship to language that members of the community already possess. In a family where the parents have a comfortable, engaged relationship with the language of the school there is not likely to be overmuch concern about whether or not a child will learn to read. The written word of the school is not something foreign and defined by authoritative rules and regulations; it is seen as something almost natural. As a result it is assumed by parents – and often by teachers if they come from a similar background – that of course the child will pick it up. On the other hand, when the relationship to the language of the school of the broader community is stilted and distant they are less likely to be certain that their children will easily grasp the language of the school – because fluency with language of the school is not something that “naturally” develops, an expected communicative tool, but rather something that must be struggled to gain. Thus the “rightness of the word” (Heath 1983: 138) comes to be seen as essential. If it is to be used correctly, every element must be right. The irony is in the fact that it is the very process of trying to “get it right”, of learning all of the rules of the language to perfection, that actually creates this
alienated relationship to scholastic language. So much focus is placed on making each distinct aspect of the language correct that it actually limits the fluency of the students’ relationship with language as a whole.

This is not to say that schools have no choice but to reproduce the existing social structures, to perpetuate the broader social inequalities. The relationship between ideologies, curricula, and larger social structures is not strictly deterministic. The curriculum at Arthur LaVelle shows that an easy, fluent relationship to language can be fostered in a predominantly working class school. The circumstances at Arthur LaVelle are somewhat unusual; however, I would argue that it is not impossible for them to be replicated to some extent. In regard to the Español classes, the Churchill community seems like they might very well be aware of the limits of this type of Spanish curriculum. I have recently become aware that next year a bilingual program is going to be implemented at Churchill Elementary school. This program will teach students in Spanish 70 percent of the day and in English 30 percent of the day across all subjects: language arts, science, and social studies (although, math will still be in English) and is open to any students who wish to enroll (native speakers of English or of other languages) The relationship to the Spanish language that will be fostered by such a program is likely to differ dramatically from what has previously been observed in the Español classes.
Work Cited

Bernstein, Basil
1964 Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences. 

Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean Claude Passeron

Collins, James

Foucault, Michel

Gracey, Harry L

Hall, Kathleen. D

Heath, Shirley Brice
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hill, Jane

Irvine, Judith T. & Gal, Susan.

Labov, William

Mehan, Hugh
Silverstein, Michael
1987 Monoglot ‘Standard’ in America: standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony. Chicago: Center of Psychosocial Studies

Stambach, Amy

Street, Brian

University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. http://gse.upenn.edu/inphilly/pas

Woolard, Kathryn A.

Woolard, Kathryn A.