

RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION FOR LINGUISTICALLY, CULTURALLY, AND  
RACIALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN A CHANGING ERA:  
ONE U.S. URBAN SCHOOL'S ALTERNATIVE VISION

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Ping-Chang Wu and Tsai-Mei Fan.

Thank you for teaching me how to dream and giving me all the support as I seek to  
realize my dream.

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**ABSTRACT****RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION FOR LINGUISTICALLY, CULTURALLY, AND  
RACIALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN A CHANGING ERA: ONE U.S. URBAN  
SCHOOL'S ALTERNATIVE VISION**

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This dissertation sets out to describe, interpret, and understand how an urban K-8 charter school in Philadelphia that serves linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students from low-income communities seeks to offer a type of education that recognizes its students' minority status in the broader society and exceeds the education typically available for this group of students. In particular, this research asks how teachers circulate and enact their vision of creating an equitable education for all students and how middle school students' identities are shaped by this vision. Drawing on the concepts of imagined communities in education, critical pedagogy, language ecology and Gee's (2000) analytical perspectives on identities, the research explores innovative teaching and learning at this socially engaging urban school.

Data from critical ethnography and critical discourse analysis indicate that curriculum has a strong focus on diversity, social justice, and students' racialized experiences, which in turn have an impact on middle schoolers' interracial/interethnic friendships. One unique educational alternative, Mandarin education, which offers students an opportunity to learn Mandarin either as a foreign language or heritage language before college, is highly contested among students for reasons related to the role

of Mandarin in the local and broader language ecologies. Studying a school such as this one in its particular sociopolitical context and understanding how students navigate their school life become the basis for more grounded and informed discussions about how to create a more equitable education in contemporary educational contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness”  
(Chinese Proverb)

### 1.1 Background Information and Introduction

Due to globalization and changing immigration patterns over the past few decades, linguistic and cultural diversity is increasingly evident in communities all over the world. Many countries, not only those with long histories of immigration (e.g., the United States, Canada) but also those traditionally considered ethnically homogenous (e.g., Japan and Taiwan), have grappled with the demographic changes and their impact on education. The quest for an equitable way of educating growing culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse student populations is increasingly challenging if education is to provide all students with equal access and opportunity for future self-realization when they leave schooling (cf., Dewey, 1916).

While some progressive educators, such as John Dewey, have sought to connect the practices of schooling with democratic principles of society, educational research has highlighted schools' hegemonic role that tends to serve the interests of states and social elites and thwart democratic lives under the guise of neutral and apolitical views of education. Usually informed by critical pedagogy in general (e.g., Apple, 1996; Freire, 1972, 1973; Giroux, 1997) or Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory in particular (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b, 1991), this body of research has revealed that schools are a microcosm of society, bearing close resemblance to the wider society in terms of inequitable relations of power along social lines like gender, race, class, ethnicity, and language, and that schools often value and inculcate the cultural and communicative

practices of the socially and economically powerful elites, thereby disadvantaging minority students not socialized into or by such practices in their families. The bulk of this research focuses on students whose experiences have been the object of discrimination (e.g., students of color, students of low socioeconomic status, or students not speaking the dominant language of the society, etc.), and demonstrates how schools are not neutral but are engaged in complex processes that tend to maintain broader sets of power relations.

Although our understanding of schools' limited and limiting roles is advanced by research that brings a critical lens to education, this research is often criticized as being deterministic, overly obsessed with the disempowering and reproduction aspects of schools, and thus failing to account for how schools can also serve as an agentive site to break the flow of class reproduction and/or how teachers and students exert their agency during the process (see critique in Canagarajah, 1999; Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Kanno, 2008). While a handful of studies have documented human agency as expressed by individual students and teachers to appropriate, resist, or challenge certain elements of cultural practices of schools (e.g., Canagarajah, 1995, 2004; Delpit, 1996; Katz & DaSilva Iddings, 2009; Lin, 2004), much of their discussion on human agency is at the individual or classroom level and overall little is known about how schools can collectively counteract societal ideologies that oppress minority students. Only a few examples of such schools are made known to us by researchers who are attentive to the impact of broader societal power relationships on schools and use them to demonstrate

that schools are able to create possibilities other than social reproduction (Freeman, 1998, 2004; Hornberger, 1991; Kanno, 2003, 2008).

Schools that recognize the political nature of education and have explicit goals of fighting against societal discrimination ideologies merit particular scholarly attention to further our understanding of how social reproduction through schooling is not the only possibility, especially at a time when the diversity of our communities continues to increase and few schools still serve a homogenous student population. It is within this context that research of a school with a vision to provide an equitable education for its linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students is conducted for my dissertation research. It is hoped that studying a school such as this, in its particular sociopolitical context, can become the basis for more grounded and informed discussions about whether and how a more equitable education can be possible in contemporary educational contexts in which a growing number of schools serve a more diversified student population than ever experienced before.

## **1.2 The School and the Study**

A brief description of the focal school where my dissertation research took place helps to set the context for the following discussion on the study's conceptual and methodological frameworks in chapter two and four. Located in Philadelphia, a city that experiences rapid demographic changes mainly due to growing immigration populations, the school that I call Philadelphia Chinatown Charter School (PCCS) is a public K-8 school near Chinatown. During the period of my research, it enrolled around 440 students

from Philadelphia neighborhoods. About 25% of the students were receiving or had previously received ESL service and 90% were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, putting them among the poorest ranks of U.S. society. Asian students comprised the largest racial group, African American students were the second largest, and there were a smaller number of Anglo (N=9) and Latino students (N=13). Appendix A details the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body. There also existed great diversity in the Asian students and the school data disaggregated this population into 13 subgroups (See Appendix B), suggesting the school's sensitivity to the students' ethnic backgrounds. Throughout my dissertation, I choose the term "Asian/Asian American students" to refer to this group of students of diverse Asian heritages for two reasons. First, this term reflects the fact that some Asian students in my study self-identify as Asian, some as Asian American, while others as both Asian American and Asian. Second, Asian/Asian American draws readers' attention to not only different lived experiences and self-identifications of students from diverse Asian backgrounds but also the legitimacy of their membership in the U.S. society. Using the term "Asian" to refer to this group of students, many of whom were born in the U.S., runs the risk of perpetuating the "forever foreigners" image of Asian Americans (Tuan, 1998). As a result, I deliberately choose the term "Asian/Asian American" to describe the students of Asian heritages at PCCS.

PCCS is, in one teacher's words, an "Asian-led" school because it was established in 2005 by an Asian American social activist organization (AASA, a pseudonym), which is dedicated to fighting against oppression through uniting Asian American communities. AASA has worked on issues related to quality of education, youth leadership, anti-Asian



violence, immigrant rights, folk arts and cultural maintenance, and has received numerous awards for its accomplishments. The establishment of PCCS is the realization of decades of planning among the organization members who have fought for better education for Asian American and immigrant students in the Philadelphia public schools. The school is intended to provide “an alternative vision of education rooted in community and folk arts as vehicles for academic learning and social change” (see AASA website for a detailed description). The organization, with a history of 25 years, has moved to PCCS since 2005 and has offered many youth leadership training programs in PCCS, based on the belief that re-envisioning the education of youth in a way that affirms their life histories and experiences can empower them to enact change in communities in which they live. As a school growing out of grassroots community efforts, PCCS highlights students’ roles as active participants in working toward a just society. Therefore, PCCS students’ presence and involvement can be found in several social justice campaigns that AASA has launched, such as challenging Philadelphia’s baseball stadium project in Chinatown in 2000, a casino project in Chinatown in 2009, and, more recently, protesting against the Philadelphia Unified School District’s failure to address longstanding anti-Asian violence in a high school in the southern part of the city.

The school’s mission statement reveals its special emphasis on the educational value of folk arts and cultures residing in students’ and neighboring communities because they are viewed as “catalyst for critical inquiry and community engagement” (see school mission statement). PCCS aims to provide education that does not privilege one type of knowledge over another, but incorporates and respects the lives of students and their

families, and engages students in understanding their own cultures and communities. Besides traditional folk arts education, the school's curriculum is also dedicated to respect for language and language diversity; thus students' knowledge in and of different languages is valued. Driven by the perspective that additive multilingualism is an empowering asset and because the school is located near the city's Chinatown and Chinese students are the biggest student population, it is the only school in the area that teaches Mandarin to all students. PCCS offers two tracks of Mandarin class: those with Chinese heritage take Mandarin as a heritage language and those without take it as a foreign language. Finally, the PCCS community is very proud of its students' academic performance. Since its inception in 2005, PCCS student test scores have increased steadily and the school achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the U.S. No Child Left Behind policy for the third consecutive year during my research year. According to PCCS statistics, a hundred percent of 2012 PCCS graduates attend high schools with a 1, 2, 3, or 4 School Performance Index (SPI) rating<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, 96% of 2012 PCCS graduates attend high schools with a 1, 2, or 3 rating and 79% of PCCS graduates attend high schools with a 1 or 2 rating.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

My dissertation sets out to describe, interpret, and understand how an urban school that serves culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse students from low-income communities seeks to offer a type of education that recognizes students' minority status

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<sup>1</sup> The School Performance Index (SPI) is a comprehensive rating system that the School District of Philadelphia created in 2009 to compare the success of all schools on a variety of components. Schools are rated on a scale of 1 through 10, with 1 being the highest rating, 5 being average, and 10 being the worst.

in the broader society and exceeds the education typically available for this group of students. In particular, this research asks the following questions:

1. How is the school's vision of creating an equitable education for linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students circulated and enacted in the school policies and pedagogical practices?
  - 1.1. How do teachers perceive their students and talk about their vision for the students?
  - 1.2. How do teachers enact their vision for the students in school policies and pedagogical practices?
2. How do students create and negotiate their identities in the context of school and in response to their experiences in school and the larger society?
  - 2.1. How do students respond to their school experiences (e.g., interracial/interethnic peer relationships, Mandarin education, extracurricular participation, relationships with teachers) and construct their identities at school?
  - 2.2. How are students' expressions of identities related to the inequalities in the larger society?

#### **1.4 Preview of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual framework that guides my research, including imagined communities, Gee's (2000) four perspectives on identity, critical

pedagogy, and the ecology of language. Chapter 3 reviews relevant research on societal diversity, schools' responses to it, and educational experiences of students from non-dominant cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds. Chapter 4 describes the setting of my research, the primary participants, the research methods that I chose, my actual practices of data collection, and my analysis of data. I give special emphasis on how I sought to respect local perspectives and experiences during my fieldwork and how this practice influences the type of data that I eventually collected and analyzed. The findings section of the dissertation is composed of four main sections: Chapter 5 presents an overview of teaching and learning at PCCS, serving as the foundation for investigating the type of education PCCS students receive. Next, Chapter 6 discusses how students take on PCCS' teaching, focusing specifically on their interracial/interethnic friendships and interactions. Following this, I explore one of PCCS' most unique educational alternatives, that is, Mandarin education for all students. Chapter 7 deals with teaching and learning in the Mandarin as a foreign language track classrooms and Chapter 8 focuses on the Mandarin as a heritage language track classrooms. The last chapter, Chapter 9, discusses how the findings from this research are connected to other theories and strands of literature and offers implications for research related to equitable education for minoritized students. Specifically, this final chapter focuses on the importance of nurturing students' interracial/interethnic friendships, cultivating students' critical cross-cultural knowledge in Mandarin foreign language education, and developing an inclusive curriculum for Mandarin heritage language learners.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

### 2.1 Overview

The following chapter provides a conceptual overview of this research. I am choosing to employ imagined communities to understand what future communities PCCS teachers hope to socialize students into and what communities students themselves hope to belong to. I also use Gee's (2000) four perspectives on identity to examine how students' multiple identities are at play at the school. In understanding minority students' experiences and their potential to foster social change, at its very core, my research draws on educational research from a critical pedagogy perspective. In addition, I choose the notion of linguistic ecology to investigate the Mandarin language education policy at the school.

### 2.2 Imagined Communities

The concept of *imagined communities* is at the center of the theoretical framework of this study. The term was first coined by Anderson (1991) when he attempted to propose an anthropological definition of nationalism to address the inability of Marxist and liberal theories to define it. According to Anderson, nations are imagined political communities "because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication" (p. 6). In this sense, nations are socially constructed communities that are invented through the imagination of their inhabitants. In fact, for Anderson, all communities that go beyond everyday face-to-face contact are imagined,

and thus it is the style in which they are imagined that distinguishes one community from another, rather than the actual particularities of the communities.

Anderson's concept of imagined communities, with its focus on spatial imagining that ties people across space, is widely received in the field of political science. In a similar vein but applied to the field of education, Wenger (1998) also argues that sources of a sense of community can come not only from direct engagement in tangible communities, but also from imagining new pictures of oneself and the world that are not constrained by time and space (p. 176). Both Anderson (1991) and Wenger (1998) theorize that imagination enables human beings to create connections and camaraderie with others beyond immediate social interactions.

Inspired by the concept of imagined communities, Norton (2001) applies this concept to examine language learners' experience and highlights learners' ties with the future. Based on her research with two adult immigrant English learners in Canada, Norton makes the case that language learners' current learning is tied to the desired or imagined communities in which they hope to participate in the future. They do not perceive themselves as part of those communities yet, but they expect to have access to them one day, and through imagining membership to their desired communities, the range of learners' identities is also expanded. In other words, learners' imagined communities connote their imagined identities and, according to Norton, learners' current investment in the target language needs to be understood in terms of whether or not they see their target language learning as moving them closer to their imagined communities.

The concept of imagined communities helps elucidate that both learners' current investment and their future affiliations have an impact on their learning.

More recently, Kanno (2003, 2008) builds on Norton's theorizing of imagined communities at the level of individual learners to investigate institutional visions. Kanno argues that just as individuals can imagine their future affiliations and identities, schools can also have visions of imagined communities and identities for their students. Schools' collective visions for students, Kanno contends, are likely to affect the current school policies and pedagogical practices, which in turn have a significant impact on their students' learning trajectories and identities. Kanno notes that the concept of schools' visions of imagined communities not only foregrounds human agency that educators and schools could exert to resist (or reinforce) social reproduction, but also provides a theoretical framework for talking about the future-present connection as opposed to past-present connection that prevails in much current educational research. As Kanno and Norton (2003) argue, the concept of imagined communities is helpful for "the exploration of creativity, hope and desire in identity construction" and "possibilities for social and educational change" (p. 248).

### **2.3 Gee's (2000) Four Perspectives of Identity**

Another important component of my conceptual framework is Gee's (2000) four perspectives of identity. Gee broadly defines identity as a certain "kind of person in a given context" (p. 99), and everyone has multiple identities connected to their performance in society. Gee develops four perspectives on what it means to be

recognized as a certain kind of person: 1) natural perspective (or nature-identity/N-identity) as a state that is developed from natural forces, 2) institutional perspective (or institution-identity/I-identity) as a position that is authorized by authorities within institutions, 3) discursive perspective (or discourse-identity/D-identity) as an individual trait that is recognized in the discourse or dialogue with and of individuals, and 4) affinity perspective (or affinity-identity/A-identity) as experiences that are shared in the practice of affinity groups (p. 100). Gee eloquently illustrates how a label like “African American” can be understood in terms of the four different identities (pp. 108-109). For example, “African American” can be treated by racists as an N-identity rooted in biology. It can also be understood as an I-identity when it incurs some expectations and attributes, be they positive or negative, within institutions. In institutions like schools, many African American students occupy the positions that are equivalent to being at risk for school failure and associated with a cluster of negative attributes. Being an “African American” can also be a D-identity, which is produced and reproduced by how people talk about and talk to others in discourse and dialogue. While an African American can face an ascribed D-identity that highlights the negative attributes of being Black, he/she can also achieve a more positive D-identity through discourse with others. Finally, an “African American” can also be understood as an A-identity when a sense of affinity with others is generated through active participation with certain shared practices and activities (e.g., wearing certain styles of clothes, attending certain sorts of cultural events, dining in certain types of restaurants). In this way, anybody can claim he/she has chosen to be African American as long as the access to relevant practices and activities is allowed.



Importantly, Gee contends that the four identities are not isolated nor separate, but are often interwoven in complicated ways in practice. However, the proposed perspectives help researchers to investigate how different aspects of identities are formed, performed, and sustained for a given time and place and why. Gee (2000) further states:

people can accept, contest, and negotiate identities in terms of whether they will be seen primarily (or in some foregrounded way) as N-, I-, D-, or A-identities. What is at issue, though, is always how and by whom a particular identity is to be *recognized*. (emphasis original, p. 109)

To investigate how students' identities are shaped by the school's vision and practices, how students negotiate and contest their ways of being a certain type of person, and how their ways get recognized or not recognized at PCCS, I focus my discussion on "I-identity," "D-identity," and "A-identity." To recapitulate, I-identity is authorized by institutional authorities through laws, rules, traditions, or principles in terms of associated rights and responsibilities. D-identity is achieved through treating, talking about and interacting with other people. To maintain an A-identity, one must actively choose to engage with particular social endeavors or practices and it is these experiences that create and sustain one's allegiance to other people. While authorities can force someone to participate in some specific practices, they cannot compel anyone to regard those very practices as a critical component that constitutes the "kind of person" they are. Specifically, Gee's I-identity helps me look at how the school and teachers work with (or against) each other to position students or create outcomes for them. D-identity is helpful to examine how the school depends on discourse to construct and sustain I-identity as well as how students actively or passively construct and sustain their ways of being

through discourse. Finally, A-identity assists in investigating how AASA's and PCCS's active engagement with a set of practices around social justice impacts students' views of who they are. Gee cites the work of Beck (1992, 1994) to argue that school reformers working to gain a charter school form "morally heated affinity groups," which are becoming an important force in the new capitalist society. Besides, it is also quite common for institutions nowadays to create affinity groups (cf., Rifkin, 2000). How AASA works with PCCS to create affinity groups among students through discourse and how it affects the way students create affinity groups of their own deserve investigation.

#### **2.4. Critical Pedagogy**

In understanding minority students' experiences and their potential to foster social change, my research draws on educational research from a critical pedagogy (CP) perspective, which situates the historical struggles of people of color in the context of social justice and aims to create social change by engaging with minority students in critique of the current social and linguistic realities in which they are living (Alim, 2007; Luke, 2009). CP's flexible and dynamic nature makes the defining task very difficult and most proponents of CP advise readers to be cautious about defining, labeling, or describing CP in simple terms because "there is no generic definition that can be applied to the term" (Giroux, 1994, p. 131) and people do CP differently according to their specific contexts (Wink, 1997). For the purpose of my study, I draw strands from CP that aim for an emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling and interrogate the impact of capitalism and racialized relations on students from historically disenfranchised

backgrounds (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). Such a focus makes education and, by extension, CP, a political act. Freire explains this notion clearly in his introduction to Giroux's well-known book, *Teachers as Intellectuals*. He holds:

I believe that central to a realizable critical pedagogy is the need to view schools as democratic public spheres. This means regarding schools as democratic sites dedicated to forms of self and social empowerment. In these terms, schools are public places where students learn the knowledge and skills necessary to live in an authentic democracy (cited in Giroux, 1988, p. xxxii)

From this CP perspective, a school's ultimate goal is to prepare students to live in authentic democracies. CP theorists reject the claim that schools are apolitical and value-neutral sites and seek to challenge the mainstream pedagogy's claim that schools provide equal access to egalitarian democracy (McLaren, 1989).

To create an education that prepares students to be socially active individuals for a democracy, schools need to move beyond a "banking system", where students uncritically receive knowledge from the authorities, to become sites where students learn to "read the word" and "read the world" (Freire, 1998). Being literate means not only being able to comprehend text but being critically aware of one's own context. Freire contends that "reading and writing words encompasses the reading of the world, that is, the critical understanding of politics in the world" (1987, p. 212-213). By becoming literate, one also becomes more conscious about their social surroundings and their actions, which is the precursor to "conscientization", a process "by means of which men, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of *objects* to assume the status of historical *Subject*" (Freire, 1970, p.158, emphasis original).

It is through reflecting upon their everyday experiences that students learn not only about decoding texts, but more importantly, about the complexity of social relationships as well as the difference between appearance and reality. As students learn to recognize asymmetrical relations of power that determine the structure they are living in, they also develop intellectual capacities and social skills that are necessary for them to feel empowered to make social changes (Giroux, 1981). In other words, through making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical (Giroux, 1988), CP combines a “language of critique” with a “language of possibility” in the attempt to create democratic education and social justice (Giroux, 1989, 1997). Schools’ responsibilities are no longer just about adding information to their students, but also about interpreting and critiquing how knowledge is produced and circulated as well as how knowledge can be transformed and appropriated. The “language of possibility” recognizes the need to explore new alternatives in the quest of improvement of our societies and it helps develop a new ethics that is suitable for our multicultural and transnational communities.

Important to the discussion of knowledge production in school and society is how history is taught to the students. CP theorists argue for the need to attend to what is excluded in the mainstream teaching of history because the dominant explanations often reflect a narrow and limiting definition of history that negates and marginalizes knowledge and experiences of the oppressed but works to support the interests and values of the dominant society (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Darder, 1991/2012). A CP approach to the teaching of history, therefore, brings in voices of historically oppressed groups,

such as women, people of color, and working classes, and delves into students' own histories and systems of meanings (Darder, 2012). As a result, teaching and curricula informed by CP allow minority students to “name and authenticate their own experiences” (Darder, 2012, p. 85) in ways that can help them reveal the critical connections between their own experiences and the dominant rationality. Finding the tensions and discontinuities in history stresses human agency and struggle and is an important part of an emancipatory education that views teachers and students as historical subjects (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970). In other words, CP highlights teachers' and students' agentive roles within structural constraints and creates possibilities for the production of knowledge through co-participation.

Central to CP of knowledge production is students' role in this process. For CP educators, their relationship with students is dialogical; students learn from teachers and teachers learn from students. The Freirian notion of dialogue suggests a moment where teachers and students come together to reflect on their reality and through pondering upon what they know and don't know, they also think about and talk about actions that they can take to make changes. Such dialogue is often done through a problem-posing educational approach that challenges students about their experiences with the world and in the world. When students start to see the interconnections among challenges that they face, they are likely to become increasingly critical about their relations with the world and committed to transformative actions against social inequality (Freire, 1970).

In summary, CP provides a framework to examine the agentive role of schools and their potential for critique and democratic intervention, which is well-suited for my

study aiming to understand how a progressive urban school offers transformative and equitable education for its minoritized students. Specifically, CP helps me be attentive to how teachers and students do and live CP (cf., Wink, 1997) in their particular sociopolitical contexts and how probing deeply into their lives affects students' learning at school and beyond.

## **2.5 Language Ecology**

I also adopt the notion of language ecology in understanding Mandarin education at PCCS. Hornberger (2006a) notes that the concept of language ecology has drawn increasing attention among language policy and planning (LPP) scholars. When Haugen (1972, p.325) developed the notion of language ecology, he defined it as “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment.” Language ecology as a conceptual approach enables researchers to examine how social, historical, sociolinguistic, and political forces at different levels shape language ecologies (Muhlhausler, 1996). Specifically, by paying attention to “the diversity of inhabitants of an ecology” and “the functional interrelationships between the inhabitants of an ecology” (Fill & Muhlhausler, 2001, p.3), researchers can identify essential factors that sustain the diversity.

Hornberger (2003) further identifies three key themes of the language ecology metaphor based on previous work in the field: language evolution, language environment, and language endangerment. She proposes that languages, like living species, evolve, grow, change, live, become endangered, or even die under the influences of other

languages and the environments in which they are situated. Hornberger suggests that this conceptual approach contributes to our understanding of the mutual relationships between languages, their interaction within their socio-political, economic, and cultural environments, how lack of sufficient environmental support might lead to language endangerment, and, more importantly, how counteracting efforts can be made.

Hornberger and Hult (2008) argue that the dynamic and holistic emphasis of the ecology of language is particularly useful to investigate LPP in multilingual settings because it helps LPP scholars to look beyond a single language in isolation. They further contend that,

By using an ecology of language approach to policy analysis, a researcher focuses on, among other issues, the extent to which language policies do or do not foster linguistic diversity. In this vein, the ecologically minded LPP researcher attempts to ascertain whether or not language policies adequately take into account the complex sociolinguistic factors that are present in modern multilingual polities, an aspect that is crucial for the efficacy of language policies (Hornberger & Hult, 2008, pp. 284-285)

Since linguistic ecologies are shaped by multiple factors, including individual speakers' learning or not learning a language, population migration, or organizational actions on language policy, language education, etc. (Calvet, 1999, cited in Hornberger & Hult, 2008, p, 281), an ecological approach helps researchers attend to sociolinguistic factors like "the relationships among languages, relations among social contexts of language, relationships among individual speakers and their languages, and inter-relationships among these three dimensions" (Hornberger & Hult, 2008, p, 282). Citing Schiffman (1996) and Eggington (1997), they argue that a better understanding of how linguistic

ecologies shape and are shaped by sociolinguistic factors is more likely to contribute to successful LPP.

After reviewing decades of research on language education, Hornberger (2002, 2003) demonstrates how an ecological perspective to language education is needed to create equitable multilingual education. She notes the tendency for many societies to privilege literacy over orality, monolingualism over bilingualism, receptive skills over productive skills, dominant language over minority languages, and second language over first language. In order to help students achieve a more balanced proficiency in different languages, we as teachers, researchers, community members or policy makers need to take account of all dimensions represented by the continua of biliteracy, which include language context, development, content, and media (Hornberger, 2002, p. 39). This means paying attention, at both micro and macro levels, to the traditionally less powerful ends of the continua of biliteracy. Table one provides a graphic illustration of different power relations in the model (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000). A number of articles informed by the continua of biliteracy and language ecology have demonstrated that existing power relations can be contested through valuing the traditionally less valued and doing so helps language learners gain literacy in multiple languages (see a collection of this work in the edited book by Hornberger, 2003). Central to this line of research is the assumption that multilingual educational situations are complex because of their involvement with power dynamics.



*Table 1: Power relations in the continua of biliteracy (from Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000)*

<b>Traditionally less powerful</b>		<b>Traditionally more powerful</b>
	<i>Context of biliteracy</i>	
Micro	<----->	Macro
Oral	<----->	Literate
Bi(multi)lingual	<----->	Monolingual
	<i>Development of biliteracy</i>	
Reception	<----->	Production
Oral	<----->	Written
L1	<----->	L2
	<i>Content of biliteracy</i>	
Minority	<----->	Majority
Vernacular	<----->	Literary
Contextualized	<----->	Decontextualized
	<i>Media of biliteracy</i>	
Simultaneous exposure	<----->	Successive exposure
Dissimilar structures	<----->	Similar structures
Divergent scripts	<----->	Convergent scripts

An ecology of language approach is especially suited for me to examine Mandarin language policy and practices at PCCS because it helps me approach the program holistically rather than focusing on Mandarin and its learners in isolation. By attending to how different languages and speakers interact with their social contexts at PCCS and beyond as well as the power relations among different languages, I will be able to capture the dynamics in the local ecology, which is the first step to envision an equitable Mandarin language education. An ecological perspective on multilingualism is “essentially about opening up ideological and implementational space in the environment for as many languages as possible” (Hornberger 2002, p. 30). Studying the interactions and inter-relationships in multilingual classrooms contributes to our understanding of how dominant ideologies about languages and their users at the macro-sociopolitical

level are reproduced or challenged by teachers and students (Creese & Martin, 2003, 2008; Freeman, 1998; Jaffe, 2007).

In sum, I explore teaching and learning at a progressive school for students of color from working class, using frameworks of imagined communities and critical pedagogy. I also delve into students' multiple identities in different occasions through Gee's perspective on four identities. This research is also informed by a linguistic ecology perspective that takes into account multiple sociolinguistic factors in the local and broader language ecology to examine PCCS' Mandarin language education program. With these conceptual frameworks and tools at hand, it is hoped that this research captures the complexities existing in urban education as well as the possibilities that it can offer to linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students.

### **3. UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL**

#### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter reviews relevant research on societal diversity, schools' responses to it, and educational experiences of students from non-dominant cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds. I start by examining how diversity is often perceived in the society and at school, moving to discuss the agentic role that schools could play and how teaching in such schools is related to fostering a different identity possibility for their minoritized students. I also draw from research on peer interactions and friendships to illustrate the importance of studying how students of color negotiate their identities in interactions and how they categorize their peer groups in diverse educational settings. I assert the necessity of examining Asian/Asian American students' lived experiences and activism when there is a dearth of research that seeks to understand this group beyond the image of model minority. Lastly, I review relevant research on Mandarin foreign and heritage language education to better contextualize my study at PCCS.

#### **3.2 Social and Educational Discourses on Diversity**

The spread and extent of migration flows in the latter part of the 20th century have brought about an exponential growth in diversity and it is argued that almost everyone is now facing a great deal of diversity (Greider, 1997). However, diversity, be it racial, linguistic, or cultural, has often been seen as a problem in modern political science because it is often perceived as a threat to national unity and economic growth (Phillipson, Rannut, & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995). Conventional nation state ideologies

have suggested that it is ideal for a state to consist of one nation/ethnic group and have one language, which inevitably leads to erasing tribal, ethnic, and linguistic differences and assimilating the minorities. The orientation to see diversity as a problem for national unity, modernization, and economic efficiency guided early nation building projects in many newly independent post-colonial countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Fishman, 1968; Haugen, 1966; Kloss, 1966). However, this sense of optimism, coupled with the belief that homogeneity would lead to modernization and national unity received growing criticism since the 1980s. Many newly dependent countries that chose Western languages as national languages and/or medium of education for the sake of efficiency and modernization found that their seemingly neutral choice in fact aggravated their dependence on their former Western colonists and resulted in growing internal conflicts between different groups (see a comprehensive review of this line of research in Ricento, 2000).

In discussing inter-ethnic hostility in many societies, Stavenhagen (1990) argues that it is often not caused by linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences, but by historical reasons related to “political struggles over resources and power” (p. 39, cited in Phillipson et al., 1995, p. 7). Specific to language diversity, Haugen reminds us that “language [diversity] is not a problem unless it is used as a basis for discrimination” (1973, p. 40). Hettne (1987) also eloquently puts it, “the problem is not that ethnic groups are different, but rather *the problem arises when they are no longer allowed to be different*” (emphasis original, p. 67, cited in Phillipson et al., 1995, p. 7).

The drive for homogeneity is also evident throughout U. S. history. Many scholars examining language in education policies in the U.S. have contended that except for very brief periods during which private language rights have been tolerated (e.g., early colonial period and Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s), U.S. history has manifested a strong drive for Anglo-American hegemony that suppresses non-English cultures and languages (Crawford, 1992, 2000; Freeman, 1998; Hernandez-Chavez, 1995; Lippi-Green, 1997; Ricento, 1998; Wiley, 1996, 2004). Numerous educational research studies have documented how schools have been and are still the key instrument for imposing assimilation into the dominant culture and language. As a consequence, students not from Anglo-American backgrounds and speaking non-standard varieties of English or non-English languages are deprived of the rights to identify with their languages and cultures and forced to be assimilated as soon as possible.

Such an assimilative orientation predominated in educational research on minority students in the 1970s, which showed a widely-held belief among researchers and teachers that linguistic and cultural differences indicated problems and deficiencies on the part of the students and their families (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Deutsch, 1967). Various efforts toward “nurturing” at an early age in order to compensate for alleged linguistic or cultural deprivation in minority students’ families have been made (e.g., the Head Start program), in the belief that once minority students’ culture and languages are made to be similar to the dominant language and culture, their academic performance will improve. Using Gee’s terms, students from non-Anglo cultures and/or speaking other languages (varieties) of Standard English often experience imposition of an I-identity that entails

certain expectations that conflate with academic failure and a variety of other negative attributes that need to be fixed. Since schools tend to unite knowledge and power in ways that thwart democratic lives under the guise of neutral and apolitical views of education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003), students from racially, culturally, and/or linguistically diverse populations are often systematically discriminated against at schools. To this group of students, schools provide “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999) that does not build upon their knowledge, but educates them in ways that correspond to their discriminated social status.

Empirical evidence for how minority students are underserved by the educational institutions can be found in many ethnographies of schooling, which have shed light on the cultural and linguistic discontinuity between homes and schools, and how educational institutions accept and value particular cultural practices and language varieties that minority students are not familiar with (e.g., Erickson, 1993; Heath, 1983; Hornberger, 1988; Philips, 1983; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1993). This line of research helps counter the earlier deficit view of minority students and diversity as problem, paving the way for subsequent research that identifies the cultural and linguistic dynamics of minority communities and the importance of connecting homes and schools.

Findings from a large body of educational research that examines the home-school (dis)connections among diverse communities (refer to a comprehensive review in Hall, 2008; Luke, 2009) have led to innovative approaches grounded under the broad framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, such as research in language awareness (Wolfram, Christian, & Adger, 1999), funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti,

2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), and multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 1995; Nieto, 2002). The changing educational response to diversity then focuses on the politics of recognition, which Luke (2009) nicely summarizes as: 1) including repressed texts and histories in curriculum; 2) engaging with diverse languages and discourses (bilingual education, critical ESL, critical foreign-language education; 3) expanding school knowledge to include indigenous, traditional, and migrant epistemologies; 4) adjusting cultural patterns of interactive communication, and 5) confronting issues of racism and all forms of discrimination. As polyglottism and cultural diversity have become certainties in many current educational settings (cf., Hornberger, 2009), various approaches to the politics of recognition provide important insights for educators to engage with diversity in their own contexts.

### **3.3 Challenging Mainstream Discourses on Diversity: School's Agentive Role**

Using Bourdieu's (1990) model of habitus, capital, and social field to analyze school and society, Luke (2009) further argues that different languages and cultures students bring into the schools are recognized or misrecognized by those in authority through a set of assumptions, presuppositions, and stereotypes about them. Although the human subjects in power assign value to students' cultural and linguistic knowledge in their everyday interactions with students, Luke foregrounds the potential moments of agency for not only students to challenge how their cultures and languages are interpreted but also for those in authority to change and unsettle the rules for interpretation or interaction. While there are many empirical studies that document the efforts of

individual teachers to challenge normative interpretation or ways of interaction through implementing innovative pedagogies that take into account minority students' ways of being and knowing (see Osborne, 1996 for a comprehensive citation list), few studies take schools as a unit of analysis to provide an in-depth examination of how schools can provide exemplary educational programs that recognize the political aspects of schooling and attend to their minority students' unique experiences.

Among a few notable exceptions are Freeman's (1998) study of a dual-language school in Washington, D.C. and another in North Philadelphia (2004). Freeman's work was guided by one central question: How can U.S. schools structure their programs and practices so that low-income speakers of languages other than English are provided with access to equal educational opportunities? The major thesis of Freeman's work is that in recognition of discriminatory practices against minority groups in the broader society, schools have choices in how they define the communities they want for their students and can collaborate with parents and communities to provide a more equitable educational alternative to their minority students. Freeman's studies demonstrate that educators in both schools in her studies have very different perceptions and expectations about their minority students than those widely circulated in the mainstream U.S. educational discourse, and these perceptions and expectations in turn influence schools' policies and practices as well as the kinds of identity opportunities available for their students to define who they are in relation to each other.

Although neither of Freeman's studies give direct reference to the notion of imagined communities, Kanno (2003) argues that Freeman's (1998) study provides an



excellent example of how a school acts as an agency to challenge the dominant monolingual ideology that oppresses speakers of other languages by socializing its students into an imagined community with an alternative future. Similarly, Hornberger's (1991) documentation of a bilingual school in Philadelphia also provides concrete evidence of how a school-wide bilingual program can be structured to embrace cultural pluralism and develop bilingualism for both minority and majority students, thus offering the greatest potential benefit not only to language minority speakers but to the society as a whole.

Kanno (2003, 2008) also explicitly takes the school as unit of analysis to examine five schools in Japan that serve bilingual students of very different socioeconomic classes, from the extremely privileged to the extremely underprivileged (i.e., one English-Japanese immersion, one international, two public, and one Chinese ethnic school). Using imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001) and Bourdieu's work on cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) as the unifying framework, Kanno illustrates how schools' pedagogical practices are explicitly or implicitly influenced by different imagined communities that they envision for their students. Depending on their particular vision, schools not only delimit the range of identities that a certain group of students can adopt but also unevenly distribute the linguistic capital (as manifested in access to bilingualism) among students of different classes.

The two schools serving students from middle- and upper-middle class backgrounds offer elite bilingualism (i.e., Japanese-English bilingualism) to their

students, who are expected to grow up to be competitive players of the global economy. As for the two public schools that serve low-income bilingual children, their immigrant students whose predicted life trajectory is to become permanent residents in Japan are given support to develop their Japanese at the expense of their L1, and migrant students whose life trajectory is temporary residence in Japan may be given opportunities to maintain their L1 but do not receive instruction that will help them continue their education while they are in Japan. These four schools seem to demonstrate that access to bilingualism is linked to the economic capital that the families of students possess from the beginning and schools only contribute to the social and cultural reproduction process.

However, Kanno presents the Chinese ethnic school as an alternative form of education as it imagines an alternative future (i.e., social bridges between Japan and China) for their minority working-class students. Kanno highlights the impact of schools' policies on the range of identity options for students and argues that it is extremely difficult for young students to resist the assigned identities. Therefore, she encourages educators to imagine alternatives because they can serve as a starting point to challenge the status quo and lead to subsequent actions. While Kanno's studies provide an excellent example of how schools could have different visions for their students, she does not focus directly on students' voices and how their identities are influenced by schools' visions.

When schools exert their agency to imagine a different future community for their minority students to participate in, they also construct a different I-identity for their students. As Freeman (1998) notes, the dual-language policies at her research site are part of a larger social identities project that aims to address longstanding discrimination

against the Spanish-speakers in the U.S. Through socializing both language majority and minority students into an educational discourse that views Spanish as a resource rather than a problem, the school hopes to create a more equitable educational context in which language minority and majority students participate on a more or less equal footing. To understand how the school's social identities project for both the majority and minority students is undertaken and realized in the local school context, Freeman uses an ethnographic/discourse analytic approach to examine how the school's dual-language program mediates between teaching and learning as manifested in daily interaction at the micro level and the school's social, political, and historical processes at the macro level. Freeman's study provides a good example of examining how I-identity is sustained and constructed through D-identity, that is, how people at school talk about and interact with one another. As Gee contends, a micro-level analysis of how interaction and politics of recognition work on a daily basis helps to answer the macro question of how institutions work to construct and sustain I-identity.

### **3.4 A Look at Students' Interactions and Language Uses in Diverse School Contexts**

Many linguistic anthropological studies reveal that everyday social interaction is another important drive to identity formation, in addition to the macro-level historical and political processes that contribute to the social categories available to individuals (e.g., Bailey, 2000; Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 2005; Rampton, 1995; Reyes, 2006). In other words, an investigation of aspects of the interactional context, such as who is being talked to, when, where and about what topic provides insights into how identities emerge from

interaction. For instance, Rampton's (1995) research on adolescent language crossing (i.e., codeswitching by linguistic outsiders) in a multi-racial urban setting in England demonstrates that adolescents continuously negotiate their many identities, not limited to racial or ethnic ones, through processes of social interaction. Therefore, to gain a good understanding of the impacts of PCCS school policies and practices on students' identities requires investigation of how teachers talk about and talk to their students as well as how students actively or passively engage with the experiences.

Examination of PCCS students' daily language use and social interaction will also provide insights into how they build solidarities or "A-identities" among themselves. Rampton's (1995) study has illuminated how multi-racial/ethnic adolescents actively use languages they have not necessarily inherited to construct new peer solidarities that contest and question the dominant social order of race and ethnicity. Rampton makes the case that focusing on such interactional processes adds to our understanding of how adolescents develop allegiance out of their diverse differences, as well as how educators can bring forth spaces that foster solidarity construction among their linguistically and culturally diverse students. My research seeks to both understand how PCCS students develop A-identities in their interaction and discourse and how the school's special emphasis on students' social responsibility and engagement might help cultivate solidarity among its students.

Several classic school ethnographies on peer groups in high school also highlight the importance of examining social interactions among students because they often provide insights into students' academic and life trajectories (Eckert, 1989; Whyte, 1943;

Willis, 1977). After reviewing this body of literature, Rosenbloom notes that “from a sociological view, studying the characteristics of peer groups in high schools is like gazing into a crystal ball to tell the future socioeconomic status of students” (Rosenbloom, 2010, p. 180) because higher status students are more likely to graduate from high school, go to college and enter middle-class careers. These school-oriented students were called “Jocks,” (Eckert, 1989) “Earoles,” (Willis, 1977) and “College boys” (Willis, 1977) in different studies, and they often identified with and integrated into middle or upper-middle class backgrounds. Although these seminal studies complicate our understanding of how mechanisms in school contribute to class stratification, Rosenbloom (2010) contends that they mostly focused on Caucasian youth from working and middle class backgrounds living in suburban or small towns.

As a result, more research is needed to understand social interactions among minority and immigrant youth as they now constitute more than 40 percent of the student population in American public schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Very little educational research in the U.S. examines friendships among students of color, let alone friendships between two racial groups that seem to experience polarized stereotypes at schools, that is, Asian/Asian American and African American students. Asian/Asian American students are often perceived by educators and the larger society through the lens of the model minority stereotype, whereas African American students are often perceived as being at risk for school failure and associated with a cluster of negative attributes. Studies that examine Asian/Asian American students’ lived experiences reveal that the model minority stereotype has silenced voices of many Asian/Asian Americans, pitting them

against other minority groups, particularly African Americans, while sustaining white privilege and perpetuating racial inequality at schools (R. Lee, 1999; S. Lee, 1996; Reyes, 2007).

PCCS is an excellent site to examine peer interactions among racially and ethnically diverse students because of the student populations that it serves. It is fruitful to see how students and teachers from diverse backgrounds at a seemingly progressive school like PCCS construct, reproduce, or contest the existing American racial, ethnic, and class structure and how doing so affects the way students from different backgrounds socialize with one another. Rosenbloom's study, which examines friendships among students of color from working class backgrounds at an urban high school, LCHS, indicates that African American and Latino students are largely perceived as the "bad kids" and trouble-makers whose behaviors are thought to be linked to school failure. The "good kids", on the other hand, are predominately recent Asian immigrants or American-born Asians who receive higher academic status at school. The two groups experience different types of discrimination at LCHS. While the "bad kids" talk about teachers who have low expectations for them, the "good kids" find teachers to be encouraging but suffer from verbal and physical harassment from their peers. The categorization of peers into either "good kids" or "bad kids" is found to be based on rampant racial stereotypes that are circulated inside and outside of the school. The dichotomous categories, Rosenbloom argues, are closely tied to a general distrust of peers among students at LCHS, which ultimately furthers the distance between the groups and prevents them from constructing a collective shared identity crucial for political actions.

Although Rosenbloom's study uncovers the intricate interracial relationships among high school students, it focuses on the interactions among African American, Latino, and Chinese immigrant or Chinese American students in the urban setting. Scholars still know relatively little about the lived experiences of Southeast Asian students, one of the fastest growing groups in urban schools (see a few exceptions on Cambodian students in Chhuon & Hudley, 2010, Hmong students in Lee, 2005, Lao students in Ngo 2010, and Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese students in Reyes, 2007). Since there are a good number of Indonesian and Cambodian students at PCCS, my study is able to capture more subtle nuances in interactions among different ethnic and racial groups. Resenbloom's study indicates that teachers and students at LCHS subscribe to the model minority stereotype when describing their Asian American students and peers, which are predominately Chinese American or Chinese immigrant students from China. However, the model minority stereotype ignores the challenges that many Asian/Asian American students from working-class backgrounds face in educational and economic spheres. In a time when a growing number of Southeast Asian students experience stereotypes as troubled youth, pregnant teenagers, delinquents, and dropouts in their local schools (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Ngo, 2010) and many recently arrived students from China are from the lower socioeconomic strata, it is important to examine their social interactions with other racial and ethnic groups at multiracial, multiethnic urban schools.

### **3.4.1 The Need to Focus on Asian/Asian American Students**

The studies that foreground the school's agentic role in the U.S. context tend to focus on the experiences of Spanish-speaking students (e.g., Salvadorans in Freeman, 1998, and Puerto Ricans in Freeman, 2004 and Hornberger, 1991), but little is known about the school as a social organization that recognizes and addresses Asian /Asian American students' lived experiences and trajectories in the contemporary U.S. society. In fact, to talk about Asian/Asian American students as a distinct group with unique needs that merits school attention is a novel concept because many of the educational studies on Asian/Asian Americans have often associated them with the image of "model minority" who do not question the status quo and can succeed within socioeconomic constraints without much support (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 1995). However, studies that sought to reveal Asian/Asian American students' lived experiences and voices in schools indicate that schools often failed to understand their unique racialization experiences and struggles. Since the dominant racial discourse in the U.S is often about black-white dichotomization, with some attention paid to Latinos, voices from Asian/Asian Americans are often absent from the mainstream educational discourse of race.

The prevalent model minority stereotype (Quach, Jo, & Urrieta, 2009) and more recently the notion of Southeast Asian refugee as "problem youth" (cf., Peters, 1988, Lee, 2001; Reyes, 2006) or "FOB" (Fresh off the Boat) (also see Jeon, 2001; Reyes, 2006; Talmy, 2004) have silenced voices of many Asian/Asian American students as well as other minorities and work to perpetuate social inequality at schools. What is more, scholars note that there is a critical need to focus on Asian/Asian American students from



disadvantaged backgrounds because nationally, many Asian/Asian Americans who are Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and English Language Learners (ELL) come from low-income backgrounds and attend highly segregated and isolated urban schools, which tend to have fewer resources despite serving a population with more needs than merely English language acquisition (Lee, 2004; Orfield & Lee, 2005). These statistics run completely counter to the model minority myth and suggest the urgent need to pay more scholarly attention to this student population (i.e., Asian/Asian American students from economically disadvantaged and non-English speaking households).

In addition, Asian culture is sometimes misinterpreted by the West as one that conforms to authority, prioritizes collective interest over individual interest for the goal of social harmony, and thus functions to reinforce rather than challenge existing social structure (see a review of cultural stereotypes in Li, 2002). I argue that this stereotype constrains Asian/Asian Americans from imagining and working toward a more socially just education for their communities. Shin and Crookes (2005a, 2005b) call into question the speculation that East Asian culture with a strong Confucian influence is passive and non-autonomous (e.g., disengagement with sociopolitical issues and loyalty to the state) and thus might encroach on the possibility of Freirian critical curricular innovation. Some researchers, (e.g., Kubota, 1999) refer to the negative distortion of Asian culture as rooted in the discourse of “Orientalism” (cf., Said, 1979) about how the “East” is expected to be, rather than how it actually is. Shin and Crookes (2005a) review other aspects of Confucian philosophy and point out that many of them are social activist in nature, such as the emphasis on the practice of knowledge in society and its direct impact on action. A

counter example is further reported by Shin and Crookes (2005b) when they successfully engaged Korean students with critically-oriented EFL materials in Korean context.

I argue that the establishment of PCCS by an Asian American organization committed to fighting against oppression also provides a counter example to mainstream discourse that views Asian Americans as passive and subject to authority, thus ignoring Asian Americans' agentic role and civic/communal engagement. The dominant discourse is reflected to some extent in the fact that no local community consultation was sought when the Philadelphia City decided to relocate the baseball stadium and the casino to the Chinatown neighborhood. A sense of astonishment is captured by the PCCS' principal's words to the local press, "We just couldn't believe that they would do this again to us. And every five or ten years, we've got to get out there to fight for the survival of the community" (9/11/08, Philadelphia Inquirer).

Although Asian/Asian Americans are positioned in the U.S. society differently from other linguistic and cultural minority groups in terms of their association with a model minority image and Orientalism discourse, there is still a paucity of research that documents how their unique experiences influence the way they traverse the U.S. educational systems, let alone how schools serving a large number of Asian American students intend to offer a socially just education that recognizes their social positioning and status in the broader society. Studying such a school will add to our understanding of what an equitable education for minority students, Asian Americans in particular, would look like and enhance our ability to imagine a better future. This dissertation also aims to

capture the emerging voice of Asian/Asian American students to contribute to our understanding of the politics of recognition and identity in the current diversified reality.

### **3.4.2 Caveat**

It should be noted that earlier studies that documented minority students' unique experiences have not been free of their critics. Minority students are assumed to have static cultural identities that index their individual relationship with members of the particular ethnic groups that they belong to (such as Latino or Chinese) who share a common history, a common language, and similar epistemology (e.g., Valdés, 1986). Poststructuralists question what they see as traditional ethnographers' attempts to search for seemingly standardized norms of behavior, which might inevitably essentialize the cultural repertoires of minority groups in ways that suggest individuals are passive recipients of a static culture (see critique in Atkinson, 1999; González, 2005). It is argued that representations of culture and groups of people are necessarily "partial accounts" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and that the partial and situated nature of knowledge that ethnographers produce needs to be recognized and examined (Visweswaran, 1994). In addition, the assumption that minority students learn better when classroom cultural and linguistic patterns are in congruence with those in the minority communities masks the underlying unbalanced power relations between the majority and minority groups within a specific context (González, 2005; Lee, 1996).

Researchers in funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2007; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) seek to move beyond stereotypical and folkloric

representations of cultural knowledge of minority groups to focus on everyday life practices of families. Funds of knowledge refer to strategic knowledge essential for household functioning and well-being that families accumulate in response to specific social and economic contexts (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This strand of research aims to understand how families develop social networks within their human ecology that facilitate the development of knowledge for them to thrive and survive. Building on that understanding, work on funds of knowledge explores ways that students' lived experiences can be integrated into a curriculum to create education that surpasses what is generally available for working-class minority students.

Funds of knowledge research provides special insights for this study for several reasons. First, it highlights the importance of moving away from the stereotypical representations of culture to reach a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences in dynamic and emergent contexts. The present study is situated within a culturally and linguistically diverse context and thus it is particularly important for the researcher to be aware of the danger of "essentializing the cultural repertoires of minoritized groups...by positing individuals as cultural dopes doomed to endlessly reproduce a static and unyielding culture" (González, 2005, p. 30). While the study will foreground Asian/Asian American students' experience, it is important to keep in mind that the very label "Asian/Asian American" itself has been problematized by many researchers (e.g., Espiritu, 1992) for its inability to capture the cultural and linguistic diversity within the Asian/Asian American communities.

In addition, research on funds of knowledge also helps me remain attuned to PCCS' teaching of folk arts and traditional cultural practices from students' communities. Finally, the premise of the funds of knowledge is in line with the focal school's views toward knowledge residing in students' communities. That is, all people, regardless of their educational, socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, possess knowledge that is resourceful for teaching and learning. González (2005) argues that when schools validate minority students' experiences, they also practice social justice. PCCS, which strives to provide an equitable education for its linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse minority students, provides a rich context to explore the relations between a school's purposeful teaching of students' community knowledges/cultures and its visions of social justice.

### **3.5 Identity, Investment, and Language Learning**

A growing research interest in identity and language learning since the early 1980s demonstrates a move from a cognitive perspective on language learning toward a sociocultural one in the field of language education (see Ricento, 2005a). Much of this research adopts a critical pedagogical lens to examine issues of power and access and their impacts on learners' identity and English language learning (Ibrahim, 1999, 2009; Norton, 1997b, 2000, 2001, 2008; Norton Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2000; Toohey, 2000; among many others). In particular, Norton's work on language, identity, and investment is identified as representing an important direction in the field of second language acquisition, paving the way for her subsequent research on imagined communities and

language learning. Norton defines identity as “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (1997b, p. 410). Using Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) notion of cultural capital, Norton (2000) conceptualizes investment as “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” p. 10). Norton further states:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources...The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. (pp. 10-11)

Language learning is conceived as related to what learners do with the language in a given context and how much access they have to it, a dimension which Norton contends is not well accounted for by Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) more fixed notions of instrumental and integrative motivation. Norton makes the case that an investment in the target language implies an investment in one’s own identity, and thus the question “Who am I?” needs to be understood along with the question “What can I do?” For instance, English learning experiences in North America of Black immigrant youth from the Caribbean (Bailey, 2000) or continental Africa (Ibrahim, 1999, 2009) are mediated by tensions between how one defines oneself and how one is defined by the politics of racialization in the host societies. Ibrahim’s (1999, 2009) ethnographic study reveals how French-speaking continental African youth’s being socially imagined as Blacks in

Canada influenced how and with whom they identified, which in turn had implications for what they learned (e.g., their use of Black Stylized English).

Norton (2001) extends her discussion of language learning and investment to imagined communities, referring to communities that language learners attempt to participate in when they learn a new language. Her study of two adult immigrant language learners in Canada suggests that learners' engagement with language classroom practices was linked to the imagined communities that they hoped would provide them with possibilities for a wider range of identities in the future. When their aspiration of and access to participating in the imagined communities were not recognized by their respective teachers, who unwittingly alienated them, the two students eventually dropped out of the class because they did not see their target language learning moving them closer to their imagined communities and imagined identities.

According to Norton, to understand learners' current investment in the target language, educators need to understand the desired imagined communities of their students and whether students see their target language learning as relevant to those communities.

Norton's work on language learning, identity, investment, and imagined communities provides important insights to investigate the Mandarin language program in PCCS. In the following paragraphs, I will review relevant research that helps situate PCCS students' identity and investment in learning Mandarin within the broader social context of foreign language and heritage language education in the U.S.

### **3.5.1 Mandarin Foreign Language Education in the U.S.**

The tragic events of September 11, coupled with an increasingly globalized economy, have foregrounded the importance to the U.S. of the learning of languages other than English in K-12 classrooms. Since 2004, a series of efforts have been taken on the parts of the Department of Defense and American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to arouse public awareness of the importance for Americans to have language competence in languages other than English that are expected to ensure national security and economic prosperity. In 2006, President Bush announced the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), which aims to expand foreign language learning and teaching across the K-16 pipeline to improve national security and economic competitiveness in the world. The initiative represents a coordinated partnership among the Secretaries of State, Education, and Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence. The President's request for \$114 million in fiscal year 2007 to fund this effort is evidence of the government's determination to address the negative effects of long-standing deficits in foreign language learning and teaching on national security, diplomacy, and commerce (NSLI, 2006).

This recent initiative seems to represent a promising moment for teaching and learning foreign language, especially for languages identified strategically important to the U.S, such as Arabic or Mandarin. Since Mandarin foreign language education is driven by national defense and economic needs, there is a need to make explicit what role and function Mandarin foreign language education and its learners are expected to fulfill, what imagined communities are created by the initiative for its learners, and how schools



and learners take up, contest or challenge the imposed imagined communities.

Examination of those issues will help understand Mandarin foreign language learners' investment in learning Mandarin.

Although currently Mandarin foreign language education seems to enjoy unprecedented public and academic attention, a further investigation of foreign language education in the U.S. indicates that there have been ongoing tensions between provision (or lack of provision) of foreign language education and issues of national security throughout the U.S education history. For instance, Pavlenko (2003) in a review of U.S. foreign language education in post-World War I finds that eradicating German language instruction at that time was rooted in an anti-German sentiment resulting from the wars with Germany, and limiting foreign language education to only middle- and upper-middle-class Anglo American students was tied to American's isolationist and utilitarian discourses. Later in the Post-Sputnik era, growing interest in foreign language education was driven by the needs for national defense and substantial funding from the federal government was allocated to promote foreign language learning at the elementary, secondary and postsecondary levels (Met, 2008). Despite governmental support, language programs failed to produce proficient students so enthusiasm and interest among schools and districts in offering languages in K-12, in particular in younger grades, waned away.

Pavlenko (2003) contends that ideologies solidified during the post-World War I era have far-reaching undesirable repercussions on foreign language education in the U.S. even to this day. A recent report by Center for Applied Linguistics that compares 1987, 1997, and 2008 data on nationwide foreign language education in the U.S. (Rhodes &

Pufahl, 2009) confirms that even in 2008, foreign language instruction was still concentrated at the high school level (with 91% of high schools offering foreign language instruction versus 58% of middle schools and 25% of elementary schools). While many countries now start foreign language education at a young age, foreign language instruction in the U.S. has been relegated to high schools as a secondary subject and in favor of a particular segment of population (e.g., upper-middle class whose first language is English rather than Latino students who already speak a language other than English). One third of public elementary and secondary schools with language programs reported that their programs were seriously affected by No Child Left Behind legislation with its focus primarily only on mathematics and reading, suggesting that foreign language is a secondary subject. In addition, there were inequalities in access to foreign language education because it was less likely for rural schools and schools serving lower socioeconomic students to offer it. Private elementary schools offered foreign language education at a much higher rate than public ones (51% versus 15%). The most “disturbing” result, according to the report, is that foreign language instruction at the elementary and middle schools decreased significantly from 1997 to 2008, and thus the report calls for all Americans, particularly legislators, administrators, and educational policy makers, to recognize the urgent need to incorporate foreign languages into the core curriculum.

It seems that the lofty goals and substantial federal funding under the NSLI since 2006 are yet to make a significant impact on the field of foreign language education.

Although teaching of Mandarin increased at both the elementary and secondary level in recent years while overall foreign language instruction decreased substantially (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009), it still remains to be seen how Mandarin foreign language learners' learning is mediated by the broader political and socio-economic context in which Mandarin is prioritized over other European languages for the first time in foreign language education history. Mandarin foreign language learners at PCCS constitute an important population for such an examination.

Also important is the fact that the focal Mandarin foreign language learners are situated within a public school serving a large number of students from lower SES backgrounds, a school that is statistically less likely to offer foreign language instruction, according to the report (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). In addition to how the focal school's Mandarin foreign language instruction is shaped by the broader discourse on Mandarin as a critical language, it is also important to investigate what other school visions are embedded in the provision of Mandarin foreign language at PCCS, and how different agents interpret the imagined communities offered by Mandarin foreign language education. Examination of these questions will provide a basis for a better understanding of Mandarin foreign language learners' learning experiences and their investment in learning the language that is classified as a Category 3 (super-hard) language for English speakers (cf., Foreign Service Institute, cited in Asia Society, 2005).

### **3.5.2 Heritage Language Education in the U.S.**

Notions of imagined communities, investment and identity are equally relevant for discussing the experiences of the one-third of students at PCCS who learn Mandarin as a heritage language. Heritage language education has also gained much ground in U.S. research and policy since the 1990s when the perceived critical need for Americans to be competent in languages other than English has been increasingly recognized by the government. Maintenance of heritage language competence in communities is regarded as an important resource that the country and individuals can draw from to satisfy the national need (Brecht & Ingold, 2002; Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000; McGinnis, 2008; Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001; Wiley & Valdés, 2000).

Scholars have worked to define heritage language learners (e.g., Fishman, 2001; Hornberger & Wang, 2008; Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2007; Valdés, 2001) and among various definitions, I follow Hornberger and Wang's (2008) definition that sees heritage language learners as "individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency in determining if they are heritage language learners of that language" (p. 6). Compared to earlier definitions of heritage language learners, Hornberger and Wang's (2008) definition pays special attention to heritage language learners' struggles and negotiated identities during their contact with dominant/local ideologies, dominant/heritage cultures, and standard/dialect language forms. Heritage language learners are situated in an ecological system in which their language learning and use both shape and are shaped by their self perceptions, positioning, and interactions with various people and institutions in the specific contexts under the larger sociopolitical

and historical influence. Hornberger and Wang's definition serves as a good complement to Norton's definition of identity because it centers on heritage language learners' unique special language learning experience, to which I will now turn.

Although an orientation to multilingualism that characterizes language-as-resource (LAR, cf., Ruiz, 1984) has recently been taken up by advocates and academics to promote heritage languages in the U.S., it is not fully congruent with the dominant orientation to minority languages (Hornberger & Wang, 2008; May, 2001; Ricento, 2005b; Valdés, González, Garcia, & Marquez, 2008; Wang, 2007). English hegemony is pervasive inside and outside of the schools and there is little room for the promotion or teaching of minority languages. Ricento (2005b) argues that a LAR orientation to heritage language often highlight the needs and interests of the state, and may perpetuate a view of language as an instrument and a commodity that is irrelevant to ethnic groups' identities and ignores historical contexts.

After reviewing the history of languages in the U.S., Ricento convincingly demonstrates that its language policies are inseparable from national development of a particular American identity and the orientation to non-English languages in public spaces has worked within a deficit framework that posits multilingualism as a threat to national unity. Ricento speculates that doubt, or even contempt, is likely to accompany recent interest in teaching and using heritage languages in K-12 education, especially from groups that have been subject to linguistic discrimination in the past for using their heritage languages. Ricento cautions us that without efforts to unpack English as a hegemonic discourse and allow a broader definition of American identity, LAR might be

another form of exploiting the minority group for the greater benefit of the majority group. He advocates for the promotion of heritage language education in the U.S. to ponder on important questions, such as “Resources for whom? For what purposes or end?” (p. 364). The questions Ricento poses are particularly helpful to examine the purpose of PCCS’ decision to offer Mandarin variety of Chinese as the heritage language to all ethnic Chinese.

In a context with a long history of promoting English learning at the expense of heritage languages and encouraging additive bilingualism (cf., Lambert, 1975) for only a limited elite population, evidence for Ricento’s speculation of heritage language learners’ resistance to learning their heritage language can be found in many works of Asian American writers or narratives of Asian Americans. Much of heritage language education, Chinese in particular, was rooted in communities for decades before it became a school subject, and some scholars praise Chinese weekend schools as important sites that the public educational system can learn from (e.g., Asia Society, 2005; McGinnis, 2008). However, many Asian Americans’ narratives have revealed that their heritage language learning experiences at the weekend schools were often forced upon them and the experiences often resulted in a departure from their heritage (Kibria, 2002; Liu, 1998; Tse, 2000; Tung, 2000; Wiley, 2008; Wu, 2002). They often failed to develop proficiency in their heritage languages, and they refused to use the languages, seeking instead to strengthen their ties with dominant English-monolingual White culture or distance themselves from fellow Asians/Asian Americans.

It is possible that under the dominant discourse that regards English as the only language of American national identity because of the belief that “we have room for but one language here,” as articulated in Roosevelt’s famous 1919 speech to the American Defense Society (see more discussion on the emergence of one language ideology in the U.S. in Pavlenko, 2002), many of the heritage language learners’ desired future communities are monolingual in English, which influenced their investment in learning their heritage languages. It is also possible that heritage language learners’ little interest in maintaining their heritage languages is related to the limited values, often in an economic sense, that they think their heritage languages accrue in the wider society. This is the very stance that many current advocates of heritage language education in the U.S. try to fight against because of the belief that heritage languages, especially those identified as critical languages, can advance the economic interests of the nation and the individuals. As mentioned earlier, Ricento (2005b) is skeptical about such a narrow interpretation of heritage languages and he casts doubts on how the LAR orientation as used by the advocates of the heritage language movement can actually elevate heritage languages’ status.

In response to Ricento’s critiques, Ruiz (2010) argues that while many language policies are driven by the economic argument and do not necessarily aim to promote cultural democracy and social justice, the issue “is how we (researchers) can accommodate it (the economic argument) without having it define the entire effort” (p. 162) while giving guidance on how to promote the use of minority languages. Ruiz (2010) reminds us that a LAR orientation connotes that even the smallest heritage

languages can be seen as advantageous because their multifaceted values are defined in intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, economic, social, and citizenship senses. Ruiz cites the fact that many communities have used their languages for generations without the instrumental values often accompanying majority languages to show that values can be given to languages within the communities in ways that outside communities may not appreciate in their own languages. To recapitulate, Ricento's (2005b) critique of LAR points out its potential negative effects on the promotion of heritage languages in the U.S. and the difficulty of its realization under a societal orientation that still views language diversity as problem. On the other hand, Ruiz's (2010) elaboration of LAR foregrounds the importance of understanding how heritage language communities might perceive their languages as resources that go beyond the material.

As Hornberger and Wang (2008) remind us, many heritage language learners need to negotiate the use of different varieties of heritage languages. In the discussions of Chinese language programs in the U.S., the term Chinese often refers to Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. However, in the case of Chinese as a heritage language education, the very term Chinese is highly contested because many Chinese ethnic communities speak other varieties of Chinese (e.g., Cantonese, Fujianese, etc.) as their heritage languages, often not mutually intelligible with Mandarin (Kelleher, 2008; Wiley, 2008). In many current Chinese language programs, speakers of other Chinese varieties are placed with Mandarin speakers in the heritage language track, but their knowledge in non-Mandarin varieties is discounted by the teachers or programs and their unique needs are often left unaddressed, causing them



much frustration in studying a language that is assumed to be their heritage language (Kelleher, 2008; Weger-Guntharp, 2008; Wiley, 2008).

For instance, Wiley (2008) explores the experience of Devin, a Taiwanese speaker learning Mandarin in a heritage track in one college and finds that in his class with about fifteen students, all of them received an “A” but for two, a Cantonese heritage language speaker and Devin. Kelleher’s (2008) study deserves special attention here given its similarity to mine. She uses Norton’s (2001) notion of identity and investment and a critical linguistic perspective to discuss issues of educational equity among the experiences of Cantonese-speaking students and Mandarin-speaking students learning Mandarin at a university. The language program in her study had two tracks for Mandarin learners: the “bilingual” track was allegedly designed for students of Mandarin background or another dialect of Chinese and the “regular” track, although not explicitly described as such, was for students without linguistic experience in any variety of Chinese. While this division suggested students with linguistic experience with any variety of Chinese be placed in the “bilingual” track, the actual class composition in the two tracks revealed a more complicated picture. Up to 55% of the students in the “bilingual” track identified Mandarin as their first language while 54% of the students in the “regular” track were Cantonese-speakers.

Kelleher turned to students’ voices to understand the disparity and found that the Cantonese-Mandarin boundary between the two tracks seemed to be related to how students needed to reposition themselves within the program structure to facilitate their investment in learning Mandarin. For instance, the Cantonese-speaking student, Kelly,

was driven to learn Mandarin partly for the economic prosperity that it might bring her in the future but largely for the potential for her to improve her Cantonese so she could maintain connections with her family. Although she was originally placed in the “bilingual” track, she left it and made her decision to move to the “regular” track because of a sense of alienation she experienced at the “bilingual” track. Below Kelly talks about how this sense of marginalization resulted from the program and the teachers’ inattention to Cantonese speakers’ needs and experiences. She said,

I actually tried to take that class [the “bilingual” track], and I understood everything that the teacher was saying, but when he asked me to speak, I couldn’t say anything...and they wouldn’t spend time on the part I don’t know [spoken Mandarin]. The only way to do that is to take the lower class [the “regular” classes] because that’s how I learn how to say the words.

I’ve gotten used to it...it doesn’t address Cantonese speakers. [The program is] ignoring us.... [It would be] more effective to have a Cantonese program...not teaching Cantonese as a language...[I] don’t expect that, but [I] would like it if there was a Cantonese transition course to Mandarin. That would be more effective. (Kelleher, 2008, pp. 249-250)

Even though Kelly was very much interested in learning Cantonese, she foresaw little possibility for a Cantonese program in the context of university “Chinese” language program. However, she did point out the advantage of including some Cantonese in the class to assist Mandarin learning of students like her. Similar to the two adult immigrant English learners in Norton’s (2001) study, Kelly also exerted her agency to leave the class that she did not see helping her move closer to her imagined communities.

The PCCS Mandarin program also divides all students into two tracks, placing Chinese speakers of different varieties (i.e., Cantonese, Fujianese, Mandarin) together in the heritage language track. Several students from Cantonese- or Fujianese-speaking

families that I have observed during my pre-dissertation stage seemed to face significant challenges in the heritage language track. Although students of this age are less likely than adults to exert their agency to “leave” the language class when there is a disparity between students’ imagined communities or identities and institutional imagined communities or I-identity, they may express their frustration through non participation or disengagement with learning during the class. Through my extended participant observation in the heritage language 6th grade class, I had gradually noticed that in the Chinese-English translation activity, students who often volunteered to give English translations were of Mandarin backgrounds and those who often spent this period of time secretly drawing, scribbling or doing math problem sets were of Cantonese background.

It is, therefore, important to understand non-Mandarin background learners’ lived experiences and their investment in learning Mandarin in relation to their own as well as the school’s imagined communities as they traverse across home and school. Insights gained from students’ perspectives will help heritage language teachers to better address non-Mandarin students’ needs and create a context where both Mandarin and non-Mandarin heritage language learners can participate and achieve more or less equally in the language class.

### **3.6 Recapitulation**

A review of literature on diversity has suggested that schools and society have a long history of viewing diversity as a problem to national unity and educational success. In the U.S. context, students not from Anglo-American backgrounds and/or speaking

languages other than Standard English are often underserved by the educational institutions. However, when schools seek to take into account minority students' ways of being and learning, they not only take an agentic role to challenge the dominant assimilative discourse on diversity at the micro level, but also construct a different identity for their students through everyday interaction. A close examination of interaction between minority students and teachers as well as among students themselves provides insights into how identities are negotiated, contested, and challenged. It is especially timely for us to learn how Asian/Asian American students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds navigate their educational and social lives at school due to the paucity of research on this particular student population. Finally, when students are required to learn an additional language other than English at school (i.e., Mandarin in the context of PCCS), it is crucial to examine their language learning experiences in relation to how much access they have to this language inside and outside of the school. As this review chapter has indicated, discussion of PCCS students' Mandarin learning experiences cannot be separated from the facts that many U.S. schools still work within a deficit framework regarding diversity and yet Mandarin is recently identified as critical to U.S. security and finance.

## **4. METHODS: CONDUCTING RESEARCH AT PCCS**

### **4.1 Overview**

This study sets out to describe, interpret, and understand how an urban charter school with culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse students from low-income communities seeks to offer education that recognizes its students' minority status and lived experiences in broader society and exceeds the education typically available for this group of students. Furthermore, it is designed to understand how school policies and pedagogies influence students' learning and identities. Therefore, much effort is made to document students' experiences and voices over the course of the study. The goals of this chapter are to describe the research methods I selected, my actual practices of data collection, and my analysis of data. To contextualize my research methods, I also describe the city in which the school is situated, the focal participants as well as my reflections on the field relationship and experiences. I begin this chapter with a description of the research setting.

### **4.2 Setting: The City**

Well-known as a city with a rich historical background, Philadelphia is a symbol of liberty and religious freedom, and it was a major destination for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Philadelphia developed as a railroad, shipping, and manufacturing center of the region, but the Great Depression ended the city's expansion. Subsequent job loss, deindustrialization, and suburbanization dimmed the city's glorious past. Today, Philadelphia faces a shrinking

and aging population, rising unemployment and poverty rate, dropping household incomes relative to inflation, and growing disparities in earnings (Brookings Institution, 2000). For the first time, Blacks (43.7%) have outnumbered Whites (41.1%) to become the largest racial group between 2000 and 2010. The city has been historically characterized as Black and White, however, it is within such a context that today's immigrants make Philadelphia more diverse than before, be it racially, linguistically, socioeconomically, or culturally. According to the U.S. Census, foreign-born residents increased from nine percent to 11 percent between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and the immigrant population grew at a rate that is among the fastest in major U.S. metropolitan areas (Singer, Vitiello, Katz, & Park, 2008).

Nowadays, the majority of Philadelphia's newcomers are from Latin America and Asia, and their numbers continue to grow. Out of the city's population of one million, Latinos make up 12.3% and Asians 6.3% of the total population and 20% of the population speak languages other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In addition, the city's poverty rate doubles the state's (24% versus 12%). In the context of a global economy and a shrinking and aging population, immigrants present both opportunities and challenges to the city. At a time when Philadelphia, like many other cities around the nation, is greatly impacted by anti-immigrant ethos as seen in growing police power to identify and detain illegal immigrants, some proponents of immigration argue that immigrants are critical to the city's survival and competitiveness because they have revitalized the city's economy by opening businesses, engaging in transnational activities with their countries of origin, and building coalitions with groups beyond their

own cultures and ethnicities (Gupta, 2000; Tekenaka & Osirim, 2010; Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvania, 2004).

The Philadelphia school district, like many other urban districts that serve student populations from diverse socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, has been plagued by students' low academic performance for many years. Among many reforms in response to the district's failure in providing quality education, the establishment of charter schools is one. Charter schools are public schools operated independently outside the control of local school districts with the aim to provide children with more opportunities for academic success. Each charter school has its own Board of Trustees and administrative staff and hires its own teachers. As autonomous educational institutions, charter schools make decisions on a wide range of educational issues, including curriculum, textbooks, length of school day and school year, numbers and kinds of extracurricular activities. While charter schools are exempt from many educational mandates, they are still subject to No Child Left Behind's requirement of adequate yearly progress. Charter schools differ from one another according to their missions, which reflect their varied foci on community, family, career, cultural heritage or academic success, and they generally do not enroll students through residential assignment but through parents' choices.

Such schools are gaining popularity nationwide since the first charter school opened in 1992. As of the 2008-2009 school year, about 1.4 million students nationwide attended charter schools and approximately 30% of the charter schools were high-poverty schools where 75 percent or more of students were eligible for free or reduced-price

lunch, an increase from 13 percent in the 1999–2000 school year. In contrast, 19 percent of traditional public schools were regarded as high poverty in the 2008-2009 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Philadelphia opened its first charter school in the 1997-1998 school year and now hosts 80 charter schools, serving over 48,000 students (School District of Philadelphia, 2011).

The burgeoning growth of charter schools has triggered considerable educational research and public debate. Advocates argue that charter schools provide innovative educational programs, raise student achievement, offer alternatives to parents and foster positive competition for traditional public schools (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). Opponents charge that charter schools dilute resources that the school districts are entitled to and promote racial enclaves within districts. An evaluation study of the performance of Philadelphia's charter schools from school years 2000-2001 through 2006-2007 finds no statistically significant difference between charter schools' academic performance and that of traditional public schools. Additionally, there was no evidence that competition led to better performance among traditional public schools, but there was some support demonstrating that students tended to be transferred to charter schools with slightly more students of their own race/ethnicity than the traditional public schools from which they came (Zimmer, Blanc, Gill, & Christman, 2008).

#### **4.3 Getting Access to PCCS**

My contact with PCCS started with student teaching requirements of my TESOL Master's degree in February 2009 when I tutored Mandarin-speaking immigrant students



from China in their ESL classes. I was often impressed by the ESL teacher I worked with: she was able to see the skills and resources that students brought with them and use them as the foundation for advanced English learning. As I stepped out of her ESL classroom and followed her to content classes to offer pull-in ESL assistance to the students, I was struck by the school's diverse student population served by the similarly diverse staff members and teachers. I was especially amazed to see the type of issues that were discussed at school (e.g., Black slavery and struggle in the U.S., meaning of social justice and injustice, racial and linguistic discrimination, family immigration history). I was very excited to see these educational practices as I believed I was witnessing the implementation of what critical educational researchers have long argued for, that is, to engage minority students with the current social and linguistic reality in which they are living (see Alim, 2007; Luke, 2004b, 2009).

Since I deeply identify with the school's mission of providing an education that foregrounds minority students' experiences, I continued to volunteer in the school even after I got my TESOL degree. However, the idea of conducting my dissertation research at PCCS did not appear on my agenda until my TESOL academic advisor, who read all of my reflections and field notes from my student teaching, proposed it to me several times. As a university researcher who has worked with ESL teachers at PCCS for several years, she noted that there is something special about the school that "one can just feel in the air" and it is worthwhile to investigate what it is about so the knowledge can be shared to a wider audience. Particularly since I had developed a positive relationship with the teachers and the students, she suggested that I take the initiative. It was with the hope that

documenting an exemplar school could contribute to discussions of alternative ways of educating minority students that I started to consider the school as my dissertation site.

In addition, making the primary foci of my study social justice and minority students' experiences is not incidental, but purposeful. PCCS is situated within a broader social context in which assaults on minority students are prevalent. For instance, in December, 2009, Asian students were attacked by a group of African American students at a public high school, in which animosity toward immigrant students, Asians in particular, has had a long history (Masterson, 2009). Many AASA members who are affiliated with PCCS have played a key role in mobilizing attacked students and families to fight against the high school and the school district for recognition of racial tensions at the school and for a safe school environment that respects diversity. The fact that PCCS has actively participated in creating a more just education inside and outside its school context seems to "light a candle" in the adversity and thus merits in-depth investigation.

When I brought the idea of conducting my dissertation research at the school to the teachers and the principal, I received much encouragement because I was perceived as someone who is already part of the school community and shares similar commitment to serving its diverse students. Freeman (2004), who worked as a university researcher in a public school in North Philadelphia, noted that gaining access to do research in a local school and community was not a simple matter for her because she needed to balance her goals of being a university professor seeking professional advancement and the local interests of students, teachers, and the community. However, Freeman found that all doors were open when she demonstrated her commitment to the children by volunteering

her time in various ways. Similarly, I also had to constantly challenge my own definition, and probably even more so the local teachers' definitions, of outside researchers since a few of them had told me about their unpleasant experiences with university researchers who came in for data collection at their own convenience and left immediately once the goal was achieved. Fortunately, after my continuous volunteering at the school, many teachers' classroom doors were open to me. I was told several times that I could go into their classes at anytime.

#### **4.4 Critical Ethnographic/Discourse Analytic Approach**

The primary analytical tool in this study is critical ethnography, which is an applied form of ethnography but with a strong focus on researching knowledge to inform change (Creswell, 1998). Traditional ethnography aims to provide a thick description of the culture of the target communities and perspectives of community members through prolonged and extensive engagement with participants (Geertz, 1973). Ethnographers interpret culture by dealing with: (a) participants' actions and behaviors, (b) participants' knowledge, and (c) objects or resources participants create and use (i.e., cultural artifacts, Spradley, 1980). The ethnographic researcher's expertise in capturing experiences and perspectives of students and teachers from diverse backgrounds is increasingly recognized as providing important insights for developing sustainable policy and program initiatives (Adair, 2010). Since program development and implementation are always intertwined with contextual variations, a better understanding of the dynamic processes in context can initiate meaningful conversations about the effectiveness of a program.

However, critical ethnography seeks to move beyond accounts of participants in particular communities to describe reality as “a social and cultural *construction*, linked to wider power relations, which privileges some, and disadvantages other, participants” (May, 1997, p. 199) with the intention to change the reality for the better. In other words, while traditional ethnography often analyzes a local community as a complete unit and “describes what is” for the sake of describing it, critical ethnography assumes that practices at the micro-level are inevitably influenced by the macro-level power relations and thus “asks what could be” for future social change to take place (Thomas, 1993, p. 2).

Critical ethnographers often are attentive to the nature of participation and committed to improving participants’ abilities to generate new knowledge, enact change, and empower themselves (Reason, 2004). Critical ethnography’s special emphasis on “the dialectical relationship between the social structural constraints on human actors and the relative autonomy of human agency” (Anderson, 1989, p. 249) enables researchers to examine the dynamic interaction among sociopolitical power relations, institutional structure, constraints, and individual or collective choices (see also Carspecken, 1996; Freebody, 2003). As such, it is well suited to explore how issues of social class, gender, ethnicity and other social constructs are manifested in educational inequality and how political and emancipatory practice can be initiated (May, 1997). Critical ethnography is chosen as the major mode of inquiry for this study to support the study’s larger goals, which include 1) to gain an understanding of how macro sociopolitical forces that shape minority groups’ experiences mediate different agents’ visions and practices at the school level, and 2) to stimulate discussions about how schools serving linguistically and

culturally diverse populations can structure their policies and practices to offer a more equitable education in contemporary urban contexts.

To approach a variety of spoken and written discourses, I adopt Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a methodology that is seen as increasingly relevant to critical ethnography (May, 1997; Rogers, 2008). CDA, emerging under the influence of the critical canon in the mid 1980s, seeks to embed micro discourse of conversations, texts, and genres within macro social and political contexts and pay close attention to how discourse at the micro level functions to reproduce or contest social, economic and political injustice and ideologies (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Gee, 1996, 2004; Norton, 1997a; Rogers, 2008). Here, discourse goes beyond units of language to refer to “the complexes of signs and practices that organize social existence and social reproduction” (Norton, 1997a, p. 209). Since discourse is conceptualized as a form of social practice having implications for inherently political aspects of life (e.g., distribution of social power and goods, privilege and exploitation, solidarity and difference, see Gee, 2004), it is understood that language becomes a site of struggle and open to contestation (Norton, 1997a). CDA provides me with a tool to understand how micro-level discourses surrounding school visions interact with, reproduce or resist macro-level societal discourse on diversity, and reciprocally, the implications of those macro-discourses for school policies and practices.

My analysis, however, is not merely about mapping language contexts to social contexts, but also about viewing social relations as potentially problematic and thus subject to transformation. Although CDA and critical ethnography have been criticized

for their emphasis on social critiques and theory building without action plans (May, 1997; Norton, 1997a), the original intention of critiques of social inequality is to create the possibility of social transformation (Poster, 1989). Being critical means appraising alternative facets of reality and evaluating different perspectives on a topic (Widdowson, 2001). While the establishment of PCCS is already in itself a realization of an action plan based on social critiques of public education for minority students, this research seeks to understand the complex realities of the classroom, different agents' voices and potential applications of the research to the school's practical needs with an analytical focus on various ways in which power is challenged, resisted, subverted, or reproduced (cf., Luke, 2004a). Although the school's vision might seem quite politically correct and welcoming to a critical ethnographer, it should be noted that no school is entirely empowering or disempowering because schools are complex sociopolitical milieu where oppressive policies and counter-oppressive practices coexist side by side (Freeman, 2004; Kanno, 2008). While I emulated Kanno (2008) in striving to not be overly concerned about the disempowering aspects of school and remaining attentive to good practices that take place within the same milieu, I was also cautious about the tendency to characterize the focal school in simple terms as an empowering or successful school.

Since my research is related to the concepts of power, recognition, and multiple perspectives, I made a conscious effort to conduct the research in ways that did not disempower the participants. Norton encourages critical educational researchers to "focus more directly on the interests, needs, and investments of learners and teachers, working collaboratively to address challenges and construct possibilities" (1997a, p. 213).

Therefore, my research went beyond simply documenting different participants' voices to involve them in the research in many aspects. In discussing issues of power in various research traditions, Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1992) distinguish among three research approaches: an ethics-based approach that researches "on" participants, an advocacy-based approach that researches "on and for" participants, and an empowerment approach that researches "on, for and with" participants. My research seeks to adopt an empowerment approach, which, according to Cameron et al., entails maintaining dialogues with the participants, valuing their research agenda, involving them in feedback and sharing research findings and knowledge.

My choice of critical ethnography and CDA as my primary analytical tools manifests my careful consideration of participants' complex social realities. Initially, I submitted a proposal to the principal about conducting action-oriented research that would require a high-level of teachers' involvement both within and after school hours. However, after my prolonged pre-dissertation observation of teachers' experiences at school, I realized that teachers' schedules were already tight enough, and thus imposing such a research agenda would neglect their everyday concerns and realities. When action-oriented research became impractical as an approach to answer the research questions I originally posed, I experienced a lot of frustration. However, with special attention to those moments and an attempt to adjust my research focus and tools, points of tensions like those become "methodological rich points" that Hornberger (2006) argues can move the research forward. Those points helped me identify critical ethnography and CDA as more adequate tools in my research context to better understand school community in a

way that would take into account participants' realities. My concerns to value and involve participants, as I will show in more detail below, continued to impact the type of data that I collected through the course of my study. In line with the principle of sharing academic knowledge and research findings that Cameron et al. (1992) advocate for empowerment research, I made myself available as a tutor, interpreter, and teaching assistant to the PCCS community during my observation and involvement there. Upon the principal's request, I also shared my preliminary research findings with the community members during their Professional Development after my research was completed, and the school is currently engaged in identifying the beginnings of an action plan. The feedback that I received through dialogue with the school staff also provide me with important insights for further data analysis.

From September 2010 to June 2011 (except the last week of February and the whole month of March when I took maternity leave), I spent an average of three full days a week at PCCS. I engaged in in-depth participant observation, conducted ample teacher and student interviews and collected relevant school documents, such as student demographics, teacher manuals, class handouts, timetables, letters sent to parents, samples of student work, school newsletters, and announcements and topics presented on bulletin boards. Over time, I shadowed a group of seventh and eighth graders representing diverse linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, which more or less reflected student makeup in the school, as they attended different classes. The purpose of focusing on students from grades 6-8 instead of younger students is mainly due to the concern that younger students might have more difficulty in articulating their thoughts in



response to abstract questions (see challenges of interviewing 10-year olds about class impact on their interaction with adults, in Lareau, 2003). Since one of the central questions of this study is to understand students' identity formation in relation to their school experiences, it is reasonable to focus on older students. As students are not passive receivers of the school policies and pedagogies but often actively engage in achieving their identities through discourses with others, I investigated their Discourse-identities by following them to various school spaces and observing how they conversed with peers and school authorities, paying particular attention to how they were treated, talked about and talked to by school authorities, and how they themselves constructed a sense of who they were through discourse.

My field notes include my observations at various sites and times throughout the school, including different classes (e.g., content, Mandarin, music, art and a variety of electives), school-wide concerts, class dismissal, lunch period, professional development for staff, field trips, parent-teacher conferences and so on. As I was allowed significant freedom to wander around the building due to my prior involvement at the school, I sometimes went directly to classrooms that I planned to observe and sometimes just walked around the building to collect school artifacts or talk to staff. I did not follow a rigid observation schedule and my decision as to which class to observe often was determined by how much my observation would contribute to my understanding of questions under study and would improve my rapport with the students.

Whenever possible, I tried to find out topics that would be covered in each class beforehand so I could make decisions on which class to observe because obviously I

could not possibly observe all the classes that seventh and eighth graders attended, especially since there were over 15 electives offered at the school. In line with the purpose of my research, I spent much more time in Social Studies because it provided rich data to understand how various perspectives on a social or historical event were talked about. I also spent a considerable amount of time in ESL class and both Mandarin classes because of my prior involvement there. Another important criterion for me to decide which class to observe was how well my observation of and participation in the class facilitated my rapport with the students. When I needed to build a more personal relationship with some students, I shadowed them closely for a few days and sought opportunities to increase my interaction with them.

When I was in the class, my role shifted constantly between participant observer and observant participant. I sometimes sat in the back of the class to observe teaching and learning, sometimes walked around the tables to help with students' work, and sometimes was called upon by the teachers to offer my opinions. Some teachers that I had observed for a long time would ask me to watch their students while they were out of the classroom for a quick bathroom break or administrative task. I initially recorded my field notes in a pocket-size notebook but later in my Mac notebook mainly because I often had the luxury to sit at a table in most of the classrooms that I observed, and my Mac allowed me to key in what the students and teachers said in more real time than the traditional paper notebook. During the course of my research, I had regular contact with approximately eighty seventh and eighth graders at PCCS but definitely more time with forty of the seventh graders, which is the result of the fact that much of eighth graders'

time was spent on administrative tasks related to their high school applications. Although observations of these moments would also be helpful in understanding eighth graders' academic trajectories, toward the middle of my fieldwork, it became clear that spending more time with the seventh graders and observing teaching and learning in the classes they attended yielded a more holistic view of PCCS.

#### **4.5 On Collecting Data with Middle Schoolers**

The prospect of asking these seventh and eighth graders who were in the process of deeply sorting through their multiple identities to sign the consent forms that allowed me to follow them to various spaces during the school hours was not a promising one, especially when I made it clear to them that they could choose not to participate in the study. The principal had anticipated students' lack of interest in participating in my study for their dislike of an adult stalker like me when I first proposed my research to her. Since I hoped to collect data as early as possible, I needed to get students' permission early. When I elicited seventh and eighth graders' participation in my study in their Mandarin classes, both Mandarin teachers coincidentally encouraged their students to join my study to "help Teacher Ming graduate." Many students who originally did not sign the consent forms took back their blank forms and signed their names, but there were a couple of students who still remained seated and thus did not sign the forms (For these students, I did not interview them nor followed them). In total, about 95% of students in the seventh and eighth grade agreed to participate in my study, thus allowing me to follow the cohorts during the school hours.

Student interviews were an important part of my study because they enabled me to better understand how students perceived their educational experiences at PCCS, their current investment, future imagined communities, and different aspects of their identities (e.g., Institution-identities, Discourse-identities) (see Appendix C for sample student interview questions). However, it took me quite a long time to accept that scheduling a student interview in advance during regular school hours is like a mission impossible if researchers are dedicated to attending to students' learning and socializing time. I could have conducted more student interviews had I imposed my own schedule on students, but I decided, with much consideration and no regrets, to prioritize students' learning over my study whenever relevant and possible.

To ensure students' learning was not taken away from by attending my interviews, I was very insistent that I could only pull students out for interviews during non-instructional time, and this presented itself to be more of a challenge than I had anticipated because there was not much non-instructional time in this school. There was only one recess during a week, and thus lunch break became an important social time for the students. As I later learned from the students how much they needed recess and lunch break, I added another circumstance that discouraged me from pulling out students: no student interview during recess or lunch breaks unless students agreed to be interviewed. Not surprisingly, when offered the option, students would rather hang out with their friends than sit down with me for interviews during recess or lunch break.

In the end, I conducted many of my student interviews during the weekly Classroom Meeting period when seventh or eighth grade homeroom teachers designated

time blocks for independent reading or daily Morning Meeting period before the first period when students ate breakfast, played the mancala card game, and made up unfinished homework. During the Morning Meeting, I would join the mancala game, if invited, help with students' homework, and sometimes I just sat near the students and listened to them talk about their lives and make fun of each other. When Morning Meeting time permitted, I conducted taped individual or group interviews with students who no longer needed to work on their homework from the previous day. The number of students in many group interviews fluctuated. Sometimes students who were not in the interview would comment on the student interviewees, thus gradually becoming part of the interview. Sometimes students suddenly recalled that they had not finished one small assignment and then left the interviews.

Unexpectedly, quite a few student interviews were conducted when the teachers were absent because of illness or personal reasons. As the substitute teachers often only had students quietly work on assignments, this became a perfect time for me to interview students who finished the assignments early. Toward the middle of my fieldwork, some students would notify me in the morning if they had a substitute teacher on that day. When regular school hours did not permit me to talk to some students in length, I interviewed them after school hours in places where they usually hung out (e.g., at the bakery in local Chinatown), allowing me to understand their lives more fully. In addition to questions that were directly related to my research, I purposely included questions that elicited students' ideas on how they thought teachers could better assist them in learning.

By sharing such information with the teachers on a regular basis throughout my fieldwork, I hoped my study had immediate and direct implications for the school.

Interviewing middle schoolers is a trial and error process that was full of ups and downs. My first few student interviews during the first semester were among the shortest interviews that I had. With much dismay, I realized that having my regular presence and help in their class was not enough to have them open their hearts to talk to me. I then made every effort to build personal relationships with many students and resumed the student interviews in the second semester when students had more personal encounters with me. Therefore, the majority of the student interviews were conducted in the second semester when my relationship with the students became closer.

To get middle schoolers to talk about their school experiences with an adult that they still needed to address as “Teacher Ming” was difficult. To increase students’ participation in the interviews, I followed what Foley and Valenzuela (2005) call a conversational style of interviewing and sharing greater personal information than the conventional interview. In many student interviews, the questions only roughly guided the conversations, which often were intertwined with casual conversations at more personal level. Individual student interviews yielded less articulated data than focus groups so I eventually tried to conduct as many group interviews as possible, which allowed me to capture a more nuanced picture of students’ thoughts and interactions. To increase students’ comfort level, I strived to interview students and their friends together. The selection was based on my observation of friendships among students, and I always confirmed with individual students in advance to see if they were fine with my choice of

grouping. In some cases when students rejected my grouping, I then conducted individual interviews with the particular students that other students did not want to be within the group interviews.

According to Colucci (2007), activity-related questions within focus groups with young people can better engage them and promote in-depth discussions so I often included hypothetical scenarios for students to talk about in addition to the interview questions that I ordinarily would go over. I often started out the interviews by asking students to create “fake” names that would represent themselves in my study. This often led to a lot of laughter and discussions that sometimes went over time that I had originally allocated. In many student interviews, I was struggling between whether I should cut short students’ chatting that did not seem to be relevant to my study or whether I should just wait for another two minutes to let them enjoy this little break. I found I often had much difficulty in interrupting students’ chatting because I could still vividly remember my own middle school years, and the moments that I still cherish most were the times when I was with my friends outside of class. Not being able to get students to go over even half of my interview questions in one interview was frustrating, but it turned out to be a methodological rich point (c.f., Hornberger, 2006) because I not only built up even closer relationship with many students, but also had to interview them several times. Some of the richest student interview data that I obtained were from the third or fourth student interviews that I conducted with the same group of students. Besides, some students who enjoyed their interview experiences spread the word to their classmates so eventually I was able to reach some students that I originally had not

thought I could reach. I am particularly fortunate to have students approach me directly and ask me to schedule an interview with them. Except for the three focus groups with newcomers from China that were conducted in Mandarin, all student interviews were conducted in English as this is the language students felt most comfortable with.

#### **4.6 On Collecting Data with Teachers**

As my study focused on seventh and eighth graders, I had regular contact with their teachers, who were extremely generous in accommodating my research. All teachers allowed me to enter their classrooms at anytime, although I had always tried hard to arrive at the classrooms as soon as the class started. Teachers' kind offers turned out to be especially critical in helping me collect the data because I often was caught in tutoring, translating, or talking in the previous class that I observed or helped. Many of the teachers also shared with me their schedules and informed me of their lesson plans in advance to help me arrange my observation or student interview schedules. The idea that I needed to spend a year with them and another two years writing to get my degree was inconceivable to many teachers and thus many promised to help me get "enough" data.

As with students, interviewing teachers turned out to be as challenging because of their busy schedules. Being a volunteer at PCCS for about two years, I was acutely aware of teachers' hectic schedules. It was common for teachers to reschedule or cancel interviews with me. In the end, I had to find ways to talk to the teachers as much as I could, such as eating lunch with teachers, serving as a chaperone on field trips, staying after school hours, attending Professional Development meetings, and translating for



teachers with Mandarin-speaking parents during report card days. As a result, a lot of my data on teachers' talking about their own teaching and about their students came from informal conversations that I had with them during these occasions.

To make my own research more relevant to the local context, I also regularly shared with teachers information that their students, who gave me permission to pass what they said in the interviews to their teachers, about how they thought their teachers could help them learn better. Whenever possible, I did not mention students' identifiable information. Many teachers expressed that they benefited greatly through our conversations, mostly because they did not have much time to interview their students and even if they did, they did not think they would be able to gather such information from their students. Seeing me spend much time hanging out with their students who seemed rather comfortable talking with me inside and outside of the classrooms, some teachers requested particular questions that they would like to figure out to be included in my subsequent student interviews. Although these questions were not centrally relevant to my study, I incorporated them in the student interviews and shared part of the data with the teachers, without including students' identifiable information.

However, anonymizing students' identities sometimes was not possible when I shared other data with the teachers that did need students' background information in order to make sense of the data that I presented to them. This posed a particular challenge, especially when I presented data on students' interracial relationships, which included gender, racial and ethnic information. As the school CEO noted, my data captured what many teachers had observed in the playground or class on a regular basis

so it was not difficult for them to identify which students' voices were included in some particular excerpts. For the purpose of this dissertation, I used pseudonyms for all my informants, even though people who are familiar with the school might still be able to identify the teachers and students participating in this study. I decided not to use the "fake names" that students told me at the beginning of the interviews because many of these names were the same names they used on their Facebook account or their nicknames known to other students in the same cohort. Therefore, I created pseudonyms for all the students and teachers.

I cannot emphasize enough that reading the data presented in this study should not result in putting any blame on the teachers or students, or the school itself. Any of these findings, positive or negative, could not have possibly been discovered had these teachers and students not allowed me to enter their communities and participate in their daily lives. While my study was situated in PCCS at a particular socio-historical moment, questions and concerns raised in my study are not unique to this school. PCCS faced similar challenges that plague many other inner city schools serving racially, linguistically and culturally diverse students. What I hope to achieve is to show the ideals that PCCS aimed to create for their minority students out of the realities in which they functioned.

#### **4.7 Researcher's Role and Positionality**

It is critical for an ethnographer to recognize that her life history, role, and positioning in the research inevitably influence the type of data she will collect

(Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Maxwell, 2005).

In addition, it is possible for an ethnographer to adopt multiple roles in the field, each of which indicates "a range of advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and dangers" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.123). Therefore, instead of seeking to eliminate the researcher's influence on the setting or individuals, the goal in a qualitative study is to explicitly examine this influence and use it "productively" (Maxwell, 2005, p.109).

Given the complexity of issues related to power, inequalities, and recognition that my research intends to address, it becomes essential for me to critically examine the self-other relationships of fieldwork (May, 1997). In the following section, I seek to unpack my personal life history in relation to research at PCCS as well as my role and positionality in this study. I try to emulate what Foley (2002) advocates for writing critical ethnography, that is, blending autobiography with ethnography and writing in ordinary language, practices that I plan to continue in my actual writing of the research.

I grew up in a family that values volunteerism, and began volunteering in my high school years to work with minorities who endured discrimination in Taiwan, such as aboriginal students, orphans, people with disabilities, immigrant women from Southeast Asia and their children. It should be noted that these experiences were not always fulfilling because I was often confronted with my own privileged status in Taiwanese society. I came to the U.S. from Taiwan to pursue my graduate study in education with an interest in learning how a country with a long history of immigration responds to the changing demographics because Taiwanese society has begun to grapple with the growing number of women from Southeast Asia and their children.

I came to the U.S. only to realize my own minority status. Being an Asian woman and a lifelong English language learner, I have experienced discrimination based on how I look and how I talk. A sense of disempowerment prevailed in my early years, which is probably what many minority groups often feel like, but fortunately, I moved forward with support from my academic advisors, teachers, and peers, among others who are centrally concerned with minority groups' experiences in the U.S. and international contexts. Due to my deep appreciation for those who have helped me grow stronger, I am committed to improving lives of those who often experience alienation and discrimination for their appearances, their ways of talking and living, their socioeconomic status and language proficiency.

Much work has discussed how researchers' social identities, be they racial, ethnic, class, or gender influence ethnographic endeavors and analyses (Collins, 1991; Bourgois, 2000). When I officially began to shadow seventh and eighth graders and interview their teachers for my dissertation in September, 2010, I anticipated that students and teachers would respond to my race, ethnicity, and gender differently and I would be able to have better rapport with Asian/Asian American students, girls in particular. In the end, I did collect more data with girls than boys, especially with girls of Asian heritages, and thus am able to give better analyses and descriptions of Asian/Asian American students' experiences in the school.

However, such field experience and data collection did not come without much effort. It was not until I actually started to talk to students that I realized that many misrecognized me as Chinese mainly because of my prior active involvement and

presence in their Mandarin heritage or foreign classes. As a result, when I elicited students' participation in my study, many thought it was about "Chinese" (referring to the language class) and did not seem to be especially excited about it. To better "sell" myself and my study to students of diverse linguistic, racial, ethnic and gender backgrounds, I had to stress that the study is not just about Chinese class but about learning students' educational experiences at PCCS and further I needed to highlight various commonalities between the students and me. Moreover, simply because I looked or sounded "Chinese" (i.e., lighter skin and a high command of Mandarin) did not mean that I wanted to easily take on that identity to build my field relationship.

Whenever possible and relevant, I highlighted my personal histories as someone from Taiwan, instead of China, with great interest in learning students' own cultures and their lived experiences of living in two or more cultures in the U.S. I resorted to my prior life experiences to connect with students in ways that revealed much of my personal information with the hope to establish better relationship with them (c.f., Foley and Valenzuela, 2005). With students of Chinese heritage, I talked about different varieties of Chinese other than Mandarin that we used at home. With students of Indonesian heritage, the fact that my sister-in-law is an Indonesian and that I had attended Indonesian language class helped me build a more personal relationship with the students. My interests in local Indonesian restaurants also greatly facilitated my communication with Indonesian students. My trip to Angkor Wat in summer 2006 triggered much discussion among the Cambodian students, just as my experiences at Beyonce's concert did among African American girls. Although these seemingly culturally or linguistically static

experiences did help me open up conversations with the students to some extent, what turned out to be very influential in mediating my data collection and analyses were my age, pregnancy/gender, and country of origin, all of which did not stand alone but intersected with my racial, ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds.

Upon talking to the students, I found that students were very curious about my age and where I was in terms of my education. Most thought I was in college and some girls even thought I was in high school. Their perception of me as a young adult certainly worked to my advantage as many students seemed to feel comfortable joking around with me and challenging me. As my rapport with many students became closer, they asked me about my relationship with my parents, an issue that many middle schoolers had to face on a daily basis. Many Asian/Asian American students also probed into my growing up experience in Asian family. Some Asian heritage girls were interested in learning about how I got along with my brother and if I experienced different gender expectations at home.

While being a female helped connect me to many middle school Asian girls in my study, it was my growing belly that opened the door for me to more Asian boys and some African American students. I began my fieldwork when I was about three months pregnant and I was constantly haunted by the thoughts that students would distance themselves from me as my body changed and I would not be able to collect “enough” data due to my maternity leave. As my pregnant belly became more apparent, it became part of my interactions with students and teachers. Contrary to my anxieties, many students showed their interest in the baby’s gender, name, as well as my marital status (I

did not wear a ring as it is not part of my cultural practice) and what my schedule would be after the birth. When some Asian girls learned that I was expecting a baby girl and asked me if a baby girl is what I wanted or if I was okay with a baby girl, I realized that many girls' educational experiences could not be separated from their gendered experiences outside of the school.

During my second trimester of pregnancy, even a short conversation initiated by some boys with the attempt to confirm that I was pregnant served as a nice ice breaker. Those students with very young siblings gave me previews of terrible twos and told me about chores that they took on a daily basis to help the family function well. I was surprised to find out how thoughtful students were in their interactions when I was present. Students often reminded one another of not running in the hall way or stairs, and they made more room for me as I walked around the tables to observe. In the student interviews, many students told me that they wanted to be pediatricians in the future and my baby could be their future patient.

In terms of my field relationship with the teachers, and staff, my pregnancy was greeted with much support and interest. During the course of my study at PCCS, more than six female teachers were pregnant or had just given birth to babies and through various conversations about babies, usually proactively initiated by expecting teachers or teachers of babies, I was able to make more contact with teachers on other floors. Most notably, I was able to learn how teachers perceived PCCS as a school that they would send their own children when they became older and how they compared PCCS with other urban or suburban schools in the area.

In the end, my own pregnancy elicited unique information that I might not have obtained. Although I did have to grapple with “missing” data during my six weeks of maternity leave in March and April when high stakes statewide proficiency tests were administered at PCCS, I take the stance with Reich (2003) who argues that her pregnancy, unlike how it is often perceived by academics as hurdles to academic success, opened up possibility in the field site because it not only facilitated her rapport with her participants, who were mothers themselves but also revealed different agents’ normative and non-normative understandings of reproduction. Similar to Reich’s case, my pregnancy also became an important source of data that allowed me to better understand how students and teachers responded to new members in their families and communities, as well as what visions they held for the next generations. As I reflect upon my data collection experience, I realize that I did not need to moan about “missing data” during my maternity leave but could possibly have had a more positive identification with my pregnancy during the field work because it did help me collect different data and get access to different people in ways that I was not able to foresee.

My country of origin also had an impact on how and what teachers and students talked to me. As mentioned earlier, many students and teachers originally misrecognized me as Mainland Chinese probably because of the common and yet often false connection between language and ethnicity or nationality. While I speak Mandarin Chinese and volunteered in Mandarin classes, I do not identify myself with China or Chinese and in occasions when teachers or students’ talking indicated that they mistook me as Chinese, I often made extra efforts to tell them that I am actually not Chinese, but Taiwanese.



Different people reacted differently to my statement, and I included their responses and interpretations of my identity as data to see how my right and decision to identify with my own country and culture were welcomed, challenged, or silenced by different students and teachers at this school with a strong social justice mission. Even though the school taught simplified Chinese, I jotted down Mandarin utterances that I heard in traditional Chinese characters for reasons of convenience. I grew up learning traditional characters in Taiwan and thus am adept at transcribing in traditional characters. Since my data were predominately spoken Mandarin, the practice of note taking in traditional Chinese characters is faithful to capture the meaning of the utterances. In presenting the data in my dissertation, I decide to keep the notation in traditional Chinese with English translation, which is sufficient to help readers understand utterances in Mandarin.

#### **4.8 Record Keeping, Analysis and Writing**

A dialectical relationship between data collection and data analysis characterizes ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). During the process of writing field notes, I used the techniques of asides, commentaries and memos, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Both asides and commentaries are techniques of reflective writing detailing some specific event described in a field note, with the former rather brief and the latter more elaborated. On the other hand, in-process memos serve broader functions of addressing incidences across field notes, highlighting practical and methodological concerns, or proposing tentative interpretations developed from earlier readings of field notes. To facilitate my reading and analysis of the field notes, I always

printed out the field notes right after I finished typing them on the computer. I then wrote asides and commentaries by hand on the hard copies of the field notes and went back to computer to type new concerns that arouse from my reading of the field notes, ranging from practical ones such as which student or teacher to interview in the following days to methodological ones such as how to improve my interviewing skills with middle schoolers.

To analyze my data, an iterative process between coding and memoing (i.e., open coding, initial memos, focused coding, and integrative memos, see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) helped me pursue insiders' meanings. Initial coding and memoing took place throughout my time at the field site as well as after my fieldwork. I first read all field notes in detail and tried to openly identify any possible themes and concepts emerging from the data. At this point in the analysis, I utilized the organizational qualitative research software, Atlas-TI, to code my data. The codes were rather general in the beginning, but they gradually became more specific and focused as I developed a better understanding of the themes. Meanwhile, I also looked for themes of immediate relevance to my analysis; namely: students and teachers' agentive roles, students' multiple identities, lived experiences, social network and understanding of their realities, as well as ecology of language.

When preparing to write the chapters of my dissertation, I went through all of the excerpts and codes relevant to a particular theme or group of themes from Atlas-TI and pondered upon what needed to be included in the actual write-up. The decisions were often driven by the aim to provide a holistic and yet dynamic view of teaching and

learning at PCCS. The selected excerpts then became the basis for me to draft sections, which eventually coalesced into chapters. In citing my field notes and interview data, I identified the sources as one of the following: field notes, recorded interviews, paraphrased quotes from field notes, and direct quotes from field notes. The latter two were based on Groff's (2010) dissertation, in which she defines paraphrased quotes as quotes written in the best memory capacity of the researcher to represent the voice of the speakers, while direct quotes include quotes from recorded interviews and quotes written word-for-word in the researcher's field notes (2010, p.117). I adopted Groff's distinctions between direct and paraphrased quotes when citing the quotes from my field notes.

My research is fundamentally related to the notion of empowerment, which according to Cameron et al. (1992) involves maintaining dialogues with the participants, valuing their agendas, and sharing research findings and academic knowledge. I made effort to incorporate these principles both during and after my fieldwork. When I started to analyze my data and write my dissertation, I still made myself available for Mandarin-English translation and ESL/Mandarin tutoring at PCCS. In addition, during the writing process, I frequently referred back to my research questions and attempted to write in ways that explain how different school agents defined, contested, or reacted to the school's visions and policies as they were circulated and enacted within the PCCS context. My best attempt at prioritizing the local in my writing is manifested in choices of themes to include in this dissertation. Chapter 6 is dedicated to PCCS students' interracial/interethnic friendships because of PCCS teachers' great interest in learning more about their students' social networks. However, this chapter turns out to be the most

challenging chapter for me to write. For one thing, students' social relationships were not among the topics I proposed to do research on and as a result, my eyes were not as keen on how students socialized with one another as on teaching and learning at PCCS during the first few months of data collection. For another, I had difficulty making sense of some students' racially troublesome comments at this progressive school for a very long time, struggling about how I could present the data without making the students sound as if they uncritically ascribed to racial/ethnic stereotypes or making PCCS look as if it were at fault with failing to engage students with critical issues on race and ethnicity.

As I was determined not to provide simple explanations for complex social phenomena, I made much effort to consult with colleagues and PCCS teachers for their insights on parts of my data on students' interracial/interethnic friendships. The questions they raised about my data and their multiple interpretations of the data helped me tremendously before I finally wrote down my interpretations in this dissertation. Coupled with my reading of prior research, which had been very little to begin with, and an iterative process between coding and memoing (c.f., Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), I aim to present a holistic and complex picture of students' social lives at PCCS in ways that do not denigrate any particular student and teacher, or groups of student, but show the various ways that PCCS students negotiated their social realities as students from minoritized backgrounds in an urban school.

## **5. TEACHING AND LEARNING AT PCCS**

### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter examines teaching and learning at PCCS to better contextualize the type of education PCCS students receive in different classes. The analyses provided in this chapter serve as the foundation for understanding PCCS students' educational experiences in this socially engaging school. Special attention is given to how PCCS teachers and staff react to diversity among students as well as how and what students are talked to and talked about inside PCCS. I conclude this chapter with some challenges that PCCS faces when teachers are determined to maintain high quality education for all of their students.

### **5.2 A General Look at PCCS**

Located in the northern part of the local Chinatown, PCCS is only a block away from a busy express highway. Surrounded by an auto shop to the east, a huge food resale store to the south, and a construction company to the west, PCCS is easily overlooked if one does not notice the two Chinese lion stone statues in front of the gate. A four-story building is where the majority of teaching and learning at PCCS takes place and a playground with a concrete floor roughly two times larger than the area of the building is where students hang out during the recess or physical education classes when the weather permits. When parents and visitors arrive at the building, they are likely to see several bulletin boards, including the Students of the Month board with headshots of students who celebrate their birthdays in that particular month. A glimpse of students' photos and

their names confirms that the majority of PCCS students are students of color and from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Since all the classrooms and administration offices are located on the second floor and above, students and visitors take the stairs to the upper floors. All parents and visitors need to sign in first at the reception desk on the second floor where they encounter two administrative staff who are proficient in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. Behind the wall of this public space hang two Keystone Achievement Awards from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, demonstrating that PCCS made Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years since the 2008-2009 school year (i.e., since the third school year after its establishment). This is also the space where PCCS displays school-wide or district-wide educational information, often available in English, simplified or traditional Chinese, Spanish, and Indonesian, for parents waiting to pick up their children. It is common to see parents linger around this space and hear them chat with one another in different languages.

Drawing from my observations inside and outside of the classrooms, my reading of relevant school documents, and formal and informal interviews with teachers and students, I now turn to an analysis of PCCS' unique teaching. Four themes that emerge from my analyses are: 1) cultural diversity as a tool for learning, 2) embracing linguistic diversity, 3) attending to students' racialized experiences, and 4) a focus on social justice. It should be noted that I also draw from the ample information from numerous bulletin boards inside of the building presenting a wide range of topics throughout the semesters. Almost every single wall around the school is used as a bulletin board and is updated

frequently. Since students have to travel around the building to get to different classes, they often wait in line outside of the classroom before they are allowed to enter. As a result, they end up reading what was put on the bulletin boards during their transition or wait time.

When I asked students and teachers why they thought PCCS was special, many did not even think for a second before they cited the diversity of all the students and teachers. As mentioned in the last chapter, PCCS students come from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Unlike many schools with teachers that do not reflect students' demographics, PCCS teachers are as diverse as the student population that they served. A significant number of the PCCS teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators are people of color, children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. Together they represent complex and rich experiences as minoritized individuals in the U.S. educational system, be they ESL students, refugees, members of the LGBT community, or working-class students from various geographical regions, including the U.S., China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, and Puerto Rico. Just as Asians comprise the largest racial group among the students, it is also the case among the teachers. In describing what was unique about PCCS, a teacher explained, "It's the only majority Asian public school, not just the student population but the employees. We've much higher [percentage of population] in terms of the grown-ups being Asian" (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011).

The diversity among PCCS teachers is impressive because many U.S. schools do not have teachers that reflect the demographic make-up as well as linguistic and

racialized experiences of their student body (Lee, 1996, 2005; Quach, Jo, & Urrieta, 2009, Valenzuela, 1999). Even for some schools that hire people of color to work with their students, they tend to be paraprofessionals who have little interaction with students and thus offer limited support to the students (Lee, 2005). However, here at PCCS, many content teachers are people of color. The first principal/CEO was an Asian American woman and the Vice CEO is an African American woman.

All adults in PCCS, regardless of their positions, are addressed as “Teacher” by both students and other adults at school because every adult is perceived as knowing important things that students could take time to learn from. Following PCCS’ practice, I use the term “teachers” to loosely refer to both teachers and administrators working at PCCS.

### **5.3 Cultural Diversity as a Tool for Learning**

Talking about PCCS teaching has to start with talking about how PCCS views different cultures students bring to the school. After all, the original name of PCCS implies that the school views all children as cultural treasures. This section focuses on how different cultures are presented in the school curriculum and in everyday conversations on diversity. I categorize PCCS’ teaching of cultures into learning traditional cultures and learning everyday cultures.

#### **5.3.1 Learning traditional cultures**

One important part of the PCCS curriculum is teaching folk and traditional arts found within the students’ own and neighboring communities. Folk art is defined as



collective art that is practiced for the needs and interests of the community and it exists because the community members have decided that it is important to hold on to and pass on from one generation to the next (Wei, 2007, p.230). Folk art is not just something from the old times but something that people do out of love for their community. In this sense, both graffiti and hip hop, forms of self-expression that are traditionally perceived as less “valuable” than watercolor painting or classical music, are considered as folk art. PCCS students learn folk arts in the classrooms, after-school programs, and residencies. PCCS offers many electives that meet every Wednesday and Friday for 45 minutes each time and after-school programs that students can voluntarily join. Many of the electives and after-school programs are culturally-based, including Dan Tranh (a Vietnamese musical instrument), Chinese lion dance, Chinese fan and ribbon dancing, Chinese chess, Batik (a painting and dyeing technique important to Indonesian culture), Hip Hop dance, braiding, African drum and dance; many of these classes are taught by the PCCS faculty or members from the neighboring communities. Students are able to enroll in one elective every 12 weeks based on their preferences. Since the electives are theme-based instead of age-based, students of different grades learn about their own cultures or their friends’ cultures with community art masters.

Throughout the semester, PCCS also hosts artists in residency, often for a few weeks at a time, allowing students to interact with artists in different ways. Resident artists visit different classes and might work closely or loosely with the content teachers on certain units. Students can also watch the artists work in an open space at school. Among the resident artists are a Tibetan Mandala Sand painter, an African American

storyteller, a Liberian singer and dancer, and a Guinean dancer, to name just a few. It is also common to see these artists' work and short autobiographies displayed on the bulletin boards around the hall. It should be noted that many of these artists speak English as a second language and do not have Anglicized names. However, they are all thought of very highly by the PCCS community and are also addressed as "Teacher".

All PCCS students have one session of music and one session of art class every week, and both teachers draw teaching materials from students' communities. In the Music class, students sing folk songs from representative cultures in their own communities (e.g., African American spirituals like "I Got Shoes", "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" or a Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower") and sometimes they also sing the songs in their original languages (e.g., Indonesian, or Vietnamese songs).

In a series of Art classes that I observed for seventh graders, the art teacher, Teacher Eddie, implemented a proverb documentation project that required that students go back to their communities and interview an adult for proverbs, for which the students needed to provide illustrations. He started the unit by discussing proverbs as a genre common to many folk speech communities, the universality and peculiarity of proverbs, and the metaphoric and symbolic meanings imbedded in proverbs. Students then were trained to conduct interviews and were sent back to their communities to document proverbs. The proverbs brought by the students, if not in English, were first translated into English and then grouped by region or culture of origin, including Philadelphian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, African American, European, to highlight their universality, peculiarity, histories and contexts. After guided analysis of different

proverbs, students then made decisions on how to visually present their proverbs in ways that would make sense to viewers from different lived experiences and histories. Students received feedback from peers and Teacher Eddie on their sketches, which included different art features, such as scale and composition, use of multiple images, and montage structures. Some students chose to present the proverbs literally while others did so symbolically or interpretatively. This project, according to Teacher Eddie, engaged students in developing visual literacy.

Through bringing students' cultures into the school's official curriculum, PCCS positions students' heritage cultures and communities as "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) that have much to offer to all PCCS students. Unlike schools that only engage students in learning different cultures periodically and simplistically in multicultural events or ethnic months that end up perpetuating ethnic stereotypes (Lee, 2005, Nieto, 2000), PCCS makes learning about cultural diversity in the students' communities a central part of school curriculum. Such a pedagogical focus creates a learning environment where many students find their cultures and a sense of who they are validated. An overwhelmingly large number of seventh and eighth graders attributed their positive schooling experience at PCCS to the school's respect for students' heritage cultures and the opportunity to learn about different cultures.

In a group interview on educational experiences at PCCS, two African American seventh graders started out by commenting about their teachers.

Ming: So what do you like most about being here?

Romy: They [the teachers] accept our culture and they respect who you are and they don't make fun of who you are.

Levon: Yeah, I like how they are really cultural and accept our culture for who we are.  
(Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

Both Romy and Levon had attended public schools where, in their own words, teachers there did not like them and therefore they got into trouble often. What made their experiences at PCCS different and positive is related to how teachers here perceive students' cultures-not only do teachers accept students' cultures, but they also respect them. It also became clear that both Romy and Levon equated validation of their cultures as validation of their own beings.

In fact, when talking about their educational experiences at PCCS, many PCCS students referenced their time in other public schools that did not seem to respond to students' cultures well. Nick, a Vietnamese American 7<sup>th</sup> grader explained,

I think it's [PCCS] better than my old school because the old school they didn't really respect your culture. But here they try and show like a variety of different cultures because they have African dance and Dan Tranh and stuff. It's a mix of different things. (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011)

Like other immigrant students, Nick had attended inner city public schools where "the educational climate is often demoralized" to minority students (Hirschman, 2001, p. 317) before he enrolled in PCCS. In talking about their current experiences at PCCS, Romy, Levon, and Nick, though they attended different urban public schools, all talked about feeling a sense of isolation and alienation in their previous schools. Many studies have revealed that schools tend to celebrate and privilege white middle-class cultures in their curricula and extracurricular activities; thus students who are not from this background

do not feel welcomed at school, and some even develop distrustful feelings toward teachers or oppositional orientations to schooling (Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1992; Reyes, 2006; Valdés, 1996).

The theme of respectful teachers at PCCS is central to many students' narratives about their learning at PCCS. Below Valerie, a Cambodian American student, explained what being a respectful teacher meant in the context of PCCS.

I like the teachers. They are very respectful. I like they don't have favoritism and like they treat everybody equally, even if that student, one specific one, is disrespectful constantly. (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011)

Earlier, Nick cited PCCS' teaching of students' cultures, such as African dance and Dan Tranh as an example of its respect for different cultures. Here Valerie illustrated PCCS teachers' respect for students in terms of their interactions with the students. According to Valerie, PCCS teachers were respectful because they did not privilege any way of being, knowing, and doing in their everyday interactions.

Teaching and learning folk arts and students' cultural traditions seem to not only confirm minority students' sense of selves, but this integral part of PCCS also helps students build interest in and love for different cultures, as evident in the following quote by a Chinese American student.

I like [that] the school has different kinds of teachers, all from different countries, different ethnic backgrounds, and how the school is multilingual and you get to know many cultures, not just one culture. (Recorded interview, 06.02.2011)

As one PCCS founder states, teaching different cultures is not about "let me make you feel good about yourself", but about helping students understand the way the rest of the world thinks so they could become a better human being and world citizen (Wei, 2007,

p.240). Ginsberg (2012), who writes about PCCS' folk art curriculum, notes that engaging students in learning their and others' folk arts through active doing and making is important because it moves beyond simplistic constructions of identity based only on one's ethnicity or race. Instead, it helps students start to consider new categories of belonging like "*beginners vs. expert, comfortable vs. uneasy, closeness vs. distance* (emphasis original, p. 67)." Indeed, one of the best Chinese acrobatics players was not a Chinese student, but a Vietnamese boy who spent much time practicing it even after the class. Many of those who persisted in this class instead of choosing other electives were African American students. Stepping, with its root in African and African American traditions, was one of the most popular electives among all the students.

### **5.3.2 Learning everyday cultures**

PCCS teachers are not only attentive to traditional cultures in the students' and neighboring communities but also to everyday practices of their students. In other words, PCCS adopts a flexible approach to cultures that seeks to understand how new practices and knowledge are originated in response to new social and economic changes. PCCS teachers are very interested in learning about students' lives outside of school and how their lived experiences influence their learning. PCCS teachers were provided with ample opportunities and tools with which to delve into the impact of culture in everyday life and in the classrooms during professional development days. For instance, outside speakers guided PCCS teachers to reflect how they hosted their guests at home. Through talking about questions like how guests are made welcome, if guests help with work, if guests can go anywhere in the home, PCCS reflected upon how visiting customs were mediated

by multiple factors, not limited to one's ethnic or cultural backgrounds. PCCS teachers also learned how to conduct ethnographic studies that could give them insight into cultures of a specific group.

On another professional development day, a group of teachers co-facilitated a "Cultural Workshop" during which they shared with all PCCS teachers about what they had learned from their ethnographic studies of students' cultures: they drew from data from home visits, parent interviews, ESL students' journals, and media reports to illustrate how parenting varied across the PCCS community and how culture affected PCCS students' learning in the classrooms. Much time was spent on satellite parenting (Bohr & Tse, 2009), referring to the practice of immigrant parents sending their child back to their country of origin to be raised by other extended family members. A growing number of PCCS students, particularly those from recently-immigrated Fujianese families from China, were products of short-term or long-term satellite parenting. Through a closer look at these parents' decisions, coupled with scholarly discussions on this topic, PCCS teachers learned that some Chinese parents did not view this practice as negatively as the U.S. mainstream media or educators did. Returnee students' journals from the ESL class further provided another window for PCCS teachers to understand these students' strengths and struggles. One Chinese American teacher told the rest of the teachers that she spent much of her childhood years with her grandparents in China and she believed this experience had nurtured her independence and helped maintain her proficiency in her heritage language, Cantonese. As one facilitator noted, "it [satellite parenting] is not bad parenting; it's just different parenting (Direct quotes from field notes, 05.13.2011). With

a better understanding of Chinese families' strategic parenting in response to their busy working schedules in the U.S. and to the desire to maintain intergenerational relationships, this Cultural Workshop led to active discussions about the next steps for the PCCS community.

#### **5.4 Embracing Linguistic Diversity**

Discussions of PCCS' orientations to cultural diversity cannot be separated from the discussions of how linguistic diversity is perceived by PCCS because languages and cultures are often juxtaposed side by side in the PCCS community. For example, the school pledge that all students have to recite every morning explicitly states that all people have a right to use their own languages and honor their own cultures. In a school where 25% of its students are receiving or have previously received ESL service, it becomes necessary to examine how PCCS responds to linguistic diversity among its students. My analysis indicates that multilingualism is regarded as a norm and an asset and being an ESL student at PCCS is perceived to be something cool by some students.

##### **5.4.1 Multilingualism as a Norm and an Asset**

It is common for me to hear students from the same home language background speaking with one another in their home language, especially among the lower grades. Since there are three newcomers in the seventh and eighth grade, who received their primary education in China, I often hear them speaking Mandarin among themselves or with other students proficient in Mandarin in various school spaces. I also documented



some tokens of Fujianese, Cantonese, Indonesian, Spanish, and some Khmer spoken among students as well as between teachers and students.

PCCS makes much effort to ensure active communication with the school and the families who speak a wide range of languages. PCCS has multilingual staff and volunteers that they can draw upon to offer translation and interpretation services in major school events as well as documents that are sent back home. PCCS also spends much money purchasing wireless interpretation language equipment that makes multiple language interpretation possible in school events that involve parents. PCCS' accommodation of speakers of different languages in public spaces suggests its "language-as-rights" orientation (cf., Ruiz, 1984), as stated in the school pledge.

There are many occasions where PCCS adopts a "language-as-resource" orientation (cf., Ruiz, 1984, 2010) to the multiple languages in daily use in the students' communities. PCCS students are encouraged to maintain and develop knowledge in their heritage languages. One huge bulletin board outside of the wall of an ESL classroom once displayed information about the benefits of speaking two languages. Teachers who put the information together on the board drew from various sources, including a scientific paper as reported in the newsletter, articles from the Center for Applied Linguistics, and excerpts from interviews to demonstrate that bilingualism was beneficial for individuals and society as a whole. Specific details included how people who learned to speak two languages at younger ages developed denser gray matter in their brains, giving them an advantage in various abilities and skills, and how speaking more than one language provided individuals with access to different cultures and broader employment

opportunities. The bulletin board also mentioned how societies that maintained a multilingual force were better able to attract more business, and residents were more likely to lead a self-fulfilling life than societies that oppressed other linguistic minority groups. The bulletin board had multilingual handouts for parents on specific questions that they could ask their children about the books they were reading. The handout made a strong point that all PCCS students should be reading at home every night for 20-30 minutes and that the best way to become a better reader was to read as much as possible in *any* language. Questions were translated into different languages to help non-English-speaking parents engage their children with literacy (Field notes, 09.30.2010).

PCCS students have constant contact with cultural and linguistic diversity inside and outside of the classroom. As mentioned earlier, many resident artists or cultural elective teachers speak English as a second language. To help the rest of the class comprehend the elective teachers, some PCCS students who speak the native languages of the teachers often translate the instructions to English. In fact, students' abilities to move between and among two or more linguistic worlds are highly appreciated by PCCS teachers. In an interview with Teacher Diana, the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, she talked about her admiration of many of her students who acquired English as an additional knowledge in a short period of time. She shared with me an instance in which she assisted her eighth graders in improving their high school application essays. In one class, Teacher Diana gave some prompts to help students rethink their strengths because she thought they could have done a better job in highlighting them in the essays. She did a quick survey among her students to figure out how many of them did not speak English

two years ago, three years ago, four years, and five years ago. As the number of years went up, more hands were raised in the air. She then asked how many of her eighth graders helped translate at home for their parents, and it turned out many students had that experience. She then stressed that it was an amazing accomplishment because she did not think she could ever pick up Chinese quickly and learn new things in that language if she went to China. She encouraged students to write about their experiences because high schools were looking for kids who worked hard and were resilient (Field notes, 04.12.2011).

When PCCS students step out of the classrooms, they often encounter various bulletin boards that perceived multilingualism positively, like the one on the benefits of bilingualism outside of the ESL classrooms and the one on the expertise of resident artists. When students participate in multicultural school events, such as the Peace or Lunar New Year concerts, PCCS students receive much praise for not only their ability to appreciate songs from different cultures, but also their ability to sing songs in different languages. During one of the biggest school events, the Lunar New Year celebration concert, two bilingual eighth graders provided Khmer and Mandarin translation respectively on the stage, followed by an African American girl who introduced the program and performers in English (Field notes, 02.03.2011).

#### **5.4.2 Cool to be an ESL student**

One prime place to examine PCCS' orientations to linguistic diversity is in its ESL program because doing so can reveal how PCCS perceives students' diverse home

and/or first languages in developing proficiency in English. As mentioned earlier, more than one-fourth to one-third of PCCS students receive ESL services. Many of the seventh and eighth graders in my study are ESL students when they were in younger grades. Unlike many ESL programs that were disconnected and isolated from the mainstream classes (Valdés, 2001), PCCS has a well-established ESL program that coordinates closely with content teachers. Due to the large number of ESL students, there are five ESL teachers, who not only provide ESL students with pull-out instruction in ESL classrooms, but also follow ESL students to their content classrooms to offer push-in instruction. According to the ESL teachers, since many students are former ESL students, they could also benefit from teaching practices that are proven helpful for ESL students, such as teaching new vocabulary in context (Nassaji, 2003) and modeling (Herrell, 1999). As a result, ESL teachers and content teachers co-teach the class frequently, which gives ESL teachers an equally important and visible role among the PCCS students, something that is not necessarily the case for many other schools. Due to highly collaborative relations between ESL teachers and the content teachers, the content teachers also have good knowledge of their ESL students' progress.

The two ESL classrooms that I often helped with were filled with bilingual books and bilingual dictionaries. Since a large number of the ESL students in the upper grades had received their primary education in China and thus developed some Chinese literacy before they came to the U.S., many comic books and pre-teen books are in simplified Chinese. During independent reading time, many ESL students from China pick out these books and read them silently in their seats. Around the walls of the ESL classrooms, one

could easily find vocabulary or phrases presented in English alongside another language, usually simplified Chinese and sometimes Spanish, to assist ESL students' understanding.

Although ESL teachers might not be proficient in Mandarin Chinese or Spanish, they often rely on Google translation to provide key vocabulary and phrases in students' first languages. It is worth mentioning that the presentation of Chinese characters does not simply serve as a comprehension aid for these students to learn English, but it become a review device for them to maintain their Chinese literacy skills to some extent. Several older ESL students from China often practiced character writing and reading when they saw the ESL teachers put up the Chinese-English bilingual vocabulary cards. They also talked about how well (or poorly) the Chinese Google translation captured the essence of the vocabulary. Interestingly, many also lamented how many Chinese characters they had forgotten since they had arrived in the U.S because they were reading and writing in Chinese far less than before. The availability of bilingual books, bilingual vocabulary cards, coupled with a supportive language learning environment seems to have enabled PCCS' ESL students, particularly those with some Chinese literacy, to develop their English proficiency without sacrificing their first languages and their identities (Field notes, 10.7.2010).

In fact, being an ESL student at PCCS is sometimes perceived as something "cool." Below, ESL Teacher Mizuki, who works predominately with fifth and sixth graders, talked about what it meant to be an ESL student at PCCS.

Mizuki: It's like cool, you know? It's like cool to be pulled out. Cool to hang out with an ESL teacher.

Ming: Right.

Mizuki: And you know, we have some of the students, especially Asian students who transfer from other schools because they were bullied or picked on for their ESL status and their language needs. And like this year, for example, a newcomer in fifth grade, and you know, he's still developing his language skills. And you would think that he'd get picked on, but he's like actually popular. And people, like other kids think he's cool, and that's not something you would see in a typical public school. (Recorded interview, 06.21.2011)

It is quite true that PCCS students do not associate ESL status with the lack of ability in English. In contrast, many view ESL students as individuals who are able to maintain their home language and develop English proficiency at the same time. When Abby, a seventh grader of Indonesian heritage, and her Cambodian friend, Eve, shared with me how fun it was to talk in their own home languages with friends from the same linguistic backgrounds, I asked them how they would raise their children in the future in terms of their language choice. Abby and Eve's responses reflect their positive identification with ESL status at PCCS. It should be noted that since both of them are former ESL students, their use of English sometimes might not mirror standard English

Ming: So when you raise your kids, would you talk to them in your own language or in English?

Abby: I forgot my Bali language. When I was little, I go to school there (Bali) in kindergarten, but then I forgot it. But I still remember my Indonesian. I think Indonesian is difficult because the pronunciation is different from English. Wait. What's your question again? I forget it.

Ming: I mean I wonder what language you would talk to your kids at home.

Abby: I will try to teach them my language first because you can forget your own language and then I will tell them about English. I might put them at a school that has programs for non-English speakers, like Toni. They might study like that so we might just stick with our language first at home and then later on, they learn English at school.

Ming: What's about Toni? Why did you mention her?

Eve: Toni went to ESL last year and now she knows a lot more English.

Abby: Yes. So I am going to put them at ESL to be more better at English. So they can talk to their friends and not be scared to say it. Just like Toni.

Ming: Because you see her make much progress in English and you feel it's possible for your kids to be bilingual, too? Is this what you mean?

Abby: Yeah, at least two languages. One [is] their own language and two is the one that they live in. Coz they can't just say no English if they live here. Coz you are going to struggle if you know no English and most people here speak English.

Ming: What's your thought on this, Eve?

Eve: I agree with her. I will teach them Cambodian first. (Recorded interview, 2.16.2011)

Both Abby and Eve attended the same homeroom class with Toni, a newcomer student from China (Toni is her self-picked English name). Abby was assigned to sit with Toni at the same table during science class and thus had much interaction with her. Abby witnessed the progress Toni had made in her English proficiency in the past year, and she associated Toni's progress with the ESL program that she attended at PCCS. Seeing Toni being able to develop English proficiency in a short period of time without losing fluency in her first language made Abby and Eve feel that being bilingual or multilingual was a viable option for her imaginary children. It seems that Toni, the product of the ESL program at PCCS, helps students from non-English speaking households re-envision a future where they could bring up their children bilingually, and where children's bilingual abilities are important assets for their lives in the U.S.

### **5.5 Attending to Students' Racialized Experiences**

Students at PCCS are predominately students of color from working class backgrounds who are subject to racism or other forms of discrimination in their daily lives. As mentioned earlier, PCCS teachers strive to account for their students' lived experiences in their teaching. The various ways that PCCS teachers approach the issues of race and racism reflect their understanding of and concerns about how racism and

discourses of race have a huge impact on the opportunities and identities of students of color in U.S. schools. This is a school that is not afraid of talking about race or racism. In fact, PCCS teachers often bring race into their teaching as well as their conversations with students.

In response to the Eurocentric U.S. mainstream curriculum that fails to validate identities and voices of students from non-dominant groups (Bank, 2010; Lee, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999), PCCS makes a concerted effort to teach history or social events from a more critical stance that highlighted the experiences of people of color. For example, in an elective called Leadership, the teacher spent lengthy time discussing similarities and differences between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in their philosophies and tactics as well as various personal, social, and political factors that influenced their leadership (Field notes, 12.06.2012). Many books that Teacher Diana chose for her seventh and eighth graders' independent reading at ELA were written by people of color who talked about their racialized experiences in the U.S. (Field notes, 01.10.2011).

The Social Studies teacher, Teacher Scott, also often leads students to interrogate the issue of race in relation to class in some U.S. historical events. For instance, when he taught about the Pennsylvania Line Mutiny during the war with the British, he linked this historical event to students' lives. First, students learned about deplorable conditions for the army and a lack of concern on the part of Continental Congress, which led to mutiny against the Congress that had not paid the soldiers in months. After that, Teacher Scott turned the focus to the present and asked students which part of Philadelphia the Army went to recruit high school students. He answered the question himself and told the



students that they recruit kids from north Philly, west Philly and south Philly where a large number of City's poor blacks and Asians reside; they recruit kids from working families by providing three meals to them. Teacher Scott wanted students to know that "it's not coincidence where they recruit their army" and "Veterans in this country have difficulty getting their money" (Paraphrased quotes from field notes, 10.6.2010). One African American girl raised her hand to share the story that her family member got annoyed about fighting for veteran paychecks. Teacher Scott acknowledged her response and added,

Throughout the history of this country, soldiers have been taken advantage of. It's not the wealthy kids that are recruited, but the poor kids. How to recruit them? By promising them something young people don't have. This is still true at this moment. Will Bush's daughter or Obama's daughter serve in the army? Even if they do, they will serve as officer not foot soldiers. (Direct quotes from field notes, 10.6.2010)

At other times, Teacher Scott would push students to reflect upon their stereotypes towards people of different races. During one class lesson on cyber bullying, Teacher Scott purposely asked the students to see if they saw any racial or ethnic pattern among people who were more likely to do cyber bullying. He offered categories like Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian for students to think about, but he also encouraged students to further break down any of them to Chinese, Southeast Asian, Mexican, or Puerto Rican in their discussions. One Southeast Asian boy cited his own experience with another Asian boy who wrote something nasty on his Facebook wall to argue that Asians seemed to do more cyber bullying than other groups. Another African American boy referred to his friend who received cyber harassment after breaking up with her African American boyfriend to show that African Americans did a lot of cyber

bullying as well. When more students joined the discussions, Teacher Scott started to question their assumptions and stances. The conversations gradually headed to the direction where the majority of students did not think it was appropriate to claim that cyber bullying was race- or ethnicity-related based on their limited sample (Field notes, 01.25.2011).

Teacher Scott's teaching mirrors a general teaching practice that I observed among many other PCCS teachers, that is, to avoid the lumping effect based on racial or other stereotypes that might dismiss individual differences and to engage students in talking about counter examples. Such a teaching practice is not simply realized in teachers' pre-designed lesson plans, but also in their conversations or interactions with students. For instance, in a casual conversation about mutual funds in one eighth grade ELA class, an African American student asked Teacher Diana, "You own lots of them, right?" (Paraphrased quotes from field notes, 06.22.2011). Teacher Diana then took some time to delve into where this student's assumption came from, and it turned out that many of her African American and Asian American students had the misconception that she must be rich because she was white. Students' conflation of race and class mirrors a broader racial, often dichotomous, discourse that associates whiteness with economic self-sufficiency and blackness with welfare dependency (Feagin, 2000). In other words, this racial discourse perceives whiteness and middle class-ness as synonymous and blackness and poverty as synonymous. Coming from a working-class background, Teacher Diana went through a lot of economic struggles and by talking about her own experiences with her students, Teacher Diana gave students a counter example that

helped them become more reflective about their presumed notions about racial and class divisions in the U.S. (Field notes, 04.12.2011).

In one Mandarin foreign language class for seventh graders on the topic of nationalities, students learned how to say different countries in the world in Mandarin. Teacher Chelsea then created an activity for students to freely choose their own nationalities when asked where they were from. She walked around the class to verbally elicit individual student's answers. When one student responded to her question, "I am a Mexican," another boy immediately whispered, "This is racist." Since the comment was not audible to many other students, and Teacher Chelsea did not understand why it was a racist comment, she chose not to do anything at that moment. But when she figured out why the boy might have thought that way, she brought up this issue in the following class. She made it clear to the students that the sentence itself was not racist given the context of the activity, but it would be inappropriate if people referred to all Latinos as Mexicans, or all Asians as Chinese. Even though the issue discussed here is not directly related to race or racism, as claimed by this particular student, this case indicates that PCCS students have developed heightened consciousness about stereotypes and lumping effects that might work to erase individual differences (Field notes, 10.28.2010).

PCCS' effort to systematically engage students in thinking about race and racism was realized in the Courageous Conversations elective, which centered on teaching and learning about how people's perceived notions about race influenced what one can, or cannot accomplish (Field notes, 01.12.2011; 01.19.2011). The class, which enrolled students from fifth to eighth graders, was taught by an Asian American kindergarten

teacher, Teacher Amy, who was adept at guiding students to learn about these issues through activities. For example, Teacher Amy implemented a modified version of Jane Elliot's Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes exercise that labeled students as inferior or superior based solely on the color of their eyes and gave them a lesson on discrimination. She randomly assigned students to either the "tall group" or the "short group" and she gave contrasting treatments to the two groups. Teacher Amy put the tall group at the corner of the classroom without explanation and whenever students from this group raised hands in attempt to answer her questions, she either ignored them or stated that she did not believe this group would know the answer. In contrast, she frequently praised the short group and let them play card games at their tables. After about five minutes, Teacher Amy asked the short group to clean up the table and invited all students to go back to their seats. She then put students into pairs and had students discuss the following questions before each pair shared their responses to the class:

- 1 How did it feel to be in the "short" group versus the "tall" group?
2. During the exercise, did you start to believe that what the teacher said is true?
3. How do you think this relates to racial bias?

Students' responses enabled us to better understand how they reacted to this activity.

Almost all students from both groups noted the negative feelings (e.g., feeling embarrassed, bad, down) that came with being in the tall group and some students talked about the privileges of being in the short group. While some started to believe what the teacher said about them (e.g., they could not do well), some also commented that not all people from the same group were good or bad, providing some evidence that PCCS students were aware of the danger of lumping people together based on predetermined

categories. In response to the third question, many students continued to discuss the lumping effect in their own words. They talked about how not all Asians were good at math and not all Black people were bad. Students used their own experiences to offer counter examples that challenged some widely-held racial stereotypes. While many students tended to talk about the racial biases that they knew of from a black-versus-white lens, Teacher Amy, whenever possible, sought to have students talk about Asian/Asian Americans' experiences. She made the statement, "Race is not just about black and white in the society" several times during the discussion (Field notes, 01.12.2011).

After the students' report, Teacher Amy then introduced students to Jane Elliot's original study by playing a video clip that included actual scenes from Elliot's classroom and explaining why the study was developed in its historical time. She stressed that she did not want the students to leave the classroom with much hatred for white people because "not all white people are bad." To close the class, she invited students to move beyond classroom to broader society and think about the role of media: how it often tells us who we are and what we are supposed to do, or to achieve. She briefly mentioned how girls were often portrayed as good at housekeeping (Field notes, 01.12.2011).

Although the Courageous Conversation elective had a focus on students' racialized experiences, it also drew students' attention to other social constructs, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class, and how they worked together to influence individuals' daily perceptions and behaviors. One activity that Teacher Amy designed asked students to come up with as many names as possible based on the categories that

she created: “People on TV,” “models, actors/actresses,” “super heroes,” “historical figures,” “American heroes,” “good guys,” and “bad guys.” After students put the names they wrote on the index cards up on the board according to the categories, she then asked them to re-arrange the names based on new sets of categories, including “African American,” “Asian,” “White,” “Latino,” “homosexual,” and “transgender.” When students were reorganizing the index cards, Teacher Amy told me that these students surprised her a lot. She originally thought that students would come up with much more Caucasian names, but they were in fact able to come up with many African American names (Field notes, 01.19.2011).

When the students were done with the task, Teacher Amy told the students that she was surprised to see the results because when she grew up, she thought that all the famous people were White. She credited PCCS for doing a good job in teaching about diversity, most likely meaning racial diversity in this context. She continued to comment on each new category and the names associated with it. She started with “African American” and noted that only three of the names that the students came up with (Martin Luther King, Jr., Barack Obama, Rosa Park) were not in the entertainment or sports industry. When it came to “Asian”, she commented that all of the four people were Chinese males who were either kungfu masters (Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Bruce Lee) or a basketball player (Yao Ming). This category had no representation of Southeast Asians. As for the “Latino” category, she brought students’ attention to the fact that all of the three names were singers or actresses (Jennifer Lopez, Eva Longoria, Selena Gomez). She further added that this was the fastest growing population in the U.S., and yet we

could only think of few ways to represent them. In terms of the “White” group, Teacher Amy thought it was the most diverse group. When Teacher Amy saw both “homosexual” and “trans-gender” categories had zero names, she asked students, “How do you feel when you don’t see yourselves represented in any media?” At the end of the class, Teacher Amy spent some time delving into the roles of Asians in the U.S. She asked students if they could think of anyone of Asian heritage who was an American hero. When students were not able to come up with any name, she further asked how they might feel if they didn’t see themselves represented in any media or books (Field notes, 01.19.2011).

Learning in a school climate that explicitly talks about race, PCCS students are understandably outspoken about race. With teachers’ attempts to bring Asian/Asian American into the race talk, Asian/Asian American students learn to see themselves as legitimate citizens in the U.S, instead of the “forever foreigner” stereotype that plagues many Asian/Asian American communities (Tuan, 1998). The following excerpt from a seventh grade Social Studies classroom observation shows how Asian/Asian American students pushed beyond the normative definition of Americanness to include Asianness in their peer interactions.

Teacher Scott announced the homework for tonight at end of the class. “Bring an artifact that you think reveals that America is an advanced country,” he said. One student quickly cried out “Apple”, followed by another boy who said “Cell phone.” Teacher Scott was not sure if they were allowed to bring both to the school so he told the students not to bring these two items. He encouraged the students to pretend that their artifacts were to be buried in a time capsule and future generations would know that USA was an advanced civilization if they opened the capsule. Teacher Scott asked students to surprise him tomorrow. Students got excited about what they could bring. As students were getting ready to leave the room for their Science class, an Asian American student Britt told

other students that he was going to bring his Buddha, referring to the Buddha jade necklace that he was wearing. A Cambodian American girl Darlene quickly said, “But he [Buddha] is not American.” Britt pulsed for a little bit and then responded, “He is an Asian American. Yes! He is an Asian American.” Students who heard that all laughed out, but nobody disagreed with him. (Field notes, 02.10. 2011)

Britt’s decision to bring his Buddha jade necklace shows his positive identification with his cultural and religious heritage, providing some evidence that PCCS had successfully fulfilled one of its missions, that is, to help students receive affirmation of their languages and cultures. Furthermore, in the context where students were asked to bring something that can represent America, Britt’s justification of Buddha as Asian American indicates that he perceived the legitimacy of Asian American culture in contemporary U.S. history. Lastly, Britt’s ability to redefine Buddha as Asian American demonstrates his flexible approach to identity construction: one could be both Asian and Asian American, depending on various factors, including the context, the interlocutors, and the individual’s will, to name just a few. At a time when many minority students are exposed to a demoralized educational climate that positions them as inferior participants in school, fostering the agency and ability to define a sense of who they are within the context of PCCS might provide them with different prospects as they enter the larger community and society.

## **5.6 A Focus on Social Justice**

*PCCS exists because people saw an unmet need and injustice and worked very hard to fix it. By becoming part of the PCCS family, you have also had an important part in changing our local world for the better. At class meetings we discussed big and small events that affected us, and shared ways we faced them. Be proud of that. And keep looking for ways, big and small to change the world around you, everyday.*



Teacher Diana, eighth grade Promotion Ceremony Speech (Field notes, 06.16.2011)

From the day students begin attending PCCS to the day they are “promoted” to high school, they receive messages on multiple occasions about their agentive role in shaping the history and the future. One important school event that helps students see individual and collective power in making history is Founders’ Day. Every year on March 9<sup>th</sup>, students learn with teachers, families, founders, activists, and community members about how and why PCCS came to be. Many of the school’s founders come to share stories about how seeing unfair treatments of minority students in public schools made them feel angry and made them think of making changes. PCCS founders faced many challenges in search of petitioners and allies, and a charter was finally won on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005 after years of dreaming, planning, and organizing. The messages sent to the students highlighted that history is always in the making, not necessarily by people with important titles or positions, but by a community of ordinary people working collectively to fight for and build something important. Students are further asked to reflect on things they could do, small or big, to make the PCCS community and beyond a better place. Through looking back and telling stories of times before PCCS, students also look forward to their roles in making PCCS histories that will be known to people who later join the PCCS community. As PCCS monthly newsletter wrote about Founders’ Day, “When we look at where we come from, we also define for ourselves who we are now (Direct quotes from PCCS’ Flyer, 03.18.2011).”

Students’ agentive roles in making social change are nurtured at PCCS on a regular basis. First and foremost, the funding organization, Asian American Social

Activist organization (AASA, a pseudonym), whose mission is to unite Asian American communities against oppression, has a high visibility at PCCS. When all students travel to the cafeteria for lunch, they often wait in line next to the wall that presents AASA's various political involvements in Philadelphia. Their accomplishments, in addition to funding PCCS, include fighting off the city's baseball stadium project in Chinatown in 2000 and a casino project in 2009, initiating a boycott and lawsuit against the school district for their failure to address anti-immigrant/anti-Asian violence at schools, and developing youth leadership projects and workshops. On AASA bulletin boards at PCCS, students learn about these historical struggles and success through multiple sources, including words of community members and AASA members as well as local media coverage of these events. They also see photos of PCCS students who went on the protests, confirming that students like themselves could make positive change in their community. As for those students who take the Courageous Conversation elective, they further learn about Children's Crusade as part of Birmingham Campaign in Alabama during American Civil Rights movements. By watching the clips that show students their ages who went on protests for better education, PCCS students also reflect upon issues related to segregation, social justice, and children's roles and participation in civic arenas.

PCCS' teaching about social justice not only focuses on "big" ways that students can change collectively or individually, but also "small" ways that students can practice every day. Middle schoolers always looked for ways they could help the school and the community in one middle school Monday elective called "May I help you?" They found that recycling pop top tabs from drink containers and canned foods could help raise

money for kids with cancer (PCCS' Flyer, 02.11.2010). Volunteer elective students delivered collection containers to every classroom and publicized this on the PCCS newsletter (PCCS' Flyer, 03.18.2010). When Indonesia was hit by a barrage of natural disasters, PCCS students of different grades developed different strategies to draw the school and families' attention to this incident and in only a few weeks, students raised over \$1,000 for disaster relief, not a small amount of money considering a majority of students at PCCS come from low-income households (PCCS' Flyer, 03.18.2010).

Another way that students work towards making the world they live in a better place is to make peace with people around them. Teaching and learning peace is central to PCCS' curriculum. In addition to reciting daily the school pledge that includes a verse "we work to build a fair and peaceful world", every December, students are engaged in a series of learning events evolving around peace and conflicts. Two direct quotes from the bulletin boards on the seventh and eighth grade hallway indicated that PCCS' approach to teaching peace is in line with its mission to create a more just world.

"Peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice" by Martin Luther King.

"Washing one's hands of the conflicts between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" by Paulo Freire.

Through studying quotes from social activists in their ELA class, seventh and eighth graders learned that peace could not be achieved if there were people suffering. To become peacemakers at school, at home, at the community and in the society means to become activists who stand up for those in need and those who receive unjust treatment. Students were guided to write down their wishes for peace and reflect upon what they

could do to make peace (more discussion on seventh and eighth graders' peace wishes will appear in the next chapter).

The highlight of teaching and learning of peace is a school wide event called the Peace Concert (Field notes, 12.14.2010). During the concert, PCCS students perform and displayed what they have learned in Music and Art class and various music-related electives. For the 2011 Peace Concert that I observed, the Music teacher, Teacher Denise, chose songs like "Light a Little Candle" and "Finlandia" that "share the theme of putting a little love in your heart and find peace within yourself (Recorded interview, 06.20.2011)." She also picked out songs with a strong message of the social justice. Songs like "Something Inside So Strong" and "Imagine" were introduced to the students along with their historical contexts (Apartheid South Africa and the Vietnam War). Occasionally, older students were given the freedom and opportunity to compose their own lyrics. A sample of a collective rap piece by eighth graders, entitled "I am a Peacebuilder, I Pledge" (see Appendix D) suggested that they were reflective upon their roles as peacebuilders who took responsibility for developing a vision of justice (Field notes, 12.14.2010). Similar to Teacher Eddie's proverb project that provided a rich context for his students to practice multiple literacies that were not limited to just visual literacy, students in the music class did not just learn to sing or play instruments; they were also developing their critical literacies that helped them understand how power and domination underline and inform the texts (cf., Hull, 1993). A better understanding of sociopolitical-economic contexts of texts and their meanings can lead to an emancipated worldview and transformational social action (Freire, 1972, Hull, 1993; McLaren, 1989).

PCCS' commitment to fostering students' critical reading of texts is most evident in what is traditionally known as Columbus Day across the U.S, which celebrates the day Christopher Columbus "discovered" America. As a charter school, PCCS has the courage and freedom to challenge the traditional construction of Columbus as a national hero and rename this day as Many Points of View Day (MPV Day) (Field notes, 10.11.2010). While most public and private schools are closed on this day, PCCS teachers design special activities for students to discuss colonization, globalization, and representation. For example, Teacher Scott drew from Columbus' journals, indigenous peoples' narratives, textbooks, and photographs to help students understand different perspectives on this event and reconstruct a more accurate understanding of it. As students learned that seeing Columbus as a hero is only one point of view, they also started to question what they had learned from other textbooks and the media. When one student posed the question to Teacher Scott, "How do we know something is true from history?" (Direct quotes from field notes, 10.11.2010), Teacher Scott highlighted the importance of examining multiple sources so one could make informed decisions about what to believe. Teaching students critically to explore Columbus's encounter with America helped students develop critical literacy skills that enabled them to see how power often mediates the construction of history, and more importantly, how history is open to revision and interpretation. MPV Day is about helping PCCS students "grow into thoughtful young adults who can share their points of view with confidence, be open to diverse opinions, and make positive change in the world" (PCCS' Flyer, 11.19. 2010).

Finally, it should be noted that PCCS' teaching of folk arts practiced in the students' communities as well as bringing students' lived experiences into the classroom is an act of social justice itself. It is part of the larger effort to help PCCS students receive affirmation of their language and culture. When a majority of minority students continue to receive subtractive schooling that divests them of their language and culture and does not provide them with a learning environment for academic success (cf. Valenzuela, 1999), schools are themselves a manifestation of a socially unjust enterprise. Teaching folk arts, particularly in formal school settings, raises critical questions about whose knowledge is legitimate, valued and valid. Below, the art teacher, Teacher Eddie explained how his teaching of folk art at PCCS was grounded in social justice.

Giving voices to people who have been marginalized in the United States is a liberatory act. When you share your Cantonese opera that you do with grandma, they are often marginalized in every realm of society because it's just made fun of. I think that a liberatory act then is to create a space for that to happen, or to counter the tendency to marginalize and dispossess people of traditional culture pieces. (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011)

Indeed, as Luke (2009) notes, when school curriculum seeks to include indigenous, traditional, and migrant epistemologies from students' communities, it offers a socially just education.

### **5.7. The PCCS Challenges**

As a school that attempts to offer an alternative to traditional schooling, my data have illustrated that PCCS' teaching and curriculum is different from what we generally know about education and schooling. However, to fight against the tide also means that PCCS teachers need to frequently work in situations where they do not have predecessors

to follow in terms of developing relevant and efficient pedagogy for linguistically and culturally diverse students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Even though many PCCS teachers that I talked to had clear ideas about the type of education that they did not want to give to their students because they had attended or taught at schools that failed to respect students' cultures, they knew less about how quality education for minority students could be translated into everyday practices. As a result, teaching at PCCS means that one needs to be creative, feel comfortable about working with uncertainty, and "a little crazy at work." As one teacher explains, PCCS is for teachers who are "willing to work straight through all day, every day to create quality instruction and pretty much never get a break... [And] to stay here after school and to do things on weekends and have meetings" (Recorded interview, 06.22.2011).

Working in a school that seeks to provide quality education for its diverse students, PCCS teachers are constantly engaged in learning, reflecting, and exchanging ideas and best practices. During my field work, a large number of teachers often stayed after the school until 5pm to prepare for the class. A few teachers that I knew particularly well also told me that they often still worked at home during the weekend. Such a busy working schedule was highly related to a low retention rate among teachers. For instance, Teacher Scott is the third Social Studies teacher in three years. Many teachers that I talked to did not think there was a solution to lower the burnout rate unless PCCS lowered the standards of teaching, which many believed was not going to happen.

Those teachers who choose to stay at PCCS since its early years despite the heavy responsibility on their shoulders have to grapple with some fundamental issues that

probably no PCCS teacher has an easy way to address. The first issue is about how PCCS can prepare students, especially those whose first school experience is at PCCS, for urban middle schools that have a long history of negating the lived experiences and voices of students of color from working class backgrounds. Below one teacher talked about her vision for the students once they graduated from PCCS, and then explained challenges that she faced in realizing her visions. She said,

I guess I want my kids to know that not everyone knows the alternative American history that they learn here and that they can share their ideas. They have the strength to share themselves with who they encounter in high school and beyond. I think that for them it's easier to share yourself when someone is inviting you. But when you aren't being invited to share who you are, where you come from, your language, [I hope] we are giving them the skills to share even when no one is asking.... But how do we simulate an environment where their ideas are not accepted? I don't know.

I think it's hard for kids to imagine another school where it's not like this. It's like how do you prepare them for the fact that – I'm teaching you this [history], but not everyone knows this? You know that you are different. You are getting a different education. But it takes courage to have a different opinion and to know different things. So, how do you have courage? And I don't know. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

Even though PCCS students learn the alternative American history that allows them to develop critical thinking toward many socio-historical events, their critical insights might not be welcomed and appreciated in new schools. Moreover, when PCCS students are used to a learning environment that validates and legitimizes their voices and lived experiences, it seems particularly challenging for them to be in schools that are not like PCCS.

A few students that I talked to expressed concerns about their lives after PCCS. Nick, for example, hoped that PCCS would have high school so he could be “in a better



school than a public school because usually in public schools you hardly get to know a teacher, but here teachers try and get to know you” (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011).

The Cambodian heritage seventh grader, Eve, had also told me several times that she was very worried about high schools because bullying was common for many of her siblings and relatives attending local public high schools. Eve was so scared about ending up in a similar school with much violence towards minority students that she transferred to another school at eighth grade because it granted its middle schoolers priority admission to its high school. Even though she spoke highly about her experience at PCCS, Eve had to leave PCCS a year earlier to make sure that she could get into a safe public high school. Eve’s decision should not be understood as PCCS’ inability to foster enough courage that can carry its students beyond PCCS. Instead, it should be understood as a reflection of the current hostile educational atmosphere where many minority students receive their education, a creative strategy by Eve, as well as the extremely challenging tide that PCCS teachers have to fight against. To what extent PCCS students can continue to have a positive identification with themselves and share what they have learned about diversity and social justice with their high school peers is an important issue that all PCCS teachers have to ponder upon when examining their teaching effectiveness.

Teacher Eddie questioned some teachers’ limited conception of student success in terms of how well they could do on standardized tests and whether or not they could go to college. PCCS students’ academic performance has been an important impetus for PCCS teachers to remain emotionally and physically upbeat and dedicated when they experience the frustration and fatigue common to teachers working in public schools.

PCCS encourages students to aim high in their lives and teachers often view college as one viable option for their students in the future. Almost all the students that I interviewed told me that they would try their best to go to college and the occupations that they wanted to pursue were heavily skewed to doctors and lawyers. However, Teacher Eddie was skeptical about his colleagues' "happy, hopeful, and everyone-will-go-to-college-scenario" because he was keenly aware that higher education was not the future for most of PCCS students, who were students of color from low-income backgrounds. He explained,

Huge, huge, huge majority [of our students] will never even smell a college. Even our most widely successful students because social pattern is nothing but ever more exclusionary for secondary school.... Even our most gifted, skilled, enlightened, helpful children will find ever fewer employment opportunities.... So even our best of the best are going to run into a door....The point in fact [is that] there's very real structural issues why they won't ever come close to that.

.... It became harder and harder to justify young people who do everything you ask them to and then don't have any job, any opportunity in the future and beyond the military. There's no other option so they [educators and politicians] have to re-write it [the script] a little bit, so a lot of it takes from testing---high stakes testing.

.... Some people get angry when I say, "You want to help kids get into college, but most of ours won't." So if we hold that out as why come to school and why do good, to get a good job and get into a good college, then after K-12, they'll call us liars because we were lying to them.... I think to conquer that is to confront white supremacy which I think is like the ideological underpinning of the United States inequity. (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011)

Teacher Eddie's words, though they might sound pessimistic, poignantly pointed to the structural racism that PCCS students would eventually face beyond the PCCS context. When the privilege of whiteness is still the norm in many institutions, non-white students from working backgrounds, even the most talented and academically successful,

are likely to face a glass ceiling that prevents them from fully participating in professional fields. In this case, whatever academic achievement that PCCS students have accomplished at PCCS cannot be taken as a precursor to their future academic or economic success. To better prepare PCCS students for the difficult times that lie ahead of them, Teacher Eddie believes that it is more important for students to learn “how stuff works in the world and hopefully, how stuff can be changed” than raising students’ test scores and painting a rosy picture of their futures.

Another challenge common for many PCCS teachers is the difficulty of truly understanding the diverse experiences that their students bring into the classroom and providing them with quality education. Even the most well-intentioned teachers, like Teacher Denise, sometimes had difficulty reaching out to some of her students, African Americans in particular. Teacher Denise, who taught music class to students from kindergarteners to eighth grade, had contacts with almost every student at PCCS. In an interview with me, she said that she sometimes felt guilty of her privileges because of her background as “upper middle class of white.” She strived to become a socially aware and responsible music teacher by incorporating students’ cultures and social justice related music into her teaching. She was also highly involved in many school wide events, such as peace and lunar new year concerts. During one professional development workshop on using ethnographic methods to learn more about students’ cultures, Teacher Denise commented, “I think we all need to think about what racial issues are going on in our school and in ourselves” (Paraphrased from field notes, 05.13.2011). When I later asked her to explain this statement in more detail, Teacher Denise said,

Well, one thing I know that I have trouble with some of my African American students here [is] that they're the ones who get in trouble more. And I think that they are hyper vigilant about that. And there's sometimes just the tension that goes on between me and some of those students, not all of them. Like lack of eye contact, I mean, and I see it at a very early age. I see it happen in very young kids, you know. For example, students will be sitting. Many of them [are] paying attention, and there will be that one or two African American students [who] won't look at me. You know he won't do it or he'll be the last one to do it. He'll be the last one that would be talking. It's like they're trying to make a statement or something. That's what I feel, like they're saying I'm different or I am....I don't know. But there's something, that something going on.

Despite her best intention for her students, Teacher Denise felt it difficult to work with some African American students because they tended to get into trouble more often than Asian/Asian American students. Teacher Denise was puzzled about their vigilance and lack of eye contact and did not know how she could improve students' engagement at her class.

Teacher Denise's example indicates a disconnection between some teachers and African American students. When I asked three eighth grade African American girls if they would introduce their siblings to PCCS in a group interview, two of them responded no. One of them explained to me that she did not feel PCCS was really diverse because "It's in Chinatown and its teaching is Chinese" and the other student added that "Its majority is Asian" (Recorded interview, 02.15.2011). What these two students were referring to is probably not just numerical but also pedagogical sense. The biggest ethnic group among the students is Chinese and close to one-third of the teachers at PCCS are of Asian heritage. With much teaching emphasis on Asian/Asian American cultures and no African American content teacher at PCCS, African American students feel less connected to other PCCS students and teachers. As an Asian led school, PCCS seems to

have better resources and expertise in providing Asian/Asian American students with education that is affirming and enriching. The consistent achievement gap (see more discussion on the achievement gap next chapter) also casts some doubts on PCCS teachers' effectiveness in working with African American students. To maintain a school in which no particular group of students is marginalized and all students have equal opportunities for success, PCCS teachers face the challenge of how to better address the needs of African American students and offer them culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **5.8 Recapitulation and Comments**

This chapter has attempted to give a closer look at students' learning at PCCS. As can be seen from the analyses, PCCS' teaching is unique and innovative in many ways. PCCS not only positively views diversity among students and teachers but also integrates it into the curriculum. In addition to academic subject matter learning, students are given many opportunities to explore who they are and their relationships with the world through learning different cultures, meeting arts teachers who might speak different languages, and engaging in social justice topics in various classes. PCCS' innovative teaching does not come without challenges. PCCS teachers need to grapple with issues such as achievement gaps between Asian/Asian American and African American students, low retention rate among teachers and how well PCCS can prepare students for life after they leave PCCS. I will now turn to more detailed analyses of how PCCS students react to and take on PCCS teaching on diversity and social justice in the next chapter by examining their interracial/interethnic friends at PCCS.

## 6. INTERRACIAL AND INTERETHNIC FRIENDS AT PCCS

### 6.1 Overview

This chapter examines PCCS students' social interactions and interracial/interethnic friendships as a window into how the students react to diversity. As teachers generally have little control over with whom students want to be friends or interact, examining how students make friends and socialize with peers from different backgrounds in a socially-conscious school helps us understand the extent to which students take up the school's resourceful teaching on diversity. Examining these interracial friendships also provides insights into how youth from diverse backgrounds build solidarity among themselves as well as how educators can create spaces that foster community construction among their racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students. In particular, PCCS' student demographics (i.e, 70% Asian/Asian Americans and 20% African Americans) make it a great site to examine interracial friendships among Asian/Asian American and African American<sup>2</sup> students, whose conflicts are unfortunately better known than their collaborations.

I am going to first examine how students talked about their interracial/interethnic relationships in the presence or absence of those they consider bullies. I then move on to discuss how students perceived racial cliques at PCCS. I seek to understand why some Asian/Asian American students preferred to make friends with students from their own racial or ethnic backgrounds. My analyses suggest that rampant stereotyping of African Americans as "rude," "loud," "mean," "bold," "crazy," and "not caring about education

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<sup>2</sup> While I always used the term "African Americans" in the student interviews, some Asian/Asian American students switched to the term "Blacks" in their responses. These two terms are thus used interchangeably in this chapter.

inside and outside of PCCS” made some Asian/Asian American students hesitant to be friends with their African American peers. However, Asian/Asian American students also needed to fight against stereotypes that essentialize them as quiet and shy. I argue that the circulation of uncontested stereotypes about both groups of students worked against the fostering of solidarity among them as well as inhibiting their empowerment. My data also illuminate the importance of taking into consideration Asian/Asian American parents’ role in their children’s interracial friendships and the perceived and real achievement gaps between Black and Asian/Asian American students at PCCS. Finally, I offer examples of two Asian/Asian American students with diverse friendship networks to demonstrate different ways that Asian/Asian American students at PCCS responded to stereotypes.

## **6.2 “The school doesn’t allow bully[ing]. You could be safe here.”**

One way to examine students’ interracial/interethnic relations is to look at how the issue of bullying, one form of hostile behavior toward others, was taken up at PCCS. Bullying is about “mak[ing] someone feel threatened, insulted, and poorly esteemed” and is different from fights because “bullying implies a pattern of instances and one party involved does not think he or she could protect him or herself,” explained Teacher Scott in a seventh grade class meeting intended to help students better understand the notion of bullying (Paraphrased quotes from field notes, 01.25.2011). Teacher Scott’s teaching on bullying was part of wider school efforts in making PCCS a safe place for all students. From its inception, PCCS aspired to become a bully-free school because one drive for its

establishment was the existing hostility and violence towards immigrant and minority students in the local public schools.

PCCS' explicit measures to eliminate bullies from the school included engaging students in learning about bullies in class meetings and distributing a school-wide survey to check if students felt safe at school. PCCS' less explicit, but more long term measure to create a safe space for all students lies in its multicultural curriculum that gives students from diverse backgrounds opportunities to learn about not just themselves but also other students. As one teacher nicely put it, PCCS' teaching helps students "have some love for yourself, have some appreciation for your family, have some knowledge of your history, get some awareness of the kids next to you and how they got here" (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011). PCCS' approach to creating a safe school builds on the premise that conflicts among people from different backgrounds would decrease if more mutual understanding existed.

Almost all the students that I talked to felt very safe at PCCS. Evidence was drawn from many narratives that compared their prior educational experiences at other schools with their present experiences at PCCS. When talking about their positive educational experiences at PCCS, a huge number of students cited the absence of bullying at PCCS. Nick, a seventh grader of Vietnamese heritage talked about his experience in an old neighborhood school while telling me why he liked PCCS which he had attended since grade four.

My old school – I went to a public school and then I didn't really like it because when I was there this kid, he would always tease me and call me the Chinese boy or like try to make fun of me. He would always tease me about my Asian race. I



was one of the very few Asians there. I liked it here more. (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011)

The theme of bullying in previously-attended public schools is prominent in the narratives of many students, Asian/Asian American male students in particular. Below are two narratives - one from a Chinese heritage boy and one from a Cambodian heritage boy- about their lives in their old schools where the interracial/interethnic relationships were tense and hostile.

In my old school, there were a lot of bully issues. Most of the time I had to fight back and usually it got me into trouble. I can't really do my school work and my grades started to drop later. (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011)

Yeah, there are students in other schools around here were like you'd literally go through the school and you have to like breathe and like brace yourself and think about. You can't think about. 'Oh, my god! What's homework tonight?' You have to think about, 'Oh, my god! Will I come out alive? Will I survive?' (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

Both boys' accounts of their early days in other schools point out their inability to engage in learning because of the prevalence of bullying in their lives. My data showed that boys tended to get into fights in their old schools and students of Asian heritage were often the targets of the fights because of their race and accents. A few African American boys that I talked to also reported getting into fights in their old schools because fighting was the norm at schools where teachers did not care about students' learning. According to these students, when teachers "don't really care about nothing happen," students spent little time learning but much time fighting (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011). While some Asian/Asian American boys mentioned being bullied by other African Americans, some newcomers from China talked about getting into fights with other Asian/Asian American students at schools. The conflicts within Black or Asian/Asian American students,

between Blacks and Asians, or between new and old comers are not new to many who work and research in multiracial and multilingual educational contexts (Lee, 1996; Rosenbloom, 2010).

Many PCCS students were conscious of interracial/interethnic conflicts either because they had personal experiences or they had learned about the anti-Asian student attacks in a south Philadelphia High school that made national headlines in 2010. While this incident was largely understood by many as Black students beating up Asian students, PCCS students learned on different occasions (e.g., Courageous Conversations, class meeting on bully, AASA's bulletin boards) that some Asian students were among those who bullied recently-arrived Asian students.

Common in PCCS students' accounts of being bullied at other schools, or conversely, feeling safe at PCCS, is their focus on school authorities' different approaches when dealing with bullying or fights among students. Below are a few examples of students' narratives that attempted to explain how the issues of bullies or fights were taken up differently in the schools that they previously attended and in PCCS.

In the old school, they [teachers] just talk to the children and don't really take the action. Children will nod, but later they start it again. (Recorded interview, 06.02.2011)

Teachers [at PCCS] are kind and caring, making my life a lot easier. They punish the people. Like if you play and hit someone, they quickly go ahead and start to talk about it. [They] talk about it to you so people won't take it as (inaudible) in the future. (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011)

The school [PCCS] doesn't allow bully. You could be safe here. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

They [PCCS teachers] don't tolerate all the nonsense. Like when you fight you're out.... [I]f you keep on doing it, they kick you out. But I felt like in my old school there was only one teacher that really cared. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

Students' narratives seem to suggest that "It's not a question of who beat whom, but who let it happen," in the words of one sign held by students at a district meeting whose agenda included how to solve the South Philly High attacks. As can be seen above, PCCS students' accounts of bullying focused more on school authorities' indifferent and hands-off approaches to tensions between students, and less on who had aggressive behaviors toward themselves in their old schools.

### **6.3 Wish for Peace: "ASIAN, BLACK, WHITE-Together"**

Recall from the last chapter that teaching peace and conflict is also part of the PCCS curriculum, which focuses on how students can find peace within themselves and how they can become peace builders in their lives. During the time when the whole school was engaged in talking about the definitions of peace before the Peace Concert, each seventh and eighth grader wrote down their own definitions of peace and their wishes for peace on a small piece of paper, to be displayed on the bulletin boards. A good number of students wrote about equal treatment regardless of one's differences, probably reflecting on how they were generally treated in their old schools. Their wishes included:

For peace, I want people to be judged by personality and not appearance.  
 My wish for peace is for everyone to be treated equally.  
 My biggest wish for peace is that there would be no more teasing to the one that is different.  
 No racism. Equality.  
 Safe school.

Students' wishes suggested that being people of color often means being different, which oftentimes incurs different treatments and judgments at school, or in broader society. Therefore, a peaceful world, according to PCCS students, is a place where one's skin color does not matter.

Some students articulated the issue of race in slightly different ways, highlighting the commonalities and solidarity between people of different races:

My wish for peace is to let God see people of different colors cooperating together, no bullying, no fighting, and no killings.  
"Gay people," "Abnormal people," "Asian," "African-American," and "Caucasian" ARE HUMAN, TOO.  
ASIAN, BLACK, WHITE- together.

In talking about their wishes for peace, students brought Asians into the traditional black-and-white racial discourse, and by including Asians in the discussion, they highlight the possibility that people of different racial backgrounds can all receive fair treatment as human beings. For students, the notion of peace is inseparable from the notion of justice because only when everybody is treated fairly can everybody work together toward a peaceful world.

While it seems that PCCS' teaching on race and social justice has a direct impact on how students view interracial relationships, what people say might not always correspond to what they actually do. It is common for people to give the answer they think the authorities want to hear. In other words, PCCS students' politically correct comments in their conversations with PCCS adults or in classroom assignments might be a result of the fact that being PC is positioned as a good thing at school. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond students' alleged claims about interracial relationships and

examine how they actually interact with one another and make friends at PCCS. Due to the nature of the student demographics at PCCS, my data captured more nuances among Asian/Asian Americans than other student groups and thus are particularly relevant to understand Asian/Asian American students' lived students and perspectives.

#### **6.4 Understanding Racial Cliques**

My longitudinal observation of peer relationships among seventh and eighth graders in different school spaces, including homeroom classrooms, electives, lunchroom, and recess suggest the existence of racial cliques. This observation was further confirmed by teachers and students. To address racial cliques, teachers made much effort to mingle students. They assigned seats for students not only in their own classrooms, but also at the lunch tables so students had multiple opportunities to interact with different peers. Teachers also made sure all the electives enrolled students of diverse backgrounds. To extend students' friendship beyond their own grades, PCCS had a "buddy" system that gave each student a "buddy" from a different grade. Students from the same homeroom were paired with students from a different grade homeroom, and the two buddies were usually from different backgrounds. Throughout the semester, homeroom teachers of the two buddy classes designed activities that enabled the buddies to show care for each other and to learn about each other's hobbies. In addition, every year around May, PCCS has a daylong "Play Day" when all students were taken out to a local park and engaged in community-building and cooperative activities that PCCS teachers designed for them. Even with much instructional and organizational effort to

create solidarity among the diverse students, there were many ways that interracial friendships were not established in school, and students that I talked to were all aware that the cliques were racially based.

Interestingly, when I first asked students about their friendships at PCCS in the interviews, almost every student gave me politically correct answers, like the following:

Cindy: I think everybody in this school gets along. We don't really care about what race you are and what language you speak, and what you look like. That's why everybody understands each other. That's why PCCS is so special.

Ming: Why do you think students here don't care about race and languages?

Cindy: Because maybe the school teaches us that it doesn't matter what race and what culture you are because everybody is just the way they are.

(Recorded interview, 04.26.2011)

Cindy, a student of Vietnamese/Chinese heritage highlighted that because of PCCS' teaching, students were able to see people beyond their racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds and thus everybody could be friends with anybody. Similarly, three African American boys that I interviewed together told me that they were able to make friends with everybody.

Yeah. I'm cool with everybody.

Everybody like me. Nobody have no problems with me.

I'm great at making friends. I'm cool with everything. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

While students claimed that they would be friends with everybody, many students, Asian/Asian American students in particular, still seemed to interact mostly with those from the same racial or ethnic background. During the lunchtime, it was not uncommon to see students position their seats at the round-shape dining tables in a way that allowed

them to interact with their friends at other tables. Even though PCCS teachers carefully diversified the student makeup in each table, they did not assign seats to students sitting at the same table. As a result, students were able to coordinate within the table and with the nearby tables to maintain their network at this space.

#### **6.4.1 Stereotyping African Americans as “Rude” and “Mean”**

While almost all PCCS students claimed that personalities were what they were looking for when making friends, some Asian/Asian American students’ narratives indicated that their interactions with African Americans at school seemed to be better understood as acquaintances, or “associates” in one student’s own words, instead of friends. Below, two Chinese American students, Sue and Maggie, who mostly hung out with other Asians/Asian Americans at PCCS, told me their interactions with other African American students.

Ming: So do you have African American friends at PCCS?

Sue: I won’t judge them by their race. I will judge them by their personality. Like how they act. If they are really rude and mean in front of me, then I will act rude to them, too. But if they are nice and always say hi, then I will say hi to them, too.

Meg: Yeah, I feel kinda of the same. I don’t usually judge people by their race, but I will try to make friends with them, like how my mom does. Like they walk past our store, we would say hi and sometimes they wouldn’t respond back. I think that’s because we are Chinese. Yeah, I like to make friends everywhere I go, at school and outside.

Ming: Can you give me some names of your African American friends here?

[Sue & Meg thought for a while and gave me some names.]

Ming: It’s more like you talk to them or they talk to you?

Sue: They talk to me.

Meg: It goes both ways to me. They talk to me, I talk to them. They ask me questions, I answer them.

Similar to all other students that I interviewed, Sue and Meg were quick to give me PC answers when I delved into their interracial friendships. However, both students' descriptions of their interactions with African Americans suggested that the interactions did not go beyond greetings and both seemed to have met some African Americans who were "rude, mean and not nice." Knowing that Sue and Meg did not usually interact with African American peers at PCCS, I then had them talk about how they initiated or maintained the conversations with their "alleged" African American friends. It turned out that the interactions did not go both ways as Meg put it. Had their African American "friends" not talked to them first, Sue and Meg probably would not have interactions with them, thus casting doubts on whether or not this relationship counted as friendship.

#### **6.4.2 Stereotyping African Americans as "Bold" and "Hot-tempered"**

To understand how Asian/Asian American students perceive their African American peers, one needs to understand their interactions with other African Americans in their neighborhoods. Many PCCS Asian/Asian American students resided in the same neighborhoods with African Americans, and the interracial interactions outside of the PCCS context seemed to have a major impact on how Asian/Asian American students perceived African Americans in general. In the narratives of Asian/Asian American students who rarely interacted with African American peers at PCCS, many talked about the African Americans on their blocks, usually not very positively, when I asked them to describe their neighborhoods. For instance, Maggie's parents ran a store at home and she was annoyed by some African Americans on the block who liked to do graffiti on the



store walls, and thus caused extra work for her father to clean. Similarly, Abby (of Indonesian heritage) who mostly hung out with other Asians/Asian Americans at PCCS referred to her neighborhood as “okay, except [there are] some black people.” Below, she and her good friend Eve (of Cambodian heritage), who hardly talked to other African American students, mentioned about their interactions with their African American neighbors.

Abby: When there is no school, they [Blacks] just stay up late at night when we already go to sleep. So it’s kind of loud and then my mom kinda of complains, too. She don’t say it to them directly, but say to herself.

Eve: Because if you yell at them, they might get mad.

Abby: And I don’t want to go there.

Eve: I sometimes go party with them.

Abby: Not me. I don’t know most of them....There is block party, we don’t usually go because it’s all black people. The time that I used to miss at the block is [when] I used to play outside and I used to play with them. We used to when we were small. I guess at eight or seven years old....We used to play together, but now we don’t because we don’t really go outside anymore. It’s not the same persons that they used to be. They become bolder and bigger. (Recorded interview, 12.16.2010)

Here Abby and Eve cast African Americans as “loud,” “hot-tempered,” “bold,” and “big.” Even though Abby and Eve did not think their interactions with African Americans outside of PCCS affected the way they interacted with their Black peers at PCCS because according to Abby, “The Blacks here [at PCCS] are nicer”, these two girls clearly had very limited self-initiated interactions with their Black peers. In fact, the Blacks outside of PCCS were sometimes even perceived as threatening. When talking about what she did with friends after school, Eve mentioned about the need to walk her Indonesian heritage girlfriend, Mee, back home at the end of the day because of their fear of Black people.

Eve: Mee always wants me to walk her home. I hate to walk her home because if I do, I will have to walk back home by myself. I get scared and I start running.

Ming: Why do you need to run?

Eve: Because there might be black people and they might chase me.

Abby: [You are such a] Racist psycho. But that is true, that is true, though.  
(Recorded interview, 1.10.2011)

Even though Abby knew that Eve's comment was not PC, she did not challenge its validity and instead, she agreed with Eve's comment, suggesting that both girls' interactions with blacks outside of PCCS were not very positive. It should be noted that both Eve and Abby, just like other PCCS students, started out with very politically correct comments in describing their interracial friendships during our first interview in December 2010 and it was not until our second interview that they started to tell me more about their feelings towards Blacks, probably due to a more familiar and open relationship with me.

Other Asian/Asian American students, girls in particular, also noted similar images of their African American peers in their second or third interviews with me. As PCCS students needed to travel to different classrooms for different subjects, the hallways were often packed with students during the transition time. Below, Mee (of Indonesian heritage), April (of Chinese heritage) and Luisa (half Puerto Rican) used their encounters with other African Americans from eighth grade in the hallways as an example to illustrate the "rude" side of their African American peers.

Mee: They [African Americans] are rude especially when they walk down the hall.

Luisa: Right.

Mee: Whenever we meet them and they're like, 'What's up girl?'

April: When I accidentally bump into one of them and they're like, 'Excuse YOU.' {in a firm voice}

Luisa: Because there was like three classes trying to get passed.

April: And I accidentally bump into one of them and they're like, 'Girl you watch where you're going.' I'm like, 'EXCUSE YOU. There are three classes going to get through!' (Recorded interview, 05.18.2011)

Here, the African American peers were portrayed as rude, impolite and inconsiderate of the context that made physical contact among students inevitable. It was interesting to see how "What's up, girl?", a rather common greeting phrase among some youths was taken up by Mee. Instead of seeing it as a way that the African American students wanted to say hi to her, Mee seemed to be bothered by this way of greeting. Moreover, the use of "excuse you," instead of "excuse me" was cited as another example of how some African Americans were considered "impolite" and "rude".

#### **6.4.3 Stereotyping African Americans as "Crazy" and "Loud"**

To recapitulate, many Asian/Asian American students mentioned that they did not look at skin color when making friends, but cared more about personal characteristics. In illustrating their choices of friendship, many referred to the characteristics of those with whom they found it hard to be friends, such as being impolite, bold, and rude, and it happened to the case that the majority of students who suffered from these stereotypes were African Americans. Personal characteristics were conflated with race or culture in creating the line between Asian/Asian American and African American students because for some Asian/Asian American students, African American students came from a culture that embodied different ways of communication and interactions. The following narrative

between Nick (of Vietnamese heritage) and Beth (of Chinese heritage) illustrates how different ways of communication and interactions became the source of miscommunication and conflicts.

- Ming: So do you also hang out with African Americans or not that much?  
 Nick: No.  
 Ming: Why not? Why are you laughing?  
 Nick: I don't really get along with them.  
 Ming: Why not?  
 Nick: I'm not sure.  
 Nick to Beth: Do you get along with them?  
 Beth: No. Not that much.  
 Nick: See we don't get along. They're so mean.  
 Ming: But are they mean to you guys personally?  
 Nick: No.  
 Ming: Then why do you say that?  
 Nick: Because they are crazy.  
 Ming: I don't understand.  
 Nick: They are very annoying because how should I say. I don't get along with Levon, Romy, Aaron and Andrew.  
 Ming: Okay.  
 Nick: Sometime last year, he said, 'Touch me.' I touched him. [And then]他打我 (he hit me)! 我摸摸他 (I touched him) and then he is like 'Biang! Biang!' He 打我 (hit me).  
 Ming: Did he really hit you?  
 Nick: I don't know but when he not get along and he said, 'I dare you touch me.' I don't know what he's talking about. And then it's Biang and 打打(hit hit).  
 Ming: Wow. But I also wonder what's really going on at that time.  
 Nick: They just try to act cool. They want everybody to like them. 'I'm better than you and you're not good. It's like that. They are talking about, 'I can do this, you cannot do this. I show you I can do this better than you. Say I can do basketball better than you'. And they try to show off like what they can do. (Recorded interview, 06.02.2011)

Here, African American students were understood as “crazy” and “annoying,” probably because they did not follow the norms of interactions or communication that Nick was familiar with. Nick and one African American peer seemed to have different expectations and interpretations about body contact. Their different understandings of what counts as

“touch” and “hit” and which act they deem appropriate for different relationships seem to prevent them from building a more amiable relationship.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for me to fairly reconstruct the events reported by Nick and Mee and there was not much time left in my fieldwork to further delve into the specifics of what counted as norms of interactions within each student group. To begin with, it took me nearly eight months to start collecting narratives in which students went beyond politically correct descriptions of their interracial/interethnic friendships. After all, building a trusting relation with minority youths who had gone through difficult schooling experiences until they came to PCCS was hard. However, in retrospect, there were some moments when I was struck by the volume of conversations among some African American students because it was not the “norms of classroom interaction” that I was familiar with when attending my own middle school in Taiwan and when observing other classrooms outside of PCCS. I did recall an instance when the volume among a group of African American students was high enough to draw some attention from Maggie, Sue and Toni, with whom I was working. It seemed that there is some cultural and sociolinguistic mismatch going on. Due to the fact that African American students’ particular way of interaction was not the focus of my study, I did not pursue specifics and did not anticipate that this might play a role among some Asian/Asian American students’ interracial friendships.

The middle school ELA teacher, Teacher Diana, who showed much interest when hearing Asian/Asian American students’ narratives, told me that she was not surprised to hear the circulation of a loud African American image among Asian/Asian American

students who rarely made interracial interactions. To help me better understand Asian/Asian American students' narratives, Teacher Diana provided her observations of African American students' ways of interaction that she thought might be a source of discomfort for some Asian/Asian American students. Teacher Diana admitted that she often needed to ask some of her African American students to lower their volume when they chatted because they tended to be very "brash". She also thought there was something unique about the way her African American students made fun of themselves or each other: They snapped on each other and there was a lot of physicality involved, such as shaking the chairs or tilting the chairs back and forth. From Teacher Diana's understanding, her African American students liked to make themselves the center of attention. The volume was often very high, and the purpose, according to Teacher Diana, was to make others laugh and have fun.

This way of interaction, she suspected, probably scared some Asian/Asian American students because it was not common, or sometimes even forbidden in their cultures, thus creating distance between some Asian/Asian American students and African American students. Teacher Diana further explained that this interaction norm existed not only among her African American students, but also between her African American students and dean of the students, Teacher Latonia, who was an African American female. Teacher Diana sometimes sent her students to Teacher Latonia because of some minor mistakes that they made, but she often felt very appalled to see how Teacher Latonia was disciplining her African American students. According to Teacher Diana, Teacher Latonia often talked in very high volume so sometimes it looked as if she

was yelling at them. Oftentimes Teacher Latonia made students apologize. As a white teacher and thus an outsider from the African American culture, Teacher Diana believes that she could not do the same thing to her African American students.

#### **6.4.4 Stereotyping Asian/Asian American Students as “Quiet,” “Shy,” and Lacking Speaking Skills**

Teachers who had regular contacts with the seventh and eighth graders had different interpretations of Asian/Asian American students’ narratives when I shared with them my preliminary analyses. Some teachers regarded students like Maggie, Sue, Abby and Eve as “extremely shy and quiet” students who did not talk much and might not know how to make friends with people from different backgrounds. However, my interactions with these students suggested that they had quite different personalities than what their teachers thought of them. For instance, when I started to elicit student volunteers for interviews that sought to understand their educational experiences at PCCS, Abby and Eve were the first pair to approach me and later became the major “marketing persons” for my study. The three interviews with them were among the longest student interviews that I had conducted because both were eager to share with me about their lives inside and outside of PCCS. Although Abby and Eve bore the stereotypes of shy and quiet students in the eyes of their teachers and possibly from some of their fellow students, these two terms do not capture their personalities well. Reducing some Asian/Asian American students’ choices of making interracial friendship to

individual personalities did not seem to provide explanations for the racial cliques at PCCS.

While African American students had to live with the stereotypes of being “loud,” “noisy,” and “rude,” many Asian/Asian American students had to deal with quite the opposite stereotypes. As mentioned earlier, some teachers perceived Abby and Eve as too “quiet” and too “shy” for them to feel comfortable with people from different backgrounds. Both Abby and Eve had limited interactions with their teachers at the personal level. Coupled with the fact that Abby was a former ESL student and she seldom spoke out in the classroom, some teachers suspected that she had language processing problems. In a school context where the ability to verbally express one’s ideas seemed to take precedence over other means of communication, Asian/Asian American students like Abby who were not as vocal in the classroom were prone to being interpreted in terms of quiet and shy Asian/Asian American stereotypes that made their speaking skills invisible.

The following excerpt documents a moment where Teacher Latonia pushed some eighth grade Asian/Asian American students to speak up in front of the class because she was not happy with some remaining quiet in the discussion.

Today’s class was a preparation for eighth graders’ trip to a citywide high school exposition next Friday. Teacher Latonia wanted to know what students had learned about some local high schools through their own internet search the night before at home. The first student who reported back was a black student and so were the second and the third students. Teacher Latonia always added her own comments after each student’s report. Afterwards, Teacher Latonia moved on to discuss some school statistics in the booklets that students had in front of them. She posed some questions about the statistics and encouraged students to talk and share their answers. Those who raised their hands were basically the same group of students who shared their internet findings earlier. Teacher Latonia then



walked to the other side of the classroom and asked a Chinese boy to share his answer. The boy remained silent for a few seconds until Teacher Latonia said to him in front of the class, “Public speaking is a skill so I won’t let you go”. Students’ attention was drawn to that boy, which made the silence quite unbearable, at least for me. I was relieved to hear the boy at least murmur something eventually. Probably with an attempt to lower the tension, another Chinese boy sitting next to him also volunteered to offer his answer. Teacher Latonia nodded and then turned to a Chinese girl at another table and asked her to speak out her answers, too. (Field notes, 09.23.2010)

A few things can be inferred from the field notes. First of all, Asian/Asian American students and African American students tended to sit with friends from the same background when the teachers let them choose their own seats. Teacher Diana, who was the homeroom teacher for this eight grade class, had told me her ambivalent feeling toward assigning student seats. She understood the importance of mingling but at the same time, she could not overlook the caring and laughter that emerged when students sat with people with whom they felt comfortable and resonant. As a result, she sometimes let students pick their seats. Not surprisingly, the seating often became racially separated. As this excerpt indicates, Chinese students chose to sit with other Chinese students and Black students sat with other Black students.

Secondly, the fact that Teacher Latonia chose to make her statement about the importance of public speaking in front of the whole class probably suggested her long-term frustration with some Asian/Asian American students’ lack of verbal participation in class. Her intentionally asking ask the Chinese girl to share her answer, even after two Asian/Asian American students had offered their answers, also showed Teacher Latonia’s determination to hear some Asian/Asian American students’ voices in front of the class.

Finally, it should be noted that the three Asian/Asian American students were all former ESL students. My observations of these students in other classes and school spaces indicated that the first boy was indeed a little bit quiet, but the last two students were as vocal as many PCCS students that I had met. The second Chinese boy even self-registered in a selective trial to be the Mandarin host for the Lunar New Year concert, which required one to speak in front of a few hundred audience members. With her limited interaction with the Chinese students on limited occasions, Teacher Latonia seemed to subscribe to a quiet Asian/Asian American stereotype that made her unable to see her students' speaking skills.

As I mentioned earlier, my personal interactions with Abby indicated that even though she tended to talk in a rather soft volume compared to her peers, she was by no means a quiet and shy student. Similarly, Abby's former ESL teacher from grade two to grade four identified Abby as a confident and sophisticated speaker when she interviewed Abby for her thoughts on PCCS' ESL program. When the ESL teacher asked Abby the question "Who are you, Abby?" at the end of the interview, Abby quickly and confidently identified herself as an Asian American because she could speak two languages. The ESL teacher, who was very aware of the perceptions that Abby was receiving in her other classes, believed that Abby's sophistication, high level of confidence, and positive self-identification would make her a great candidate for a leader in the future. It is interesting to see how the same student evoked contrasting images in the eyes of her teachers.

I argue that the circulations of a loud, brash African American student image and a quiet, shy Asian/Asian American student image among the students and teachers, unfortunately worked against solidarity across racial lines. The notions of being “loud” and “quiet” are no longer about acoustic matter, but are associated with evaluative terms of being brash and shy, thus suggesting a norm that students are evaluated against. While PCCS aspires to offer an education that does not privilege one way of knowing and being, it is not separated from the outside society and general educational practices that place disproportionate emphasis and value on “the ability to enter quick-paced, highly intertextual [classroom] interactions” (Duff, 2001, p.120). In studying ESL students’ experiences in mainstream content areas at the secondary school level, Duff found that many ESL students from Asian countries seemed to lack confidence and a sense of entitlement to speak about their views and concerns in classroom practices that demand students’ oral participation during open discussions. Besides, since many studies have shown that current educational practices mirror and celebrate communication patterns of middle-class Anglo cultures (Heath, 1983; Lee, 2005; Philips, 1983), both African American students and Asian/Asian American students are evaluated against this “norm” while their own ways of communication and interaction were associated with a cluster of negative attributes, rendering their speaking skills invisible to both students and teachers.

#### **6.4.5 The Role of Parents in Asian/Asian American Students' Interracial Relations**

Another common reason that Asian/Asian American students cited to explain their distance from African American students was different educational expectations they experienced at home. As children of Asian parents, students believed that they bore much more parental pressure to do well at school than their African American peers. A few Asian/Asian American students used the fact that some African American students often skipped their assignments as an example that their parents did not care about their education. According to these students, Asian/Asian American students all had the need to spend much of their time studying and thus they could relate better to other Asian/Asian American students who experienced similar pressure from parents. Some students stressed the tendency for Asian/Asian American parents to constantly devalue what their children could do, which only worked to lower their children's self-esteem. This parental style draws much resistance and complaint among the Asian/Asian American students, and to some extent, also draws them closer to each other. Below three Asian/Asian American students talked about their parents' parenting style. By highlighting what "notorious" Asian/Asian American parents generally did to their children, these students' narratives emphasized a growing-up experience only understood by Asian/Asian American students, which in turn built a stronger tie among those who had the same experience.

The following conversation was originally about Linda's encounter with an African American on the street, who was able to beg for some change in Cantonese, but it

changed to Linda's prediction of what her mom's response would have been if she had been present. The conversation then took on a new direction where students talked about what Asian/Asian American parents were particularly good at, that is, to shame their children.

Linda: My mom probably would say 'This guy is not even an Asian and he speaks Chinese better than you can.'

Sally: I think my mom would say the same thing. Like 'They are not even Asian looking and then they speak Chinese better than you.'

Eddie: Asian parents are always like that. Like they are better than you and I am lower than them.

Linda: She [my mom] compares you to other people. If your mom says something about you, it's always like if there is a person next to you and they were like Asian, too. And they do something better than what you do, and it's just a little tiny better, right? My mom will go and say, 'See they do something better than you do. What do you do? You only stay at home and watch TV!' I don't understand. Why? Why do you do this [to your children]?

Sally: Yeah. It's like lower your self-esteem. (Recorded interview, 05.02.2011)

Here, a generic group of Asian/Asian American parents is constructed as people who like to compare their children to other Asians, sometimes even to some random people, and are never satisfied with their children's achievements. As a result of this tendency, many Asian/Asian American children had to deal with much stress from their parents, which further strengthened the tie among Asian/Asian American students.

It is worth mentioning Asian/Asian American parents' role in influencing their children's perceptions of African Americans in general. There was a tendency for Asian/Asian American students who had a strong preference for Asian/Asian American friends to have parents who did not encourage or allow interracial friendships. Many Asian/Asian American students were not able to bring home friends of other race (usually

meaning African Americans) and their parents preferred them to be friends with other Asians. Interracial dating was not an option for many Asian/Asian American girls. Asian/Asian American parents' unfriendly attitudes towards African Americans sometimes had roots in their negative personal experiences with African Americans, such as Maggie's father who had to clean the graffiti, but more often than not, was not based on any personal contacts with African Americans. Many Asians/Asian American students were not able to understand why their parents did not allow them to be friends with African Americans and could only guess that their parents subscribed to rampant negative stereotypes of African Americans in the broader society. Those who rarely interacted with African American peers often talked about their parents' strong attitudes toward African Americans in the interviews with me. Even though these students were attending a socially-conscious school that engaged students in learning racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity on a regular basis, students did not spend all their time at school, and their parents had a role in influencing their interracial friendships at school. As one Chinese girl, who tried to explain to me why Asians liked to hang out with other Asians at PCCS, put it, "I think sometimes the Asians can connect with each other more. They have their families and they all want them to be more Asian" (Recorded interview, 06.02.2011). It seems that despite of much diversity within Asian/Asian Americans, Asian/Asian American students at PCCS have a more shared experience of being racialized.

Finally, quite a few Asian/Asian American students, girls in particular, talked about not being able to get out of the house once they went back home from school.

Things that they could do after school were often surfing the internet, talking to friends on the phone or Facebook, and watching TV. Since many PCCS students lived in poor neighborhoods where drug use, crime, public drinking and panhandling were common, parents had little option but to physically constrain their children at home. As one Asian American girl explained, “School is my only social hour, basically my social time. Whenever I have time to talk to friends [at school], I talk because my parents are very strict. I can’t go out with them [after school]. My parents just don’t like me going out a lot” (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011). Unlike students from middle class background who might meet friends in sports clubs or afterschool programs in community centers, PCCS is the only place where many Asian/Asian American students (in fact, also many African American girls) could meet and hang out with their friends. As a result, a common wish for a better PCCS experience among PCCS students, not limited to Asian/Asian American students, is to have more recess. At the time of my study, there was only one 50 minute recess per week for middle schoolers where they could freely play with their friends on the playground. Since PCCS offers art, music, Mandarin language, and a variety of electives along with content subjects, students’ schedules can only afford one recess per week.

#### **6.4.6 A Look at the Achievement Gap**

The perception that African American students did not need to excel academically was reinforced by the achievement gap between Asian/Asian American students and African American students at PCCS. When it comes to reading and math assessments,

PCCS breaks down the student population into four sub-groups, including Asian, Black, Economically disadvantaged, and English Language Learners. The achievement gap between Asian/Asian Americans and Blacks had been evident since the school's first statewide assessments in 2006. By 2012, nearly 90% of Asian/Asian American students were proficient in math and 80% in reading while only 50% of African American students were proficient in math and 55% in reading. The statistics here should not be interpreted as PCCS' inattention to African American students, however. Back in 2006, only around 20% of African American students were proficient in math and in reading (as opposed to 50% of Asian/Asian American students proficient in math and 35% in reading). Since 2006, the percentage of African American students who were proficient in math and reading had steadily gone up until it reached 50% percentage in 2010. This 30% growth among African American students merited a big applause for PCCS teachers.

However, both students and teachers were very aware of the achievement gaps. Even though the teachers did not publicly discuss students' academic performance, students knew who did well on the assignments and tests. Some academically-oriented Asian/Asian American students, like Eddie and Sally, were not shy about asking other Asian/Asian American students about their grades. The Hall of Fame inside of the classrooms that displayed names and headshots of students who won the first place in some subjects was dominated by Asian/Asian American students. During several professional development workshops that I attended, a few teachers continued to express concerns about the achievement gaps between Asian/Asian American and Black students,



but it still remained unclear what the next steps should be. The fact that Black students on average did not perform academically as well as Asian/Asian American students at PCCS not only made some Asian/Asian American students further believe that the two groups were different but also made them ignore Black students who did well academically. When I mentioned some African American students who had good academic performances to Nick and April, they either saw these African American students as exceptions, or discounted their blackness, suggesting that some of them were “half white” and “not really black.”

Another African American stereotype that was circulated widely among Asian/Asian American students was their talent in sports, basketball in particular. Recall that Nick complained that his African American friends liked to show off their basketball skills. It was true that basketball was very popular among African American students at PCCS, and it was common to see a group of African American students and a handful of Asian/Asian American students play basketball during recess. The sporty African American stereotype circulated at PCCS was a reflection of how African Americans were perceived in the larger society, as evident by the fact that the majority of the African American celebrities that students named in the Courageous Conversations were in the sport industry. This sporty African American image, coupled with other stereotypes mentioned earlier, reinforced some Asian/Asian American students’ belief in the distance between the two groups, especially for those not interested in sports.

So far, I have tried to explain factors that account for some Asian/Asian American students’ unwillingness to build friendships with their African American peers. Now I

turn to two Asian/Asian American students, Vanessa and Dondon, both of whom claimed to have African American friends and were frequently observed to have regular interactions with these friends. Examination of Vanessa's and Dondon's narratives gives us insights into how Asian/Asian American students like them perceived their interracial friendships and what factors came into play in helping them move beyond superficial racial stereotypes that define African American students.

### **6.5 Case #1: Vanessa**

Vanessa was a seventh grader of Cambodian heritage. She mostly hung out with other Southeast Asian students and African American students, even though she, like other Asian/Asian American students, claimed that she was friends with everybody in her class. She studied hard and did well on the exams. She was particularly close to some African American boys in her class and those boys seemed to see her as part of their group. One day when I was touching her hair while praising her new hair style as well as the length of her hair, an African American boy came to me and said, "Hey, you are touching my hair" in a lively manner, which put a smile on me and Vanessa. While I challenged that her hair texture was different from his, he insisted that the textures were the same and I was actually touching his hair. It seemed that they were such good friends that one could claim that the hair textures between the two were the same, even when they were not.

When talking about racial cliques, Vanessa joked that if I saw three Asian/Asian American girls playing basketball with African American students during recess, they

would be her friend, her cousin and her. This statement was true based on my observations. Like many of her Asian/Asian American peers, her parents did not like the idea of her hanging out with African Americans. In fact, Vanessa's father did not even want to see her walk with African Americans.

Ming: Can you invite friends over?

Nessa: It really depends who I invite.

Ming: What do you mean?

Nessa: My parents, I don't know. They ask them some questions to see if they are smart enough. They don't want me to hang out with people who don't care about education.

Ming: So your parents are really concerned about your education.

Nessa: They are....

Ming: I see. Then can you bring African American friends?

Nessa: No! Asian parents are just so. I try to tell them that not all Blacks are the same. And they would say, 'No! I don't like them!' And every time I walk home, this one guy walks near me because, he wasn't even walking with me. He walks near me. And I was coming home from school and he thought he was with me. I was like 'No! I was coming from school!' And my father was like 'I don't want to see you walking with Black people!'

Ming: But you have a lot of African American friends at school.

Nessa: Yeah, I do. That's why I only introduce them my ASIAN friends.

Ming: I've always wanted to interview you because I've found that you hang out with African Americans quite a lot.

Nessa: Because I understand that they are not all the same. Everybody is different. But my parents, they don't. (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011)

Vanessa's narratives indicated the degree to which some Asian/Asian American parents held negative attitudes toward African Americans. Coming to U.S.A. as refugees, Vanessa's parents went through a lot of challenges in this new land and their lives were never easy. They tried their best to make sure that Vanessa would not need to go through similar struggles, and probably the only thing they could do was to ensure that Vanessa did not hang out with wrong people (e.g., Black people), who "do not care about

education.” Fortunately, Vanessa was able to understand that not all Blacks were as bad as her parent thought.

Vanessa did not start out as someone feeling comfortable with African Americans when she was little. She used to be really “scared” when she saw some Blacks on her aunt’s block.

My parents aren’t rich so we live in an average household, and where we live there are a lot of Asians. So I don’t have a lot of experiences with Black people. But when I go to my aunt’s house, she has a mixture of Whites, Asians and Blacks on her block. And I met this Black girl. She was really nice. I used to be AFRAID of them because of the stereotypes. And when I first went there, I was SO scared because my parents often talk about all the bad stereotypes about them. But she actually was very nice, nice to the point that whenever I’m there, I started to talk to everybody. I don’t like keeping distance from everybody. (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011)

With all the negative stereotypes associated with Blacks in her mind, Vanessa felt very scared when she met Blacks. A nice black girl, coupled with her own personal characteristics of not liking to keep distance from everybody helped Vanessa to disregard the stereotypes.

More importantly, a teacher that she met on her first day at PCCS in grade four further helped her step out of her comfort zone. Vanessa said,

Teacher Lan gave us a speech that says that you guys shouldn’t just stay within one group. No matter you are bi-sexual, gay or whatever, everyone is different. You don’t really know who they are unless you talk to them. So I start to talk to everybody. I don’t have anything against everybody. You are who you are and I will let you do it because it doesn’t have to do with anything with me. (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011)

Even though Vanessa came from a family that discouraged interracial friendships between Asian/Asian Americans and Blacks, she went to a school that fostered minority students’ affirmation of their own cultures and appreciation of other cultures. Educated in

such a school, Vanessa was open to different ways of being and her openness allowed her to cross the boundary and become friends with many African Americans. Although Vanessa gave the credits to a single teacher at PCCS in explaining her changed attitude, it probably took more than a teacher to reach such an effect: other teachers at PCCS continued to nurture the seeds that Teacher Lan planted in Vanessa at grade four throughout her years there so she could live Teacher Lan's words in her daily interactions with her seventh grade peers.

Even though Vanessa did not "have anything against everybody," some Asian/Asian American girls, Chinese heritage in particular, had something against her. She was regarded by some Asian/Asian American girls as a "bad representation of Cambodian culture" and "playing 流氓樣" (gangsters), mainly because of her ways of speaking. According to these girls, Vanessa often spoke "too loud" and laughed "too hard" and hung out mostly with African Americans. Just as much as some Asian/Asian American girls did not like Vanessa, Vanessa felt she could not relate herself to other Asian/Asian American girls, especially those from Chinese heritage because none of them knew anything about growing up with parents with no English proficiency and no formal education. Like many of her Asian/Asian American peers who were children of immigrants from non-English speaking and low-income households, Vanessa needed to help with much housework, including making medical appointments for her non-English-speaking mother, filling in legal or medical documents for the family. When she did not understand some words, she would go to [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) to look them up. It was hard for a seventh grader to bear so much family responsibility. Every time Vanessa's mother

asked her what she learned at school, she responded, “I tell her that I don’t learn how to make an appointment because I am not in a stage where I am able to fill in an application. It’s really hard.”

Life at home was more difficult for Vanessa than for her other Asian/Asian American peers because of her parents’ lack of formal education. Below Vanessa talked about how her Cambodian parents’ lack of basic education, coupled with their limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with life in the U.S. had a direct impact on her educational experiences and trajectories.

My parents are very concerned about my education because after next year, then I can get married (chuckling). Yes, I can. [But] they don’t understand English so they wouldn’t know how things happen in the America. They like to think back when they were in Cambodia, like when they were in war. That’s why they came here. They don’t know how things are here and they don’t know squares because they never went to school in Cambodia. Over there, they forced people to clean and cook. That’s why. They didn’t know how these helped their life here. I want to be a fashion designer but my dad was like, ‘No, you can’t do that! We don’t come to the U.S. for that’. They don’t have the life things here so they want to mold us to be what they wanted to do. (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011)

Coming from a culture where early marriages are common for teenage girls, Vanessa aspired to defy the tradition by finishing college and pursuing her dream as a fashion designer in this new land. Yet, her parents’ past and present hardship also made her pursuit harder than for other Asian/Asian American students that she knew of. Not only were her parents unable to give her much academic support and guidance, they wanted to “mold” her to be what they wanted to be. While other Asian/Asian American students also talked about some jobs that their parents preferred them to do in the future, most of them did not receive a strong rejection from their parents when talking about what they really wanted to do (e.g., photographer, dancer, etc.) to their parents. Since Vanessa’s

parents had come so far and gone through so much, they were more restrictive about what she could do in the future, and probably who she could hang out with. According to Vanessa, her experiences growing up were very different from other Chinese and Indonesian students at PCCS and thus she did not feel related to her Asian/Asian American classmates.

Informal conversations with some teachers confirmed that Cambodians were at the lowest rung within a so-called/supposed Asian/Asian American ethnic hierarchy that positions students from East Asian backgrounds over Cambodian students (cf., Chhoun & Hudley, 2010). Teachers had heard about the use of the expression “dirty Cambodians” among other Asian/Asian American students and a few teachers had also noted that some Asian/Asian American parents did not want their children to be friends with Cambodian students. My data indicate that students of Chinese heritage tended to have mostly unfriendly remarks toward Cambodian students, especially those who were thought to “play cool” to hang out with African American students. When I shared my observations with PCCS teachers at one professional development, one PCCS teacher of Chinese heritage helped other non-Asian teachers understand the interethnic hierarchy among Asians by saying, “For Chinese, Cambodians are like the Blacks among Asians.” Teacher Eddie, who was keen on interracial/interethnic relationships at PCCS also made the following comment in the interview, “ [I believe] there is arrogance among sectors of Chinese population towards Southeast Asians, towards Pacific Islanders, towards African Americans and I think it echoes what’s happening in the broader context” (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011). Indeed, Chhoun and Hudley (2010) have documented similar

discourse at a high school that positioned Cambodian students lower than students of East Asian backgrounds because the former were assumed to be poor, low-achieving and involved in crime.

The Social Studies teacher, Teacher Scott, agreed that Chinese students tended to stay within their own group and Southeast Asian students seemed to have more regular interactions and develop closer relationships with African American students. He guessed it probably was because people of Chinese heritage were rather established both at PCCS and in the broader society so there was little need for them to go beyond their own network. In contrast, due to smaller numbers of Southeast Asians at PCCS and in the city, they inevitably needed to interact with people from different backgrounds and many probably resided with Blacks in the same neighborhoods.

At PCCS, even though many Chinese students also liked to play basketball, they did not play with Cambodian students, who often played with African American students. As Vanessa put it, “I understand the Chinese in our class like to play basketball, too, but whenever we [Cambodians and African Americans] all get to play, they feel scared or something” (Recorded interview, 06.07.2011). It seems that Vanessa and other Cambodian students at PCCS were likened by the Chinese students to Blacks. The situation at PCCS mirrors a growing educational discourse that positions Southeast Asian refugee students, Cambodian and Hmong students in particular, as troubled youth, delinquents, and dropouts in their local schools (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Lee, 2005; Reyes, 2006).



Acutely aware of the challenges that Southeast Asian students face in academics and in their peer relationships at PCCS, Teacher Eddie hoped that PCCS could offer “a context where a range of kids, but particularly Southeast Asian kids, may know someone who shares their mannerisms, their pattern of speech, their historical experience and create a comfort level which then can give them confidence and the ability to succeed in lots of other arenas” (Recorded interview, 06.23.2011). Vanessa’s lived experience as a Cambodian student at PCCS points to the danger of lumping Asian/Asian American students together when discussing their educational experiences and interracial/interethnic friendships. An overarching racial category such as Asian tends to ignore diverse racialized experiences that exist within the group itself and overlook the lived experiences of subgroups that have less representation in the educational and public research. My data have suggested the importance of separating Southeast Asian students, Cambodian in particular, from students of East Asian backgrounds in understanding their interracial friendships and interactions with African American peers. Not doing so will inevitably overlook the positive interactions between Southeast Asian and African American students.

Contrary to the stereotypes circulated around Cambodian students within and beyond PCCS, Vanessa was academically successful. Knowing that her African American friends were perceived as academically less capable by many Asian/Asian American students, she was enthusiastic about helping them out. I often observed her offer homework assistance to her African American friends during the morning meeting time. This was the time before the first period when students often had their breakfast,

played board games, or finished remaining homework from last night. When Vanessa arrived in the classroom, she often headed directly to the back of the classroom where two huge tables with faucets for science projects were located. This was the space where she would meet other African American boys during the morning meeting, check on their homework, and offer help when needed. Meanwhile, the rest of the class were playing board games, eating breakfast, chatting, or working on their assignments in the middle and front part of the classroom.

In addition to offering homework assistance, Vanessa also sometimes verbally corrected her African American friends' English in their conversations. During their drawing time in the art class and their homework time during morning meeting time, I heard several times when she asked her African American friends to be watchful for their subject-verb agreement and verb tense uses, especially in sentences where the subject was a third person or the event happened in the past. Her friends did not seem to be bothered by her corrections and they often just continued what they were already talking about.

In reality, narratives of many Asian/Asian American students, including Vanessa herself, often displayed features of subject-verb disagreement and mixed use of past and present tense, but only Vanessa acted publicly to correct her African American students' nonstandard English uses. She seemed to be worried that the use of nonstandard English among her African American friends might further marginalize their status among PCCS students, many of whom subscribed to a non-academic stereotype of African American students. Her help with African American friends' homework and her corrections of their

English, however, still reflected that she agreed with some stereotypes of African Americans that were circulating at PCCS.

They [African Americans] are actually like us. They are like us. They can move well....They [Asians] don't talk to them [African American] as much. Because if you read them [African American], they are different. I have to say that they are not as smart [as Asians]. Most of them are not as smart as Asians because Asians probably develop more brain cells or whatever. They [African Americans] are amazing. They are, although some of them might seem to be a little bit lazy and I try to help them.

It turned out that Vanessa offered help to her African American friends because she did not think they were smart enough and were a little bit lazy. Vanessa's ascription of African Americans as having fewer brain cells is undoubtedly false, and her framing of African American students as "lacking" and "needy," though well-intentioned, indicates that she partakes in "benevolent racism" (cf., Villena, 2001, 2002), which dismisses African American students' resilience. The fact that Vanessa used they/them to refer mostly to African Americans suggested that she did not see herself as part of the group. She did not seem to see herself a full member of the Asian/Asian American group, either, because she used the term "Asians" more often than "we/us" in talking about this group.

In fact, being a Cambodian girl at a school where she was not well received by other Asian/Asian American cliques was difficult for Vanessa. At the end of my interview about her interracial/interethnic friendship, Vanessa said, "I don't really care about friends now. I just care about grades. And when the high school is over, it's going to be college. And I will find real friends in college and high school." Even with a handful of African American friends, Vanessa still felt that she did not have real friends at PCCS and needed to wait until high school and college for real friends. Not being fully

accepted by her Asian/Asian American fellows might explain Vanessa's loneliness at PCCS.

### **6.6 Case #2: Dondon**

While my writing so far seems to indicate that students of Chinese heritage, girls in particular, were least friendly to African American and Cambodian students, I want to present a counter-example of an eighth grader Chinese boy named Dondon. He came to PCCS at grade five from China when I first entered my field site as an ESL volunteer so I had known him for more than two years by the time I started my dissertation study.

Dondon amazed me in many ways: he not only exited ESL class in just two years but his style of dress quickly embodied American youth subculture by the third year he arrived at PCCS (e.g., wearing a tilted baseball hat and baggy pants after school and having gelled hairstyle). His teachers were also amazed to see how much his English had been improved, both academically and conversationally, and how much he could be friends with everybody. When asked what he liked most about PCCS, he cited its diversity, especially in terms of racial and ethnic diversity among students. In responding to my question about who his friends were at PCCS, Dondon said, “很多，什麼種族的都有” (I have many friends and they are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds). His father, according to him, was fine with him dating and making friends with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds because what mattered was one's personal qualities.

Dondon liked to play basketball with African American students in the playground. When I asked him to comment on other Chinese students at PCCS who did not interact with African American students, he responded, “Because I am not racist.” He was distancing himself from other newcomers from China who not only rarely interacted with African American students but also called African Americans “黑鬼”, literally translated as “black ghosts”. In some varieties of Chinese, “black ghosts” are used to refer to black people in general and this term is often considered derogative and racist. Occasionally, a few newcomers from China called African Americans “black ghosts” in their conversations (see an example of this in chapter eight), suggesting their distance from black people. Unlike Vanessa, Dondon was well-received by other Asian/Asian American students, though not so much by other newcomers from China. However, the latter fact did not bother him much since he regarded his ability to be friends with students from different backgrounds as an asset that enabled him to learn from different people.

When I told my observations of interracial friendship among PCCS students to Teacher Diana, who was Dondon’s ELA teacher, she showed me a poem that Dondon wrote in her class. Fascinated by Dondon’s poem, Teacher Diana believed that a closer examination of his piece would provide me with important insights into Dondon’s incredible ability to make interracial friendship. Dondon composed this poem after Teacher Diana played the finalist Alvin Lau’s performance of “Asia-America, Where Have You Gone?” at the National Poetry Slam in 2006. The son of first-generation Chinese immigrants, Lau’s poem spoke about the anger and frustration of losing his

heritage, living through stereotypes, and finding his place in society as an Asian American. See below for how Dondon depicted in his own way similar issues that many children of immigrants face.

MIC  
(Made In China)

I look Chinese  
I speak Chinese  
Duh!  
Cause I am Chinese

But me  
A MIC- (made in China)  
Be losing the languages of being a Chinese  
Be forgetting the phrases that I need to talk to my families  
Be using other languages that don't relates to me

Yeah, I know  
I should feel low  
And be ashamed of myself...

But I'm not  
Cause things be coming  
I like how it's going  
I'm not gonna reject it  
I know I want it  
A cool American life  
Like a zillionaire living in his mansion with handful of money  
Like the bees on the flowers looking for some honey

Yeah it's just my life  
A boy who was  
Made In China  
Starting to enjoy the life as an American  
And LIKING it!

A quick read of this piece might lead someone to think that Dondon was losing his culture and language, something against the school's teaching and that he was rather

unreflective of his becoming American process. However, if we read it within the context that Dondon in fact was particularly good at making friends with African American students and was academically successful, Dondon's ability to write poems in what appears to be a rap style calls for more attention. To begin with, Dondon was not losing his language and culture and instead, he had highly positive identification with his heritage. His wishes for the Mandarin class were to learn both traditional and simplified characters so he could read more Chinese books, not only those published in China, but also in Hong Kong or Taiwan. He hoped to keep learning Mandarin and improving his English so he could become a good Mandarin-English translator in the future. Dondon understood that if he did not keep learning Mandarin, he would lose it very quickly because he had found that he could not recall how to write many Chinese characters that he learned back in China.

Dondon surely was aware of the stigma attached to someone who lost his/her heritage because he attended a school that basically existed for the purpose of preventing immigrant students from suffering this stigma. While Lau approached this issue with much anger and frustration in his slam poetry, Dondon gave this all-too-common immigrant experience with a new twist in his poem that had some features of a rap, including the use of invariant *be*, simile as well as boasting about one's wealth. In following some rappers' tradition that celebrates materialism, Dondon adopted a seemingly deficit, and yet popular point of view toward one's heritage at the beginning, but then he claimed that he was not caught in that low feeling about himself because his

American dream (in the form of economic upward mobility) was going to be realized soon.

As mentioned earlier, one may see this piece as a rather uncritical piece written by an immigrant student who romanticized the hurdles that many immigrants would face. However, I argue that this piece is an indication of how well Dondon was versed in the genre of free-style poetry, which had its roots in African American cultures. It could be that his good grasp of rap came from his regular interactions with his African American peers, or his embrace of or interest in African American youth cultures drew him closer to his African American peers at PCCS. As an academically successful student, Dondon was able to challenge the commonly held “FOB” (“Fresh off the Boat”) stereotype around late arrival immigrant students from Asia who are uncool and non-English-speaking, and the “gangster” stereotype around second generation Asian American students who dress and talk like African American students and are not concerned about academics.

### **6.7 Recapitulation and Comments**

Moving beyond just a black and white lens in understanding racial interactions at a multiracial urban school, my analyses have indicated that stereotypes about African American and Asian/Asian American categories of people run rampant even at a socially-engaging and conscious school that aspires to implement an all-inclusive curriculum. The fact that many PCCS students’ friendships are racially based seems to suggest that solidarity is not well established among African American and Asian/Asian American



students. However, a closer look at the lived experiences of a Cambodian student, Vanessa reveals the need to shift the lens to look beyond racial categories. Interracial friendships were established at PCCS, especially so between African American students and Cambodian students. The case of a newcomer student, Dondon also challenges the perceived notion of FOB and sheds light on the power of African American popular culture in understanding his frequent and amiable interactions with African American peers at school.

## 7. MANDARIN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION AT PCCS

### 7.1 Background Information and Overview

PCCS offers Chinese language education in the form of Mandarin to all students. Since very few primary schools offer a non-Romance language during regular school hours and quite many PCCS staff and students identify the Mandarin program as something unique about PCCS during the interviews, the provision of Mandarin language class is a major organizing alternative at PCCS that merits special examination. Middle schoolers at PCCS had three sessions of Mandarin class in the 2009-2010 academic year as part of the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), but classes were then reduced to 1.5 sessions in the 2010-2011 academic year due to the elimination of FLAP funding. Like many other Mandarin programs across the U.S., PCCS divides all students into two tracks, placing Chinese speakers of all different varieties (i.e., lumping Cantonese, Fujianese, Mandarin together as “Chinese”) in the heritage language track and the rest of all students who are not ethnically Chinese in the foreign language track. At the time this research was conducted, about 60% of PCCS students took Mandarin as a foreign language, making the foreign language track class size bigger than heritage language track.

In this chapter, I will explore teaching and learning in Mandarin class, focusing on the experiences of students who learned Mandarin as a foreign language. I deliberately choose to use the term “Mandarin” instead of “Chinese” to refer to the language taught at PCCS throughout my writing to avoid the lumping effect that I briefly discussed in Chapter Three. Besides, the term “Chinese” can have multiple meanings depending on

the context. It can be used as a noun to refer to one or multiple languages, a group of people from China, or an ethnic group of people who have ancestral connections to China (e.g., ethnic Chinese). It can also be used as an adjective to describe the cultural values and practices associated with this group of people. In any case, the term “Chinese” encompasses a wide range of experiences and languages shared among a diverse group of people. Since this chapter and the next one focus on language education, it becomes necessary to make a distinction between different varieties of Chinese languages to better understand the lived experiences of the focal students, especially those who were placed in the heritage track, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. I use the term “Chinese” to loosely refer to ethnic Chinese people or the cultural values they were often associated with and cultural practices that they often were engaged with. I recognize the fact that this group is not a monolithic group but I still need to use the term to describe this group that has some shared, be they real or imagined, ethnicity, cultural values and practices. I use Mandarin to refer to the language being taught at PCCS, although when reporting students and teachers’ direct speech, I keep their use of the term “Chinese” and do not change it to Mandarin. I will disambiguate this term whenever necessary.

In the following sections, I first introduce Teacher Chelsea, who teaches the foreign language track at PCCS. Next, I report three themes that emerged from the data. In line with my overall research aims, my analyses strive to situate students’ Mandarin learning within the broader social context of foreign language education in the U.S. It is also important to stress again that my focus is not to evaluate Teacher Chelsea’s teaching,

but to focus on how her students' Mandarin learning experiences were mediated by factors beyond her actual classroom.

## **7.2 Meeting Foreign Language Teacher: Teacher Chelsea**

Teacher Chelsea was the instructor for all the kindergarten to eighth graders who were learning Mandarin as a foreign language and had taught Mandarin at PCCS for two years by the time I started my study. Teacher Chelsea identified herself as Anglo American in my interview with her. She learned Mandarin as a foreign language in college and had the opportunity to study it intensively in China for a few months as an undergraduate business major student. Before she was hired as a Mandarin teacher, she was the student teacher of sixth and seventh grade English Language Arts at PCCS. When the former Mandarin teacher left PCCS, Teacher Chelsea was encouraged by PCCS staff to take over this position and thus she went ahead to get an instructional add-on certificate in teaching Mandarin. Part of the certification requirements are that candidates achieve intermediate high or above on the oral and written Mandarin assessment in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). It took her much effort to finally pass the test that she had failed twice. Teacher Chelsea noted that her primary visions for her students are to “help them develop interest in learning Chinese and to come away having felt like [they have developed] a certain level of mastery” because “most of us have to wait until middle school [to learn a foreign language] and we don't even know what we have learned [about a language]” (Recorded interview, 06.21.2011).

Teaching over 250 students across kindergarten to eighth grade is an extremely challenging task for any teacher, but even more so for Teacher Chelsea who learned Mandarin as a foreign language herself because according to her, she needs to spend extra time going over Mandarin language vocabulary words, tones and sentence structures that might seemed intuitive to native speakers of Mandarin. She was honest in telling me that even after so many years of learning Mandarin, she still struggles with Mandarin tones and many less-commonly used vocabulary words. She recalled that she “freaked out” when she suddenly forgot the tones for Cambodia when she taught nationalities to seventh graders. During the same week, she had units on family members, ages, and transportations for different grades and it was hard for her to remember all the Mandarin vocabulary words and their associated tones (Field notes, 11.29.2010).

Teaching Mandarin at a school where a good number of staff and students is already proficient in Mandarin creates much stress for Teacher Chelsea because she worries that they would overhear her students’ Mandarin in other school spaces. She is often concerned about whether her Mandarin is one hundred percent correct, and she placed high demands on her students for correctness in their Mandarin assignments, many of which are put on display outside of her classroom. She felt particularly insecure about her Mandarin proficiency when teaching older students because they tend to ask her vocabulary words that she does not know. For example, when she taught a unit on clothing, her eighth graders asked her how to say skinny jeans and hoodies in Mandarin, and she was not able to answer the questions right on the spot.

As a native speaker of Mandarin, I put in much effort to make Teacher Chelsea believe that I was not there to evaluate her proficiency in Mandarin or teaching but to understand her students' learning experiences. It took a long time before we finally built a more collegial relationship that afforded me an important role in her teaching and lesson planning. During her teaching breaks, she would often ask me idiomatic expressions in Mandarin and discuss with me activities that she designed for her students. Teacher Chelsea would often direct students' questions to me in front of the class when she was not able to answer them, many of which were about vocabulary words in Mandarin and some on cultural practices in China. At the end of my study, Teacher Chelsea treated me to lunch in a restaurant in Chinatown because in her own words, "I feel I have been co-teaching the class with you" (Direct quotes from field notes, 5.21.2010).

When students made their way to Teacher Chelsea's classroom before class began, they would often stand in line outside of her classroom. Teacher Chelsea would then shake her hand with every single student while she said *Nihao* (Hello!) to each of them. In response, students would also say *Nihao* back to Teacher Chelsea and then go to their assigned seats. There were four tables in the classroom and each table would seat up to five students. Students' seating assignments were based on how well students could work together as partners. There were several times when Teacher Chelsea had to rearrange her assignments because some students tended to talk to one another in ways that she thought were distracting to the class.

Now I turn to three most salient themes from my data analyses. First of all, learning Mandarin is extremely challenging for students with no exposure to it beyond Teacher Chelsea's classroom. Much class time is dedicated to building students' basic knowledge in Mandarin, which in turn has a direct impact on their investment in learning Mandarin. Secondly, the legitimacy of Mandarin education for all students at PCCS is constantly challenged by Teacher Chelsea's students. Finally, Teacher Chelsea's teaching moves beyond teaching of traditional Chinese culture to engage students in learning about sociopolitical issues in contemporary China, which is arguably the most positive theme for Mandarin as a foreign language education at PCCS.

**7.3. Theme One: Learning Mandarin is extremely challenging for students with no exposure to it beyond Teacher Chelsea's classroom. Much class time is dedicated to building students' basic knowledge in Mandarin, which in turn has a direct impact on their investment in learning Mandarin.**

Both observation data and interview data indicate that the majority of Teacher Chelsea's students have much difficulty and frustration in learning a language that is classified by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State as a Category 4 (super-hard) language for English speakers. The FSI estimates that an English speaker would need to spend approximately 2,200 hours of learning Mandarin to reach general professional proficiency in Mandarin, compared to 575-600 hours of learning a Romance language, like Spanish. General professional proficiency is defined as being able to "speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to

participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations” and to “read within a normal range of speed and with almost complete comprehension” (Interagency Language Roundtable, 2012). This suggests that Teacher Chelsea’s students would need to work extra hard for them to feel that they were, to at least some degree, proficient in Mandarin. However, the fact that they have only three hours of Mandarin class per week, combined with another fact that they do not have any opportunities to use Mandarin beyond the language classroom, makes it hard for them to develop basic proficiency in this language.

To ensure students’ comprehension, Teacher Chelsea’s language use in the Mandarin class is predominately in English, and translation is an important part of her teaching. She often poses the question, “What does this mean?” whenever a Mandarin word or phrase came up. Her use of Mandarin is limited to the language forms that she aims to teach in a given lesson. The majority of linguistic tokens of Mandarin that I documented from Teacher Chelsea’s class are at the word and phrasal levels, with very few tokens at sentence or discourse levels. Because students are not able to produce long stretches of sentences in Mandarin without much assistance, Teacher Chelsea often teaches short conversations that involved multiple interlocutors, each of whom is responsible to only one or two lines.

As a result, students’ Mandarin use is rather simple, as are the tasks that require them to use Mandarin. For example, students might be able to say in Mandarin what sport activity they like, but they are not able to articulate why they like it. Not being able to express themselves in Mandarin to the extent that would allow them to engage in more complex conversations creates a negative impact on students’ investment in Mandarin.



Many students that I interviewed are frustrated about not being able to converse in Mandarin after several years of learning at PCCS. In the excerpt below, Teacher Chelsea talks about how her vision of helping her students to develop some proficiency in Mandarin is hard to achieve with limited hours of instruction at PCCS:

It's really hard to maintain a vision when you don't have the kids on a daily basis, which is impossible for Chinese, for like something you always hear your teacher say like, "For the beginning of the year, you just practice procedures for the first three weeks, right?" But if I practice [them] for 15 days, that will be half of the year. Like that's an equivalence. Do you know what I mean? So it's really hard to get in place. Even if you try your best, and like everybody being on board with the procedures and expectations, so if a child is absent for one day, or there's a field trip for one day, things can get derailed easily. (Recorded interview, 06.21.2011)

According to Teacher Chelsea, lessons need to be repeated several times because students tend to retain little Mandarin once they leave the classroom. Each unit has to build upon prior units, and when her students do not develop basic proficiency in Mandarin due to limited hours of instruction at school and without reinforcement at home, she finds it almost impossible to design activities that are cognitively challenging and engaging to her older students. Since both foreign language students and heritage language students' work are displayed outside of the classrooms, Teacher Chelsea often compares her students to heritage language students and complains that her students are not able to participate in age-appropriate and content-rich tasks due to their limited proficiencies. She explains that this is the major reason why her students show little interest in learning Mandarin.

Students' lack of participation and motivation then become major sources of Teacher Chelsea's frustrations. Through the course of my study, when we discussed her seventh and eighth grade classes, Teacher Chelsea noted several times in our

conversations that she did not know how to motivate her seventh and eighth graders. A good number of students, eighth graders in particular, are often off-task when they are in Mandarin class. While some students would make an effort to participate in the activities when approached by Teacher Chelsea individually, others continue to remain silent or put on blank faces. It is common to see some students completing assignments from other classes when they are supposed to be doing group projects; some even put their heads down on the table. Teacher Chelsea is sometimes embarrassed about me witnessing her students' lack of participation in her classroom, and her embarrassment sometimes turns to anger and bitterness. Teaching eighth graders creates much stress for Teacher Chelsea because "this is the group that made me [her] want to quit" (Direct quotes from field notes, 09.27.2011). To make sure that the students do not fail her tests, Teacher Chelsea often needs to brief her students about what will be on the tests. She lets students collectively pick out three vocabulary words to be included on the test so that students can spend their time and energy in memorizing the target words. Most of the tests ask students to translate from English to Mandarin or Mandarin to English, and she often includes a few questions that students can do for extra points.

While this group of students might appear quite unmotivated to learn Mandarin, their alleged lack of motivation could probably be better understood from the investment and imagined community perspectives. According to Norton (2000), when learners invest in learning a new language, they need to see the capital that it will bring them and that their learning will move them closer toward their future desired communities. A closer examination of students' narratives, especially those who show little participation in the

class, suggests that they do not see learning Mandarin as relevant to their current or future communities and thus they have little interest in investing their time in learning it.

I don't really like Chinese because it's kind of boring and hard....I feel we are kind of like put into the class. (Recorded interview, 03.19. 2011)

I think that it's okay to learn [Mandarin] but I don't know if it will help me in the long run....I don't hate it or nothing like that. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

We only recognize Chinese while we're in Chinese class but we forget about it when we're in other place because no need for it. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

The majority of the students that I interviewed understand that PCCS's provision of Mandarin is unique in the context of the local district and that this language is strongly connected to China, a country with growing world power. However, many also noted that learning a language that "has crazy strokes and tones" is extremely hard for English speakers with no exposure to Mandarin at home (Direct quotes from field notes, 05.02.2011). Those students who have attended the Mandarin program at PCCS for several years know that at this rate of learning, they will not acquire the language proficiency that will help them function in any Mandarin-speaking community. The students who see little to no prospects and capital in learning Mandarin show the least participation and most resistance in class.

While one might argue that PCCS's Mandarin foreign language education provides students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds with an opportunity to learn a language with growing capital in the current globalized economy, it is as important to examine if other factors necessary for language acquisition are available to facilitate students' Mandarin learning. Offering students Mandarin instruction only three

hours a week is obviously not sufficient for them to develop much proficiency in Mandarin, especially since compared to Romance languages it would require relatively more time to develop functional proficiency. This factor turns out to be crucial in mediating students' investment in learning Mandarin. Teacher Chelsea used her own French learning experience at high school and college to illustrate how after several years of learning, she was still not proficient in the language. When she said that, she probably was showing some empathy toward her students' struggle in learning an even more challenging language. Her vision for her Mandarin students to be able to develop some proficiency when they leave PCCS turns out to be quite difficult to realize. Toward the end of the semester, Teacher Chelsea was so frustrated about her older students' proficiency level and participation in the class that she concluded, "Maybe FLAP is just not good" (Direct quotes from field notes, 06.21.2011) since it only allows for a few hours of instruction in Mandarin during a regular school day. Teacher Chelsea wondered aloud with me if, after all, what she envisions for her students would require an immersion program that spends half day in English and half day in Mandarin (Field notes, 06.21.2011).

#### **7.4 Theme Two: The legitimacy of Mandarin education for all students at PCCS is constantly challenged by students who learn it as a foreign language.**

A repeated theme that I documented throughout my interviews and interactions with PCCS students is that many of them perceive Mandarin education as something PCCS imposed upon students with no heritage connection to the language. As mentioned

earlier, according to the Foreign Service Institute, L1 English speakers need to invest a lot of time in learning a typologically different language like Mandarin before they achieve general proficiency in this language. Learning Mandarin as L1 English speakers and teaching Mandarin to L1 English speakers thus poses many challenges and creates much frustration for both students and Teacher Chelsea. While both Teacher Chelsea and students often note the difficult nature of learning Mandarin for English speaking learners, many students further highlight the imposed aspect of Mandarin education at PCCS.

A good number of students question why they need to learn a language that very few high schools in the local district offer. They see little future for their current Mandarin language learning at PCCS, which does not help them develop much proficiency after all, to be fostered beyond the PCCS context. Learning a Romance language seems to be a more tangible option for the students as they believe that it is easier for them not only to develop functional proficiency from the beginning of language learning, but it is also possible to attain a higher proficiency in it in high school, since many high schools in the district offer coursework in Romance languages. Some academic-oriented students even incorrectly believe that their Mandarin learning at PCCS disqualifies them to apply for one of the best public high schools in the area because they think that school only accepts students with prior learning experiences of a Romance language.

The fact that PCCS offers another heritage track for ethnic Chinese students creates some backfire among students who are put in the foreign language track.

Remember that students in the foreign language track come from very diverse linguistic backgrounds, and some even question why they are not given opportunities to learn or identify with their heritage languages. Many comment that since PCCS has already placed a heavy emphasis on Asian cultures, it should offer non-Asian languages to its students to make it more like other schools in the U.S. In a small group discussion in which I sought to understand students' resistance in learning Mandarin, Aisha, an African American girl, said, "Since there are already many Chinese in this school, aren't we supposed to learn something else, other than Chinese? It's unfair for us to learn Chinese because they [Chinese students] already know that" (Recorded interview, 10.26.2010). This issue of fairness and unfairness came up several times during my interactions with seventh and eighth grade non-heritage language learners, particularly among some African American and a few Latino students, who questioned why they need to learn an Asian language when they are not Asian themselves.

Below is a vignette that documented how a seventh grader of Puerto Rican heritage, Moya, kept questioning the meaning of learning Mandarin at PCCS in middle of the Mandarin class.

Teacher Chelsea gives back students' midterms and tries to go over the questions with the whole class. Moya is not satisfied with her grades so she keeps asking Teacher Chelsea why she did not get the points she deserved, especially she thought she already tried to write down something on that particular question. Teacher Chelsea walked to her seat, looked at her sheet and explained to her in a volume that is not audible to me. Moya does not really pay attention to what Teacher Chelsea said, but turns to students sitting in the back table and asks, "Does our grade in Chinese affect our high school application?" several times. Some students said yes, but most students sitting in the back remain in silent. Moya continues to say, "We are not going to learn Chinese in high school. We are going to learn Spanish in high school. What's the purpose of learning Chinese now?" (paraphrased from memory). Wendy, who is sitting next to Moya adds that

some schools also teach French so Spanish is not the only other language that they get to learn in high school. Since nobody could answer her question of whether their performance in Teacher Chelsea's class would influence their high school admission, a girl sitting in the back then turned to ask Teacher Chelsea this question. Teacher Chelsea responds, "Yes, because your grades on Chinese will appear in your transcript". Moya is very upset to hear that. She keeps complaining that since no high school is going to teach Chinese, then "Why bother to learn it now?" Some other boys join the conversation and suddenly their voices submerge Moya's. Teacher Chelsea has to interrupt the conversation and she tells Moya right in her face, "This is not the time and place where we are going to discuss why we need to learn Chinese. This is the school's policy. If you have questions, go to talk to the principal!" Teacher Chelsea also tells the class that she already is so tired of answering questions of this kind that she refused to make any comment on this question at this moment and beyond. (Field notes, 10.26.2010)

As can be seen from the vignette, when questioning Mandarin education at PCCS, Moya made several references to the foreign language educational practices at the broader district level, which she believed did not include Mandarin education. Moya was not able to make sense of her learning of Mandarin at PCCS because she foresaw the disappearance of her knowledge of Mandarin after she graduated from PCCS. Moya asked her fellow classmates to help her find an answer to her tedious learning experience probably because she anticipated that she would not be able to get a good answer from Teacher Chelsea, who was annoyed at being bombarded with similar questions.

After this particular class, Teacher Chelsea apologized to me because she felt it was inappropriate for her to lose control of her temper in front of me and the rest of the class. However, her anger and frustration resulted from the repeated questioning from not just her students but some of their parents as well. When I asked her how she responded to those questions, Teacher Chelsea simply told me that deep in her mind, she

actually wanted to tell these students to transfer to other schools since nobody forced them to come to PCCS.

Students' questioning of the learning of Mandarin at PCCS might be related to several factors beyond the walls of Teacher Chelsea's classroom. One might be related to Mandarin's relatively new status in the U.S. foreign language educational system. According to a survey done by the Center for Applied Linguistics, only one percent of middle and high schools with foreign language programs offered Chinese, including Mandarin and Cantonese, as a foreign language in 1999 (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). Even though Mandarin is on the rise in foreign language education, the number of programs is still small. In 2008, only four percent of secondary schools with foreign language programs offered a Chinese language program (most likely in the form of Mandarin) while 93% of them offered Spanish (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). Situated in such an educational context, Teacher Chelsea's students knew that they had little opportunity to further their proficiency in Mandarin beyond PCCS when the pipeline for Mandarin language education was still nascent.

When Teacher Chelsea's students and parents challenge the legitimacy of Mandarin education for all students at PCCS, they also highlight that this language policy only allows the opportunity for ethnic Chinese students to identify with their own heritage language and as a result, Mandarin language learning becomes an easy experience for heritage learners (which is not necessarily the case, as my next chapter shows). Although the PCCS school pledge states that all people have a right to use their own languages and honor their own cultures, in reality, only the largest ethnic student



group's language receives systematic institutional support from PCCS. In other words, only a handful of students are able to cultivate their heritage language at school. That is why Moya accused PCCS of doing the opposite of what the school preached in the interview with me (Paraphrased quotes from field notes, 05.18.2011).

In response to students' frequent complaints, Teacher Chelsea argued that the parents could have chosen to send their children to a school without such a language policy, but other ethnic Chinese teachers that I talked to feel this complaint might indicate a deeper historical issue: Asian Americans, Chinese Americans in particular, have been deprived of the right and opportunity to identify with their own heritages in institutions for so long that non-Chinese students and parents are not receptive to educational alternatives that focus on Chinese American students' empowerment and identification. These teachers believe that fewer parents and children would voice their complaints if the school's focus was on Latino students' empowerment and their learning of Spanish. The data presented here suggest that an examination of the Mandarin learning experiences of PCCS's foreign language students cannot not be separated from an examination of how Mandarin is situated in relation to other non-English languages in the U.S. educational system, both diachronically and synchronically.

Of particular relevance to the discussion of Mandarin foreign language education at PCCS is the notion of elite bilingualism. As mentioned in Chapter three, the U.S. has a long history of promoting bilingualism among upper-middle class English-speakers and thus non-English language learning for the larger population at primary and secondary schools has been rare. It has been even rarer for students from economically

disadvantaged backgrounds to attend primary and secondary schools that offered non-English language education. The survey funded by Center for Applied Linguistics confirms that it is less likely for rural schools and schools serving lower socioeconomic students to offer foreign language education (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). Paradoxically, while PCCS's provision of Mandarin for all of its students of working-class backgrounds could possibly serve as a potential equalizer in theory, the very students that PCCS could empower through Mandarin language education are critical about this language requirement because they do not feel empowered by learning this language. Since learning and teaching a non-English and non-Romance language in the U.S. educational system is not an established convention, offering a language like Mandarin would require much work from the school to establish it as a legitimate course subject. Three sessions of Mandarin per week at PCCS do not seem to be enough for PCCS to combat the longstanding and deep-rooted views toward the teaching and learning of non-Romance languages in the school system, even though Mandarin enjoys growing prestige in current U.S. political and educational discourse for its function to serve the nation's needs (Asia Society, 2005)

Another important factor that seems to explain FL students' resistance to learning Mandarin is its low visibility in the PCCS language ecology and little relevance to non-ethnic Chinese students. Many African American students at PCCS told me that they would like to learn Cambodian or Indonesian because these are the languages spoken by their good friends at school. This corresponds to my observation of interracial friendships at PCCS, which reveals more frequent interactions between African American students

and Southeast Asian students, and is similar to Howard (2008) who discusses the importance of the language practices of children's peer groups in determining which languages are adopted by children. In fact, as the next chapter on PCCS' Mandarin heritage language education will illustrate, Mandarin is not a language vital to HLLs' identities and social networks. As a result, many PCCS students challenge the legitimacy of learning a language that not only is super hard to learn, is offered only in a few schools, but also has low representation in the PCCS local language ecology. These students' investment in learning Mandarin diminishes when they do not see learning Mandarin help move them closer to their imagined communities.

**7.5 Theme Three: Mandarin as a foreign language education at PCCS moves beyond teaching of traditional Chinese culture to engage students in learning about sociopolitical issues in contemporary China.**

Because Mandarin as a foreign language class is situated at a school with such a strong focus on social justice, this class offers a space for its students to develop their awareness and understanding of contemporary sociopolitical issues in greater China, and this is arguably the most positive theme for the Mandarin as a foreign language class. Since Teacher Chelsea claims that she cannot design developmentally and cognitively challenging language tasks for her older students due to their Mandarin proficiencies, she deliberately engages students with intellectually-rich English texts on human rights issues in contemporary China. Though she is not teaching Mandarin language per se, Teacher

Chelsea, who pays much attention to the sociopolitical issues in China during her free time, spent time in class talking about these issues.

The two most salient examples that I documented were her lessons on two Chinese social activists: artist, architect, and sociopolitical critic Ai Weiwei, and Liu Xiaobo, a writer, professor, and human rights activist. In both cases, to engage students with discussions on the contemporary political situation in China, Teacher Chelsea used authentic English newspaper articles on Mr. Ai's and Mr. Liu's personal history and political engagement, which also discussed the Chinese government's reaction to their political critiques. Teacher Chelsea used both figures as topics for teaching at a time when Mr. Ai was confined by the Chinese police (November, 2010) and when Mr. Liu was granted the Nobel Peace Prize (December 2010), which coincided with the time when I conducted my research study at PCCS. In other words, if Teacher Chelsea's students read American news coverage on China during their free time, these were the exact types of news that they would possibly encounter.

In her actual teaching, Teacher Chelsea encouraged her students to not only share with the class new information that they learned about Mr. Ai and Mr. Liu but also to draw connections between what they read about these two prominent figures and what they had learned in other classes. She also asked students what the differences were between personal freedoms allowed in the U.S. and China based on the lengthy English newspaper texts that she provided. While some students shared their thoughts on how Chinese people did not have much freedom under the control of a communist government, others commented on how freedom was something that people had to fight

for and not something that people were granted. This latter group of students shared with the class what they had learned about the imprisonment of Martin Luther King, Jr. in his fight for the liberation of African Americans back in the 60s in their “Leadership” elective class. Even though Teacher Chelsea originally intended to have students compare the notion of freedom in contemporary China and the U.S., students who had been educated at PCCS were able to analyze this notion from a historical perspective that highlighted the commonality in the pursuit of freedom between the two countries. Also some students noted that in the face of governmental violence, it took extraordinary human courage to fight for freedom, a comment that seemed to be reminiscent of a major theme taught in another elective<sup>3</sup> class called “Courageous Conversations,” which engages students in understanding that one needs to be courageous when confronting discrimination and that it takes much courage to stand up for others in creating a peaceful and equitable society.

Teacher Chelsea’s discussions of Mr. Ai’s and Mr. Liu’s cases are also in line with PCCS’s emphasis on understanding how different perspectives are constructed differently by those with and without power, a general focus of a school-wide event, “Many Points of View Day.” As mentioned in chapter five, PCCS did not celebrate Columbus Day, but instead called it “Many Points of View Day” and full attendance was expected. One of the goals of this day was to help students develop critical eyes towards history, specifically how history is constructed differently from different perspectives and for different purposes. In teaching Mr. Ai’s and Mr. Liu’s lives, Teacher Chelsea did not seek to vilify the Chinese government, but instead she raised questions that did not

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<sup>3</sup> More discussions on different electives appear in Chapter Five.

necessarily have easy answers. For instance, she asked, “What is contradictory about the Chinese government’s treatment of Mr. Ai?” and “Why do you think the Chinese government is treating Mr. Ai in the ways described in the article?” Both questions enabled students to critically reflect upon a controversial social event that might be interpreted differently by different people for different purposes. For instance, while Mr. Ai helped design the renowned Bird’s Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, he later disavowed his role, saying the government had transformed the Games into a patriotic celebration instead of using them to create a more open society. The Chinese government has a love-hate relationship with one of its most famous living artists and most vociferous domestic critics. Teacher Chelsea’s way of teaching Mr. Ai’s life provided her students with an opportunity to delve into a complex sociopolitical event in contemporary China and develop a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese government and the political situation in China. In addition, when she taught the piece on Mr. Liu’s being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Teacher Chelsea invited students to think about why some countries did not send representatives to the Nobel ceremony honoring Liu Xiaobao.

Teacher Chelsea’s teaching of human right issues pertinent to contemporary China exemplifies how PCCS students are envisioned as critical beings who are attentive to social justice issues not just within their living vicinity, but also in other parts of the world. Students’ critical analytical skills are fostered and furthered in multiple spaces at PCCS, including different electives, school-wide events and the Mandarin class. It should be noted that discussions on human right issues are very rare in Mandarin language

classes elsewhere because no Chinese government-sanctioned textbooks touch upon such controversial issues. Many topics, including Dala Lama, Tibet, Taiwan, and China's military buildup are proscribed in the textbooks published by the Confucius Institutes, which sends China-trained Mandarin language teachers to hundreds of "Confucius classrooms" in high schools around the world (Guttenplan, 2012).

In fact, teaching culture in foreign language programs in U.S. school has often remained "little more than the recognition of a few isolated historical and geographical facts, holiday customs, and food preferences associated with speakers of a language other than English" (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005, p.358). More often than not, teaching Chinese culture in Mandarin language class focuses on static and traditional cultural practices and holidays in China. My own teaching experience at a federally-funded STARTALK Mandarin summer program for high schoolers indicates that teaching of paper cutting, fan dancing, and martial arts is not contextualized and thus offers little information for students to understand and appreciate these traditional practices. The rationale beyond teaching traditional cultural practices is often to arouse beginner foreign language learners' interest in learning Mandarin, but doing so also without enough contextualized information runs the risk of exoticizing the Chinese people's doing and knowing.

Teacher Chelsea's choice of teaching social issues in contemporary China is itself a courageous act because of her intention to engage students in issues that are generally not talked about in beginning language classes. She does that not without concern; in fact, Teacher Chelsea told me that she was often very worried that students would mistakenly think she was criticizing Chinese cultures. However, she also thinks it is important for her

students to learn about some aspects of contemporary China that are not often discussed in Mandarin language classrooms. It is also very likely that her original training as a subject content teacher gives her insights and expertise in analyzing and teaching social events in ways similar to PCCS' general teaching.

Teacher Chelsea was also very conscientious about my Taiwanese identity as soon as she learned that I am not from China, but Taiwan. When teaching a unit on nationalities, she purposely added Taiwan to the vocabulary list for her students because the Chinese government-sanctioned Mandarin language textbooks do not regard Taiwan as a legitimate country, but as a part of China. When she introduced the vocabulary words of Taiwan and Taiwanese to the class, she also gave a brief introduction of the complex history of Taiwan and China and made a case as to why she viewed it as a legitimate country. She did so without any direct reference to the fact that I was actually from Taiwan. Throughout her teaching of nationalities, she also included Taiwanese and Taiwan in the review sheet, which suggested that she viewed them as important vocabulary as other nationalities included in the textbook. Perhaps due to students' identification with the minoritized status of Taiwan in the face of the Chinese super power, many students in seventh and eighth grade chose to "be" Taiwanese in a speaking activity that asked them to put on a new national identity in the conversation skits. At the end of this activity, Teacher Chelsea finally told the students that I was also from Taiwan and was a Taiwanese. Many students were excited to hear that and some asked me about life in Taiwan during the student interviews.



In another occasion when Teacher Chelsea discussed with the heritage language teacher, Teacher Meihua and me, about which big cities to include in their teaching of major cities in China for both tracks of students, Teacher Chelsea made the following statement:

I don't want to include Taipei [in my teaching] this time. Is that okay? I don't want them [my students] to get confused. They might learn in one textbook that Taiwan isn't part of China and learn that it is part of Taiwan in all the Chinese textbooks, but I don't want to teach something that's contradictory to what they already learn in their other classes (reconstructed from field notes, 10.04.2010).

Teacher Meihua agreed that they did not need to include Taiwan in their lessons and she thought it was a good idea to be mindful, “especially in this school.” Teacher Chelsea repeated after Teacher Meihua and said, “Yes, especially in this school, I think we should not include Taiwan in this case” (Direct quotes from field notes, 10.04.2010). Here we see how Teacher Chelsea rationalized her choice of not including Taiwan in a unit on China as something in line with PCCS's general commitment to creating a socially responsible world as she spoke to Teacher Meihua, who was originally from China and might see Taiwan as part of China. It was also possible that Teacher Chelsea's attentiveness to the complex issue between China and Taiwan in her teaching was related to my heavy involvement in and with her class, which had a direct impact on how she designed her lesson in a way that recognized my political identity and stance. As a result of Teacher Chelsea's conscientious efforts, her students had the opportunity to extend what they had learned in other classes in the Mandarin class. Even though her students might end up not developing the necessary language proficiency that Teacher Chelsea and they had hoped, these students at least had the opportunity to practice their critical

analytical skills through examinations of sociopolitical events in contemporary China.

## **7.6 Recapitulation and Comments**

The analyses presented in this chapter have shown that students seem to resist learning the linguistic component of Mandarin for various reasons. Mandarin is a super-hard language for L1 English speakers to learn and thus much class time is dedicated to learning basic vocabulary words and sentence structures. As a result, students are frustrated about their Mandarin learning experiences and the students who show the most frustration and resistance about their inability to develop functional proficiency in this language are those who had learned Mandarin for several years at PCCS. In addition, students' Mandarin learning experience is mediated by broader educational practices that rarely include teaching Mandarin as a foreign language in secondary schools. When students see little opportunity for them to continue their Mandarin learning in the future, their current investment in Mandarin learning diminishes. Also quite a few students note the imposed aspect of Mandarin education at PCCS and argue that it better serves the ethnic Chinese students who learn it as a heritage language. The legitimacy of Mandarin education for all is further challenged by students who see little relevance of learning Mandarin in their own social network. While students are not able to develop much language proficiency in Mandarin at PCCS, they are able to develop critical analysis of China in the language classroom. Situated in a school with a strong social activist focus, coupled with the fact that Teacher Chelsea is a content subject teacher instead of a foreign language teacher by training, her Mandarin class becomes a space where students

further their critical analytical skills towards contemporary social issues in China. More educational implications as to how to better serve this student population will be further addressed in the conclusion chapter.

## **8. MANDARIN HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION AT PCCS**

### **8.1 Overview**

About 40% of PCCS students are placed in the heritage track. The selection to teach “Chinese” seems to be reasonable at first sight because the largest student population is of Chinese heritage and the school is located near the local Chinatown, which not only offers a safe learning environment but also is home to many of its students. However, as this chapter will show, ethnic Chinese students’ Mandarin learning at PCCS is more complex than at first blush because each student has different historical, social and linguistic experiences in relation to Mandarin, and therefore responds differently to Mandarin education at PCCS. As with the last chapter on foreign language education, I first introduce the heritage track instructor and give a brief overview of her teaching.

### **8.2 Meeting Heritage Language Teacher: Teacher Meihua**

Teacher Meihua is the instructor for the kindergarten to eighth grade of the heritage track and has taught Mandarin at PCCS for two years. She immigrated to the U.S. from China in her late twenties and has been in the U.S. more than five years, during which she earned her second bachelor’s degree in special education at a local university. Her home language is Teochew, but she learned Mandarin in school in China and learned Cantonese much later when she attended college in Guangdong province where, according to her, Cantonese is essential in order to live.

Teacher Meihua is a hardworking and conscientious teacher who strives to develop age-appropriate lessons for her students. As a novice teacher, she told me, she often works at home until two in the morning because she wants to make sure her activities arouse students' interest in learning Mandarin. During my pre-dissertation involvement at her class, I often saw her review and revise the lesson plans that she wrote the night before during her lunch or teaching break. She wrote different lesson plans for all her 18 heritage classes per week.

When I observe or help in Teacher Meihua's class, she always asks me for feedback at the end of the class. In our conversations, she frequently reflects on her teaching and often shows much interest in learning more about research literature on heritage language education and in meeting other Mandarin teachers in the area. During my involvement at PCCS, I helped connect her with other experienced Mandarin teachers that I know in the area and arranged for her some classroom observations in one local high school Mandarin class.

Teacher Meihua is particularly adept at developing arts and crafts related activities and her students' art work is displayed in her classroom, as well as on the bulletin boards outside of her classroom. Teacher Meihua has very strong rapport with many of her students. They often greet her in energetic voices when they see her in the hallway and many of her fifth graders regularly come to her classroom during lunch time to socialize with her or check out Chinese books from her bookshelf located at the corner of her classroom.

Many of the seventh and eighth grade HLLs also have good rapport with Teacher Meihua personally. Even though they do not spend their lunch break in her classroom, they often greet Teacher Meihua on their way to or out of the cafeteria, which is across from the Mandarin classroom. In the student interviews, many students note that Teacher Meihua is very approachable and nice. Those students who have attended local Chinese weekend schools state that Teacher Meihua's teaching is far better than the weekend school because she explains vocabulary in detail and fosters a pleasant learning environment.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, students need to travel to different classrooms for different subjects. When students arrive at Teacher Meihua's classroom, they go to their assigned seats and wait for Teacher Meihua to start the class. The class is often divided into three to four groups and each group sits together at a table. The beginning and ending of Teacher Meihua's Mandarin class mirrors classes in China. One student is assigned the role of classroom leader and gives the directions to the whole class about when to stand up to greet Teacher Meihua at the beginning of the class and pay their gratitude to her when the class was over. The following excerpts show typical student-teacher interaction on these occasions.

To signal the beginning of the class:

Teacher Meihua (to the whole class): 同學們, 上課了 (Students, it's time for class.)

Classroom leader: 起立! (Stand up!)

The whole class then stands up and says in chorus: 張老師早上好 or 張老師下午好 (Teacher Zhang<sup>4</sup>, good morning or good afternoon.)

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<sup>4</sup> 張老師 is directly translated to Zhang Teacher. This was the only moment when students called Teacher Meihua by her last name, a very common educational practice in China. Outside of this particular moment, students always followed the PCCS norm to address her by her first name, followed by Teacher.

Teacher Meihua: 同學們早上好 or 同學們下午好 (Students, good morning or good afternoon.)

To signal the ending of the class:

Teacher Meihua (to the whole class): 同學們, 下課了 (Students, class is dismissed.)

Classroom leader: 起立! (Stand up!)

The whole class then stands up and says in chorus: 謝謝張老師. (Thanks, Teacher Zhang). 張老師再見 (Teacher Zhang, goodbye.)

Teacher Meihua: 同學們再見 (Students, goodbye.)

After the greeting, Teacher Meihua often tells the students what they are going to learn today, first in detailed Mandarin and then repeating herself in simplified English. The activities are very diversified, including lectures, read aloud texts in chorus, individual practice with writing exercise, art and craft, and group projects. Teacher Meihua's classroom language use is mostly in Mandarin, but on occasion when she finds that some students are not able to follow her instructions to complete the tasks, she explains her expectations again in English.

Below I am going to discuss three themes that stand out from my data analysis. It should be noted again that it is not the focus of my study to examine if Teacher Meihua's teaching was "good" teaching because rendering the issue to the individual teacher masks the broader structural issues that shape heritage language learners' learning experiences. In order to scrutinize heritage language learners' Mandarin learning experience, it is crucial to move beyond individual teachers' teaching practices to link heritage language learners' Mandarin learning with their lived experiences and situate their learning experiences within broader sociopolitical contexts. In my analysis, I follow Kelleher's (2008) research to pay close attention to the experiences and voices of ethnic Chinese

speakers from non-Mandarin backgrounds. I also take a language ecology perspective to describe the interdependence of multiple Chinese languages among the heritage language students.

### **8.3 Theme One: Mandarin as a heritage language for the ethnic Chinese students is highly contested considering students' linguistic realities.**

It is common to meet students in the heritage track who actually have little or no exposure to Mandarin at home. According to Teacher Meihua, about one-third of her 200 students in the heritage track were from Fujianese-speaking families, one-third from Cantonese-speaking backgrounds, and the remainder from mixed backgrounds (Personal communication, 6.28.2011). Classroom observations show that students mostly chat in English during group project time, but when languages other than English are used among students, they are often Cantonese or Fujianese. Conversations with students indicate that the majority of them are exposed to Cantonese, Fujianese, or the combination of either one with Mandarin at home.

Maggie, who speaks Fujianese, Cantonese, Taishanese (called Hoisan-wa by many of its speakers) at home and learns Mandarin at school, is the epitome of the speaker of multiple Chinese. Her father and paternal grandfather are Taishanese and she learns Cantonese from her mother, who is Fujianese but also speaks Cantonese, Mandarin and Hakka. Maggie described the language use among her family members, "I speak to my grandpa in Cantonese and he talks to me in Taishanese. But I still understand him. I grew up with the language Taishanese because of my babysitter, my aunt, she took care



of us and we heard it every day. This is how we learned” (Recorded interview, 02.21.2010). Maggie’s words succinctly summarize the linguistic realities in which many of the students lived.

Assigning Mandarin as a common heritage language for all ethnic Chinese students from various Chinese language backgrounds is highly contested because many students in fact do not hear much Mandarin spoken in their linguistic ecologies. Since the medium of instruction in the heritage track is Mandarin, many students from non-Mandarin speaking backgrounds have much difficulty in the class. According to Teacher Meihua and my conversations with a few parents, some Fujianese- or Cantonese-speaking kindergarteners and lower graders even cried when they first attended the heritage class. While such extreme cases are rare, many of the seventh and eighth graders from Fujianese or Cantonese speaking backgrounds still report similar frustration in being placed in the heritage track to learn a language that they do not speak at home. Cindy, from Cantonese and Vietnamese backgrounds stated,

I think the Chinese class is hard because the school they pick heritage students based on whether or not they are Chinese and if you speak it well on it. I feel it’s very hard, but if I go to Teacher Chelsea’s class [Mandarin as a Foreign language track], the class will be easy for me. Because everybody in the heritage class has different Chinese levels, and mostly I, I don’t understand it. (Recorded interview, 04.26.2011).

Similarly, another Cantonese-dominant girl, Karen, explained, “we speak a different type of Chinese [Cantonese] at home” and she further noted, “Most of the time, I don’t understand what she [Teacher Meihua] says so I always need to ask my friends to translate for me” (Recorded interview, 0.16.2011). When asked if she wanted to continue learning Mandarin in high school or beyond, Karen responded, “I would like to choose

something that I feel comfortable with so I won't fall behind at the beginning" (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011). Below April talked about the difficulty of being a Fujianese-dominant speaker in the Mandarin heritage classroom.

April: Well, I am hoping that she [Teacher Meihua] can translate [what she says] in English because I have no idea sometimes what she says because I am not 100% Chinese, you know.

Ming: What do you mean?

April: I was born in America and at home we don't speak Mandarin. We speak FUJIANESE.

Table two provides a summary of fourteen seventh graders' linguistic realities as reported in the student interviews. As the table suggests, multiple varieties of Chinese co-exist in students' linguistic ecology and for many students, Mandarin is competing with their true heritage language, a circumstance with unwanted implications for their investment and identities, which I will turn to next.

Table 2: Children's linguistic realities and interest in learning Mandarin

Pseudonyms	Languages other than English heard at home	Interest in continuing learning Mandarin
Linda	Cantonese, very little Mandarin and Spanish	Very ambivalent
Monica	Cantonese, some Mandarin when going to paternal grandmother's	Prefer to learn Cantonese
Maggie	Cantonese, Taishanese, Fujianese, Mandarin, Hakka	Yes
Sheryl	Cantonese	No
Hank	Cantonese	No
Jasmine	Cantonese and Vietnamese	Not available
Abbie(change)	Cantonese and Mandarin	Probably
April	Fujianese and a little Mandarin	Prefer to learn Cantonese
Harris	Fujianese and Mandarin	Prefer to learn Cantonese but would still like to learn Mandarin if Cantonese is not available
Zhuning	Fujianese to grandparents and Mandarin to parents	Yes
Eddie	Mandarin	No
Cindy	More Vietnamese and some Cantonese	No
Sally	Indonesian	Prefer to learn Indonesian
Karen	Cantonese	Prefer to learn Cantonese

**8.4 Theme Two: Students' real heritage languages influence their current and future investment in learning Mandarin and Mandarin heritage language education tends to put students from non-Mandarin backgrounds at a disadvantage, both in terms of language learning and family connection.**

Although the class seems to have a normal bell-curve distribution with some students in the higher and lower end and more students in the middle range in terms of their performance, the most successful ones are those with exposure to Mandarin at home or with prior educational experiences with Mandarin during long-term stays with their grandparents in China<sup>5</sup> and the struggling students are those without exposure to Mandarin. In other words, students' heritage language backgrounds play a crucial role in determining their performance in the class. Such varied participation is particularly evident in the Mandarin-English translation activity. Students who volunteer often to give English translations are those with Mandarin-speaking family members and students who often remain silent or doodling in the margin are those without Mandarin exposure at home.

However, Mandarin-dominant students' active participation in the class often masks the real struggles that Cantonese or Fujianese-dominant students are having. For instance, when the whole class is asked to read the Chinese texts aloud, Mandarin-dominant students often become the *de facto* leaders in this exercise as they tend to read in a loud voice at a speedy pace that masks other students' difficulty with the texts.

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<sup>5</sup> Growing numbers of immigrant parents in the U.S. and Canada, including some of the focal students' parents, send children back to their country of origin to be raised by other extended family members for a few years before or during the first few years of schooling.

Mandarin-dominant students also tend to stay on task more often than Cantonese or Fujianese-dominant students, which enables Mandarin-dominant students to practice Mandarin more often and thus further their Mandarin proficiency. These are also the students who express interest in continuing Mandarin learning in high school or beyond in the student interviews.

Students who have little exposure to Mandarin at home, on the other hand, tend to face significant challenges in the class. The following vignette from my pre-dissertation observation of the sixth grade HL class is a good example of this.

Teacher Meihua asked students to work in groups of two or three to translate Chinese written texts into English. I was standing next to a pair of students and when I asked them if they needed help, the girl told me quickly, “I don’t, but he does”, pointing to her partner, Hank. I spent time with Hank, trying to help him understand the sentence. When the time was up, Teacher Meihua asked Hank in English if he wanted to share the answer with the class (she certainly saw me help him), but he kept shaking his head. Teacher Meihua encouraged him several times and told him that he could either say it in Chinese or English. He still shook his head. One boy sitting at another table turned to him and spoke up, “Say it in Cantonese!” And some other students echoed enthusiastically. The boy continued to say, “Just say something” (the utterance is incomprehensible to me, but I was sure they were some Cantonese sounds) and the whole class burst into laughter. Hank still shook his head with his mouth tightly closed, and eventually Teacher Meihua gave up and asked for a volunteer to share the translation. (Field notes, 11.10.2009)

As I build closer rapport with Hank and observe him in other classes, I am often amazed to see him display two contrasting personalities in the Mandarin class and other subject matter classes. During my extended participant observation in the Mandarin class, Hank often shows signs of lack of motivation and participation: he rarely raises his hand to ask questions or share his answers; he does not pay attention to what happens in Mandarin class, and often secretly draws pictures, scribbles on paper, or does his math problem

sets. I have not recorded any Mandarin utterance from him in the Mandarin class since whatever he says, he says it in English. He often distracts other students in the Mandarin class because he likes to chat with his classmates who sit next to him during individual or group work time.

Teacher Meihua never scolds Hank for not being able to complete the task because she knows that Hank does not hear or speak Mandarin at home. However, there were multiple moments when Teacher Meihua had to stop what she was saying and call Hank's name to stop him from talking to his classmates or get his attention back to the lecture. During the second semester of my dissertation research, Teacher Meihua created a “靜思角” (Peace Corner), which has a Chinese-English bilingual instruction that said “想像, 回憶一個讓你快樂的情境。把它畫下來, 將這幅畫畫好” (Imagine/recall a situation/event that makes you happy and peaceful. Draw it so that the picture is complete). She told me that she would send students who were not able to calm themselves down to this circle so they could be with themselves for a few minutes. Although I never witnessed Teacher Meihua send students to this corner, I saw Hank sit quietly at this corner twice.

From my observation of Hank in the Mandarin class, I mistakenly thought he was monolingual in English. It was not until later when I observed him help his cousin, Tony, a late comer from China, in Social Science class that I realized that he actually speaks some Cantonese. Hank and Tony live in the same household and although Tony claims that Hank only knows English, I have seen him translate part of the Social Science teacher's instructions to Cantonese for Tony. More importantly, Hank displays

personalities that are quite different from those in the Mandarin class: he is often a much-welcomed member for group projects, he is engaged in learning, and he volunteers to offer his opinions on some social events in front of the whole class. Anyone who observes the Social Science class would hardly think he is a destructive student in Mandarin class.

Similar observations are recorded on other Cantonese or Fujianese-dominant students who are not exposed to Mandarin at home. These students often show few signs of active participation in the classroom, and when called upon by Teacher Meihua to answer her questions, they need to ask translation help from peers with higher Mandarin proficiency. For instance, Karen never volunteers to answer the teacher's questions and whenever it is her turn to say something in Mandarin, she looks very uncomfortable and needs to ask her friends for extra preparation before she utters some Mandarin. Karen also identified "Chinese" as her least favorite subject in my student interview with her. Another Cantonese-dominant student, Sheryl, also referred to her Mandarin learning experience at school as "mostly guessing meaning" although she actually enjoys the Mandarin class mainly because she likes to do the art projects. When it comes to group projects, Sheryl often takes the role of drawer or painter while other Mandarin-dominant students take the language intensive role that enables them to practice more Chinese character reading or writing.

Although students at this age are less likely than college students in Kelleher's (2008) study to exert their agency to actually leave the language class, many Cantonese or Fujianese-dominant students in my study express their frustration through non

participation or disengagement with learning in Mandarin class. While these ethnic Chinese students do speak “Chinese” as their heritage language, the fact that Mandarin enjoys prioritized funding in current U.S. education renders their knowledge in non-Mandarin Chinese useless and invisible in the “Chinese” language class. According to some PCCS funders who read part of my preliminary analyses, the reason why Mandarin was chosen as the overarching heritage language for all the ethnic Chinese was mainly because FLAP funding only allows for that option, coupled with other practical concerns, such as the difficulty of finding Cantonese or Fujianese speaking teachers and textbooks. To understand non-Mandarin speaking students’ investment and seeming lack of interest and participation in Mandarin class requires us to be attentive to how their Mandarin learning experiences are linked to broader socio-cultural, economic, and political factors at play.

In the excerpt below, Linda talked about being a Cantonese speaker at a local Chinese weekend school, which recently switched from teaching Cantonese to Mandarin. Earlier in our conversation, she had talked about why, in general, she was not interested in learning or speaking Chinese (meaning Mandarin in this conversation).

I don’t really... particularly like to speak Chinese. My mom makes me go to Chinese school on Sundays. But before, like last year, I went to Chinese school on Saturdays, too. So I don’t have a day off. But then me and my sister told my mom that we don’t want to go to Chinese school so she cancels out Saturdays. And now we only have Sundays. But on Sunday school, they used to teach Cantonese, but now, since everybody speaks Mandarin, they change to Mandarin. And I don’t like it because I can’t understand it. (Recorded interview, 05.2.2011)

Linda’s, Sheryl’s, and Karen’s experiences of being Cantonese speakers at the Chinese school or the Mandarin class at PCCS illustrate how the language classroom is a site that



“reinforc[es] societal values about language in general” (Valdés, Gonzalez, Lopez Garcia, and Marquez, 2008). In a time where Mandarin is identified as a critical language to the U.S. in policy and public discourse, accompanied by the Chinese government’s strenuous effort to promote Mandarin internationally (e.g., the establishment of Confucius Institutes), instruction of other Chinese languages decreases due to the increase of Mandarin instruction. Mandarin has growingly been assumed the heritage language for oversea Chinese communities, including the ones in Philadelphia.

Growing socio-economic and political interests in promoting Mandarin at the expense of other minoritized Chinese languages put their speakers at a disadvantage, not only in terms of language learning, but also in terms of family connections. Many Cantonese- and Fujianese-dominant students in my study showed little identification with Mandarin and thus little interest in learning this “heritage” language, even though they attended a school that valued (or was perceived to value) the students’ home languages and cultures. Many of these students would rather learn a language, such as French and Spanish that at least they could begin on an equal footing with other students when they went to high school or college. It is foreseeable how these thoughts and decisions, unfortunately, are ultimately going to push them away from connecting with their family members. In a group interview when all the three students expressed no interest in continuing to learn Mandarin beyond middle school, Linda expressed her concern about leaving Mandarin, and ultimately also Cantonese, behind.

But I feel like if I don’t keep continuing to learn Chinese, then I will forget it. And when I am in high school, or when I move away when I grow up, or move out of my home or something, I don’t think I would remember it. And when I come home, I won’t be able to speak to my parents.

It is particularly disheartening to hear Linda's worry. In another group interview, I learned that Linda speaks to her parents primarily in English and some Cantonese, even though her parents insist that she speaks Cantonese at home, a phenomenon not uncommon for many heritage language speakers. She occasionally hears some Mandarin when her parents interact with other family friends or relatives who are Mandarin dominant. Since the possibility to learn Cantonese in school context is minimal, Linda has to resort to Mandarin and Mandarin education to maintain her bond with her parents. Ironically, Mandarin is the exact language that she experiences much struggle and alienation in learning at the weekend school and PCCS, which results in her lack of interest in further learning it. For students like Linda, Mandarin is replacing her true heritage language and becomes her "surrogate" heritage language (cf. Leung and Wu, 2011a, 2011b), which negatively influences her investment in learning her heritage language, be it real or surrogate, and limits her ability to construct a broader range of identities that would help her participate in multiple communities, including one that her beloved family members belong to.

**8.5 Theme Three: Students of non-Mandarin Chinese languages assign values to their home languages in ways that challenge current narrowed conceptions of "Chinese" heritage language education.**

During the post-911 era, Mandarin is ascribed unprecedented economic, educational, and political values, thus rendering other varieties of Chinese invisible in

public and educational discussion. However, listening to non-Mandarin Chinese-speaking students in this study reveals that they do not necessarily wholeheartedly embrace this macro process of elevating Mandarin over other varieties of Chinese.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of the students, predominately those from Cantonese or Fujianese backgrounds, are not interested in further pursuing Mandarin education beyond their current educational level. However, when I created a hypothetical scenario in which PCCS also offered Cantonese and Fujianese in addition to Mandarin and other European languages, more students, including those of Fujianese-language backgrounds, expressed interest in Cantonese. For some students from Cantonese backgrounds, the opportunity to learn Cantonese in school would mean that they would understand the target language better and therefore would no longer need extra help. For many students, learning Cantonese is more meaningful than learning Mandarin because Cantonese is the language that connects them to their community and carries currency in their social network.

Monica: I would like to learn Cantonese because when I say Cantonese to my grandma, we only say certain words. So when I talk to other people in Cantonese, sometimes they say words that I've never heard before. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

Harris: Because most of the schools that I have been to, the boys and girls, the Chinese...most of them speak Cantonese. Some of them...only a few speak Mandarin. I just want to understand what they talk about. (Recorded interview, 06.01.2011)

April: I want to take Cantonese because half of my friends are mostly Cantonese, like Sheryl and Monica. I don't know Cantonese so I want to know Cantonese. (Recorded interview, 02.16.2011)

What follows are excerpts from a classroom observation of an eighth grade class during which students actively debated about the values of non-Mandarin Chinese

languages in their language ecologies. While Mandarin is the variety that currently enjoys the most institutional support from China and many U.S. media outlets, this does not imply that other Chinese languages are not important. Quite the contrary, as the students discuss, being able to understand and speak other varieties is just as important in their immediate vicinity. The data presented below offer examples of how the hierarchical order of different Chinese is challenged, which allows “shades of grey” (cf. Blommaert 2010) where linguistic resources and functions are assigned (and reassigned) to non-Mandarin Chinese by their users.

The first excerpt was recorded when Teacher Meihua engaged her eighth graders in talking about their heritage languages. For weeks, she had tried to find out if her Fujianese-speaking students all speak the same variety of Fujianese. She hoped to learn some Fujianese classroom commands to help her communication with Fujianese-speaking students, especially those with no Mandarin proficiency from the lower grades. She had asked many of her Fujianese-speaking students in different grades how to say “I speak Chinese” in Fujianese but they did not sound quite the same to her. She then decided to spend some time in the eighth grade heritage language class talking about this issue, hoping that the older students might be more articulate, more thoughtful and more helpful in resolving her question.

When the class begins, Teacher Meihua first asks students to raise their hands if they speak Fujianese at home. Five out of six students have their hands up in the air. She goes on to explain to the class that she has had some questions in her mind for a long time and hopes students can help her solve the puzzle. Upon hearing this, students get really excited and urge Teacher Meihua to tell them her questions. Teacher Meihua first asks students how to say “我會說中文” (I can speak Chinese) in Fujianese. Some Fujianese phrases are quickly elicited from the Fujianese-speaking students, but then they seem stuck in coming up with a full sentence in Fujianese. Yemin, a newcomer from

Fujian province with very high Mandarin proficiency tells Teacher Meihua in Mandarin that it is hard to translate 中文 (Chinese language) in Fujianese since there are different ways of saying it, such as *Putonghua* (common language) or *Guoyu* (national language).

In an effort to explain the linguistic situation of China, Teacher Meihua draws a map of Guangdong province and writes down “客家話”(Hakka language) in the northern part of the map, “廣東話 (Cantonese language) in the middle and “潮州話” (Teochew language) in the south eastern part. See Appendix E for a replica of Teacher Meihua’s map.

She explains that in Guangdong province, where she went to university, three major “dialects” are spoken, but they are not mutually intelligible. So if someone asks her whether all people from Guangdong speak or understand Cantonese, she would say no. She then wonders aloud if all people from Fujian speak or understand Fujianese. Yemin and Yu, who had attended schools in Fujian for several years, tell her that they had met people who do not speak or understand the Fujianese that they speak. Teacher Meihua then asks them if teachers used Fujianese in the classroom setting in Fujian and Yemin responds in Mandarin:

沒有, 都不准許吧. 可是他們自己有時候會不小心跑出來. (No, Fujianese was not allowed, although they sometimes would slip Fujianese out of their tongues.)

在中國上課都只能說普通話, 說福州話會被罵的. (In China, all classes had to be in Putonghua and if you speak Fujianese, you would get scolded.)

可是很奇怪阿? 為什麼他們能共存呢? (But it’s so strange. Why can’t they co-exist?)  
老師上課歸上課, 我們下課的時候照講 (Well, we still talked in Fujianese during the break even though teachers only used Putonghua in class.)

Yemin continues to tell the class that he just learned from a website that Fujianese actually preserves more features of Old Chinese than Mandarin and that it belongs to a different language family from Mandarin. He also adds that he had shared this new information with his friends on the playground during recess. Teacher Meihua acknowledges Yemin’s contribution and confirms that compared to Mandarin, many “dialects” are more similar to Old Chinese in terms of pronunciation. Not only that, she says, sometimes they give out more semantic information in one single word. Teacher Meihua illustrates her point by using the word “bed” as an example from Teochew, her heritage language. In Teochew, a bed is called 眠床, literally “bed for sleeping” whereas in Mandarin, one calls 床 (bed) without 眠 (sleeping) as the modifier.

Students quickly note that Fujianese also has the same way of saying sleeping beds. For the following 10 minutes, the whole class is engaged in some compare and

contrast analysis of Fujianese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Teochew. Fujianese-speaking students take turns to say some phrases or words in Fujianese and have the rest of the class guess the meaning. It is not always the case that Fujianese students could always make the right guess because even within the Fujianese speaking students there exist some variations of tones and uses. The only Cantonese-speaking student, Zhehua, also throws in some random Cantonese for his classmates to guess the meaning (Field notes, 11.12.2010).

As can be seen from the excerpt, different Chinese are used to not only convey meaning, but also to perform identities, reflecting students' linguistic practices beyond the classroom and extending into their communities. Teacher Meihua's willingness to accept students' multiple Chinese in the classroom allows them to develop their repertoires of multiple Chinese as well as position themselves as certain types of person (i.e., multilingual Chinese speakers). In keeping with Hornberger's (2002, p.607) argument that bi/multilinguals' learning is maximized when they are allowed and enabled to draw from across all their existing language skills, rather than being constrained and inhibited from doing so by monolingual instructional assumptions and practices, the "Chinese" heritage learners seemed to benefit from a pedagogy that moves beyond Mandarin-only approach that allows students to explore the interdependent skills and knowledge across different Chinese. This pedagogy also provides students with an interactional space to express and negotiate more fluid identities within larger macro-level historical and political processes that erroneously assume Mandarin is the heritage language for all ethnic Chinese. Such interactional space allows Yemin and other students to explore the artistic values of their heritage languages, which are not visible to monolingual Mandarin speakers, and helps them develop a sense of pride in their own language.

Below is another excerpt that documents moments right after the last excerpt, which further shows how students from non-Mandarin Chinese backgrounds actively engage in disrupting and dismantling conventional notions of “Chinese” while at the same time assigning values to non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese.

Seeing how excited her students become when they are talking about their heritage languages, Teacher Meihua asks them whether they would like to learn Fujianese or Cantonese, if both are offered at the school. Sharlene, a U.S.-born Fujianese speaker, quickly claps her hands in excitement about this proposal, and Yemin also expresses he would love to learn Fujianese, especially because he just learned from the website that it was historically and linguistically different than Mandarin.

However, Yu, also a Fujianese speaker, does not think there is need to learn Fujianese because Cantonese is more useful in Chinatown since most of the restaurants in Chinatown are owned by Cantonese-speakers. For him, learning Cantonese makes more sense. Yemin disagrees, saying, “如果你去紐約的 Chinatown, Flushing 那邊, 大家都是說福州話, 很好用的” (If you go to Chinatown in New York, over at Flushing, everybody speaks Fujianese. It’s very useful). Yu refutes Yemin’s argument and says, “福州話都是用在黑鬼區, 廣東話才是用在 Chinatown 的.” (Fujianese is only used in black ghost neighborhoods<sup>6</sup> and Cantonese is what is widely used in Chinatown).

In the end, Yemin agrees that many Fujianese who come to the U.S. do not have much education and are relatively poor, but he still thinks Fujianese is very useful in the U.S. Yemin and Yu’s exchange on the stereotypes of Fujianese people makes Sharlene very uncomfortable. She joins the discussion by opposing Yu’s generalization. Sharlene rarely speaks Mandarin in class since she finds it very difficult, but this time, she tries very hard to express her ideas in Mandarin. She says, “我的爸爸, 媽媽, 叔叔, 阿姨都是在 Chinatown 開餐館的, 他們都是說福州話” (My father, mother, uncle and aunt all run restaurants in Chinatown and they all speak Fujianese). Yu quickly challenges her, “他們不說廣東話?” (They don’t speak Cantonese?) Sharlene responds firmly: “不說” (No, they don’t speak it). She then switches to English and argues that it is a good idea to learn Fujianese because “the more languages, the more better.”

Zehua, the only non-Fujianese speaker in the class, comments on Sharlene’s statement in English: “Well, it depends on which language.” Yu agrees and adds that when searching for a job, he believes those who can speak Cantonese have a better chance to get good jobs than those who only speak Fujianese. Yu also recognizes the unequal power relations between Cantonese and Fujianese. He explains, “會說廣東話會

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<sup>6</sup> See more discussions of students’ talk about race in Chapter Six.

幫助你找工作, 福州話不會, 福州話都是不好的工作” (Cantonese will help you find a job and Fujianese can't. Fujianese is only for bad jobs). Since Sharlene keeps saying “the more languages, the more better”, Yu then questions her in Mandarin: “那如果要你學廣東話呢?” (Then how about you learn Cantonese?). Sharlene answers without hesitation, “I would love to learn Cantonese, if that is offered, because the more languages, the more jobs you can get” (Field notes, 11.12.2010).

While hefty resources have been invested in the teaching of Mandarin because of its marketability associated with China and its capacity to serve the nation's political needs, these students' conversations showed that the imagined communities that they seek to move closer to are not necessarily the preferred Mandarin-speaking one, but the ones that allow and value the co-existence of multiple varieties of Chinese. When imagination of such communities was made possible, these students' language learning no longer was isolated from their own lived experiences and thus their participation in the language class was greatly enhanced.

The discussion presented above was so engaging that the class went over time. Both Teacher Meihua and I were very impressed by how actively students were engaged in talking about their heritage languages and how much Mandarin students were able to use to facilitate their discussion. As Teacher Meihua told the students before they ran to the next class, they were in fact engaged in high-level Mandarin debates and she hoped students felt proud of their ability to do so.

This student discussion became a turning point for Teacher Meihua to rethink her teaching to her ethnic Chinese students from diverse Chinese language backgrounds. In several of our subsequent conversations, Teacher Meihua wondered aloud if teaching Mandarin while simultaneously fostering students' Fujianese or Cantonese might be



better for her students in terms of preparing them to become competent language users in the U.S. context. She envisioned that her classroom could become a place where minoritized varieties of Chinese, such as Fujianese or Cantonese, were not devalued but could co-exist.

### **8.6 Recapitulation and Comments**

The data have shown that a diversity of Chinese has existed and continues to exist in the local U.S. ecology. A mismatch between students' true heritage languages and the institutionalized surrogate heritage language (Mandarin) does influence investment in learning the latter at PCCS; it was often those who were not exposed to Mandarin at home that experienced the most frustration and alienation in the heritage language classroom. Even though PCCS started out as a school committed to respecting and valuing students' cultures and languages, its designation of Mandarin as the heritage language for all ethnic Chinese students may make it hard for all students to participate in the class on an equal footing. Listening to students in this study suggests that even a minoritized heritage language, like Fujianese or Cantonese, still has value to its speakers in ways that might not be congruent with outsiders' values (cf., Ruiz, 2010). My study of PCCS's Mandarin heritage program has pointed to the importance of delving into questions like "Resources for whom? For what purposes or end?" as proposed by Ricento (2005b, p. 364), especially at a time when Mandarin is growingly considered to be the heritage language for all ethnic Chinese. In creating a more equitable and inclusive language learning context for all students, researchers and educators need to be attentive

to the experiences of students from non-Mandarin Chinese-speaking backgrounds, especially when this population is sizeable and continues to grow. More educational implications will be further addressed in the conclusion chapter.

## 9. UNDERSTANDING PCCS IN BROADER CONTEXTS-SOME EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

### 9.1 Overview

In this final chapter, I summarize the main findings across the chapters in relation to answering my research questions. Where it is relevant, I draw upon references to my theoretical frameworks of imagined communities (Kanno, 2008; Kanno & Norton, 2003), Gee's (2000) four perspectives of identity, critical pedagogies (Darder, 1991/2012; Freire, 1970/2002), and language ecology (Fill & Muhlhausler, 2001; Hornberger 2002). I present this chapter in a sequence that is similar to my finding chapters, that is, I start from the discussion of PCCS teaching and learning, move to interracial/interethnic friendships and end with Mandarin education at PCCS. I highlight connections between my research and several theories and strands of literature. I also provide implications of my research for pedagogy and future research directions throughout this chapter. These implications are summarized briefly again in the end.

To review, the research questions that I sought to answer were as follows:

1. How is the school's vision of creating an equitable education for linguistically and culturally diverse students circulated and enacted in the school policies and pedagogical practices?

- 1.1. How do teachers perceive their students and talk about their vision for the students?

- 1.2. How do teachers enact their vision for the students in school policies and pedagogical practices?

1.3. How do teachers foster solidarity among students from diverse backgrounds?

2. How are students' identities shaped by the school's vision?

2.1. What identities are encouraged and discouraged by the school?

2.2. What vision do students hold for themselves?

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated that teaching and learning at PCCS is innovative and complex. As Chapter Five shows, PCCS teaching and curriculum address issues related to cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity among its students and in the broader society. In general, PCCS adopts a resourceful perspective to diversity and often situates the discussion of diversity through a lens of social justice. Contrary to many schools that provide subtractive education to working-class students from diverse backgrounds (Valenzuela, 1999), PCCS teachers envision their students as social agents for change. The imagined communities that PCCS students are socialized into are the ones that have members who enjoy learning about different cultures, languages and meeting different people, are critical of social forces that disadvantage some groups, and more importantly, have the courage to make positive changes when they see injustice. In Gee's (2000) words, a caring, thoughtful, reflective, and agentic "Institution-identity" (or I-identity) is encouraged and fostered at PCCS.

PCCS pedagogy, as I have shown, is grounded in critical analyses of the sociopolitical contexts where students of color live their lives. There were countless instances where students were guided to problematize their social surroundings in ways that highlighted their agentic roles in making changes to create alternative realities. This

pedagogy starts from and is sustained by PCCS educators' awareness that their students are subject to structural and individual discriminations that often constrain the possibility for them to live to their full potentials. It is not a coincidence that an overwhelmingly large number of students talked about the caring teachers that they met at PCCS. Many students contributed their academic success to the caring teachers at PCCS who made their lives free of bullying and full of opportunities to learn about their own cultures and to acquire knowledge. Coupled with the fact that many PCCS teachers worked for long hours to ensure they provided quality education for the students, a better conceptualization of PCCS pedagogy is perhaps the one that sees "teaching as an act of love" (Darder, 1991/2002). In exploring the legacy of Paulo Freire, Darder quoted the following from Freire (1998) to illustrate the revolutionary power of teaching as an act of love.

It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving in. In short it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love. (cited in Darder, 2002, p. 91)

PCCS teaching is best understood as a profound love for PCCS students and for the world. While many teachers were still looking for the best practices for teaching their students, PCCS teachers had the courage to try different and innovative teaching practices. This deep love for the world is probably what enables PCCS teachers to collaborate and struggle together to transform the public education that tends to oppress students of color.

## 9.2 Understanding Academic Success at PCCS

Educated in a nurturing environment that encourages positive identification with heritage cultures and critical analysis of students' lived experiences, PCCS students cultivate a strong sense of their identities and have good academic performance. My study at PCCS adds evidence to the growing research on minority students' racial/ethnic identities and academic performance, which indicate that stronger racial/ethnic identities are often related to better academic achievement among minority students. Many studies find African American adolescents who hold a strong connection to and pride in being Black show more resilience in the face of challenges and higher academic persistence (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Sellers, Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Similarly, recent research on immigrant students also highlights that the maintenance of cultural traditions and connection to the ethnic community help immigrant youth persist in face of adversity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

PCCS students' academic success might also be related to the school's teaching of folk art and music in extended periods of time because it engages students in developing knowledge transferrable to other subject areas, such as science and language arts. Growing scholarly research that takes a closer look at teaching and learning in arts-based programs for children and youth, especially those that involve professionals, reveals that arts programs touch upon similar skills that other subject areas demand or mirror the practices in these subject areas (Heath, 2001, 2004; Heath & Smyth, 2000; Heath & Wolf, 2005). For example, both science and art projects demand attention to

detail, understanding of specialized terms and processes, as well as analytical thinking (Heath & Wolf, 2005). “At-risk” youth who participate in arts-focused programs acquire certain syntactic and genre forms more quickly than their counterparts participating in programs focusing on community services or sports (Heath, 1998). Teacher Eddie’s proverb project exemplifies the integrative capacity of an arts project that generates other kinds of learning, including interviewing skills, compare-and-contrast skills for proverb analyses, and combinations of creative thinking and literacies. Similarly, when PCCS students worked on instruments with professional artists during their electives, they were actually engaged in a practice similar to what they were likely to encounter in lab experiments: they had extensive practice with tools under the direct guidance of a professional (cf., Heath & Wolf, 2005).

### **9.3 Understanding Interracial/Interethnic Stereotypes and Friendships**

Despite PCCS’ teaching of diversity, many of its students relied on and used racial and ethnic stereotypes to describe and understand their peers. After all, teachers and students did not operate in a vacuum, but rather, they worked within the larger context of other social influences. For example, Black males are widely portrayed by the media as wild, threatening, and violent (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002). Unfortunately, the characterizations of Asian/Asian American students and African American students that were based on normative ideas of communicative styles and manners illustrated a social hierarchy that pitted the two groups against each other. African American students were described by Asian/Asian American students and some PCCS teachers as “loud,”

“impolite,” and “brash” while Asian/Asian American students were described by teachers as “quiet” and “lacking speaking skills.” The polarized categorizations of the two groups made it harder for them to establish interracial friendships.

Moreover, teachers and students at PCCS still existed within a racial social system where “the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p.9). Even though PCCS’ teaching and curriculum adopted a resourceful view towards students’ heritage cultures and attempted to address students’ racialized experiences, the fact that many PCCS students previously attended hostile schools where they experienced violence prior to coming to PCCS is closely related to a racial social system that upholds whiteness and strips students of color of many privileges that white students receive at school. Though this dissertation focuses on the progressive teaching and learning at a racially diverse urban school, much of PCCS students’ construction of their social network is inseparable from the construction of whiteness in the broader society. While PCCS students’ politically correct claim about making friends without seeing one’s race could be understood as their intake of PCCS’ teaching, it is still in some ways very similar to colorblind discourse, of which many researchers call for further examination when teaching students from diverse backgrounds (Bank, 2001; Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011; Milner, 2010). Maintaining a colorblind approach, according to Bank (2001), “refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of color and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the status quo” (p.12).



In a study of interracial friendships among students of color in a multiracial urban high school, Rosenbloom (2010) also found “colorblind” discourse among her high school students, which, she argued, reflected students’ belief in American egalitarianism. Ironically, while her students claimed to be “colorblind,” they simultaneously experienced firsthand discrimination because of their race. Similarly, PCCS students had previously attended schools where their races were “marked” and they learned about stigma attached to being non-white and/or immigrant. In an era when White culture is still the norm by which minority students are compared and judged, such colorblind thinking ignores heritages and histories that are important aspects of the identities of students of color, thereby dismissing assets and strengths that these students bring into classrooms. A colorblind ideology also does not question the existence of systemic and institutional racial and ethnic inequalities. Rosenbloom (2010) states that a large number of minority students’ attendance at underfunded failing schools is itself the product of a racial social system where resources are not distributed evenly across racial and ethnic groups.

Rosenbloom further asserts that distrusting relationships among students of color because of their mutual ascription of unexamined racial stereotypes to other groups undermine students’ potential for building a collective identity, which is important for political engagement and collective action. Students’ inability to view peers as allies who go through similar hardships, Rosenbloom argues, limits the possibility for them to work together to fight back against living in the ghetto, attending dysfunctional schools, and experiencing discrimination (p.5). Rosenbloom’s findings illuminate the sociopolitical

implications of peer relationships for minority youth in public schools. Even though PCCS students attend a school that made much effort to integrate students from minoritized backgrounds and envision them to be future social agents for change, there were still many occasions when students from different backgrounds did not develop mutual and caring relationships. The inability to form “Affinity identity” (or A-identity), which Gee believes is crucial for collective social action, prevents PCCS students from considering their peers as having similar concerns that can turn into collaborative action beyond PCCS.

Residing in racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods, many PCCS students were told by adults in their families about how to live and interact (or not to interact) with people from different cultures and backgrounds. However, when these students came to PCCS, they received a different message: they learned to view diversity positively and often participated in classroom activities that were carefully planned out to engage students with topics related to multiculturalism, multilingualism, social justice, and empowerment. In some ways, many PCCS students received conflicting messages about interracial/interethnic relationships from the two most important authorities in their lives. Even though PCCS created many opportunities beyond regular content classes for students to meet with others from different backgrounds (e.g. electives, lunch time seat assignments, the buddy system), the effectiveness of these policies and practices were ultimately undermined by the values that students’ parents and the larger society instilled in them.

My study shows that for many PCCS students from working-class backgrounds, school is not only the place where they learned academic subject matters and different cultures, but also the major social place where they interacted with people from different backgrounds. When interacting with people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds is rare and not encouraged at home, the school's role in educating minority students' understanding of one another and fostering interracial/interethnic friendships is even more important. As Rosenbloom (2010) reminds us, how schools shape social relations among poor, racial, and ethnic minority youth is a political act because these social networks are precursors to collective identity and social action. While PCCS envisions its students to be social agents for change and teaches them to have a resourceful view toward diversity, its inability to socialize students into a collective identity eventually diminishes the potential for sociopolitical mobilization in the future.

While much of the current educational emphasis has been placed on how students perform academically at school, students' social lives at school receive relatively little scholarly interest. Research on school safety and bullying has continuously suggested that racial minority students are often targeted with race-related hate words (DeVoe & Murphy, 2011; Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010). Although statistical data indicates that African American students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to participate in bullying in some urban school districts (e.g., Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006), qualitative studies that pay close attention to minority students' lived experiences reveal that African American students experience discrimination from teachers who hold low expectations for them (Alim, 2010; Rosenbloom, 2010).

Discrimination from adults in the school, Rosenbloom argues, has severe detrimental effects on students' academic performance.

Asian/Asian American students, on the other hand, grapple with a different type of discrimination that is also rooted in stereotypes. Chinese American middle school students report frequently experiencing racial slurs that focus on Asian languages or accents, school performance and physical appearance (Liang, Grossman, & Deguchi, 2007). In some multiracial schools, Asian/Asian Americans were the most frequently victimized ethnic group among students of color (Moultapa, Valente, Gallagher, Rohrbach, & Unger, 2004; Rosenbloom, 2010; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). When Asian/Asian American students are still largely perceived by other minority students through the lens of forever foreigners and model minority (Lee, 1996; Reyes, 2006; Tuan, 1998) that position them outside of the mainstream groups, interracial friendships seem hard to establish. Bearing these earlier studies in mind, it is not difficult to understand why Asian/Asian American students at PCCS, many of whom attended multiracial inner city schools before coming to PCCS, choose to hang out with peers from their own racial background even at a school that makes much effort to address the issue of bullying. Although my study did not delve into how African American students perceived Asian/Asian American students at PCCS, to better serve both Asian/American and African American students means that the school needs to engage both groups in understanding not just their own, but also the other group's racialized experiences. In other words, students need to learn to view their peer groups beyond racial stereotypes.

It is equally important for students to move beyond ethnic stereotypes because of the diverse experiences that Asian/Asian American students represent. When reviewing studies on bullying and victimization among Asian American students, Tran and Okazaki (2012) urged researchers to pay attention to subgroup variations because differences among and within Asian ethnic groups provide more insights than generalizations across panethnic Asian American groups. Similarly, my study on interracial/interethnic relations at PCSS also suggests various ways ethnic Asian students circulated and responded to stereotypes, which to some extent, is a reflection of an ethnic hierarchy that places ethnic Chinese students on the top and ethnic Cambodian Americans at the bottom. The power structure within Asian heritage students makes Cambodian students especially vulnerable to discrimination from other Asian heritage students and thus makes it harder for Cambodian students to build trusting friendships with their Asian American peers.

My study highlights the need for educators to be cautious about the danger of lumping all Asian ethnic groups together and be more attentive to the ethnic diversity and hierarchy within Asian/Asian American students. Ngo's (2010) ethnographic work of Lao students in an urban high school also cautions against similar lumping effect. Because teachers and non-Asian students failed to recognize Lao students' ethnic identity and positioned Lao students as "Hmong" or "Chinese," Lao students felt excluded and isolated, and their interethnic tensions with Hmong students were not recognized or addressed at school. It is thus important for educators working with Asian heritage students from different ethnic backgrounds to probe into how different ethnic groups perceive one another and how students navigate their interethnic friendships.

Examination of Asian/Asian American students' interethnic relationships and friendships will likely provide teachers with insights to better serve groups that are often shadowed by numerically bigger or more powerful groups.

In line with the interracial/interethnic discussion here, a panel of interdisciplinary scholars drew from research and experience on education and diversity to identify essential principles for teaching and learning in a multicultural society. Four principles on intergroup relations are particularly illuminating to the current study and thus are worth citing in full (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield, & Stephan, 2001, p. 3).

Principle 6: Students should learn about stereotyping and other related biases that have negative effects on racial and ethnic relations.

Principle 7: Students should learn about the values shared by virtually all cultural groups (e.g., justice, equality, freedom, peace, compassion, and charity).

Principle 8: Teachers should help students acquire the social skills needed to interact effectively with students from other racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups.

Principle 9: Schools should provide opportunities for students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups to interact socially under conditions designed to reduce fear and anxiety.

It seems that PCCS' teaching is consistent with Principles 7 and 9 because it focuses on issues of social justice, peace, and self-identification and offers many non-academic courses, such as music, art and electives.

However, to improve the current stage of students' interracial/interethnic relations at PCCS, teachers need to engage students more directly and more frequently in understanding stereotyping and in acquiring the social skills necessary to interact with

people from different backgrounds. Although PCCS offers some electives for students to delve into such issues (e.g., *Courageous Conversations and Leadership*), they are limited to older students who voluntarily enroll in these electives probably because they have more interests in social issues from the beginning. However, as my data show, there is a need for all students to learn about their differences and similarities if more interracial/interethnic friendships are to be established, and this requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond weekly elective courses but can reach all students on a regular basis. Darder (2012) argues that it is important for teachers to call on their courage and inner strength to go beyond looking for quick-fix methods to restore a false sense of harmony at moments of confronting issues of covert or overt discriminations. According to Darder, teachers can begin with questions about the feelings that bring about the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors among their students. In addition to delving into the origins and effects of racialized stereotypes, Darder also urges teachers and students to critically examine the relationship between stereotypes and other forms of injustice in the community. Conversations like these, as Darder reminds us, should be fostered in the classroom so that students have the opportunity to talk about their racialized feelings and come to understand how these relate to their lives outside of school. In the process, students also become more conscious about how their own attitudes and behaviors affect others and, more importantly, develop strategies for countering discriminations when they encounter them in their own lives.

#### 9.4 Understanding Different Communicative Styles

People from different backgrounds have different ways of speaking, and at a multiracial, multilingual school like PCCS, students encounter different ways of speaking and communication even though the medium of communication is English. My study indicates that African American students and Asian/Asian American students' unique ways of speaking incurred different perceptions among teachers and students, which sometimes furthered the distance among different student groups. The complex relationships among language, culture, identity and schooling are best captured by bell hooks (1989) below:

Learning to listen to different voices and hearing different speech challenges the notion that we must all assimilate- share a single similar talk- in educational institutions. Language reflects the culture from which we emerge. To deny ourselves daily use of speech patterns that are common and familiar, that embody the unique and distinctive aspect of our self is one of the ways we become estranged and alienated from our past. It is important for us to have as many languages on hand as we can know or learn. It is important for those of us who are Black, who speak in particular patois as well as Standard English, to express ourselves in both ways. (pp. 79-80)

hooks insightfully pointed out that some languages or ways of communication receive more capital in educational institutions, but education should not strip students of the right and opportunity to continue the daily use of speech patterns that they are familiar with because their ways of communication are closely related to who they are. For students whose ways of communication are vulnerable to discrimination inside and outside of schools, it is also crucial for them to become familiar with the dominant ways of communication so they are not at a disadvantage in society and schools. hooks' idea is in line with Freire who urged that children from minoritized cultural groups learn the



norm of institutional societal rules and practices so that “they diminish the disadvantages in the struggle to live their lives, [as well as] gain a fundamental tool for the fight they must wage against the injustices and discrimination targeted at them” (1998, p.74).

To foster a good understanding among students of color about the impact of language on social structures and practices, Darder (2012) argues that bicultural students need to have critical dialogues with those outside their cultural communities. Cross-cultural dialogues help students better recognize the manner in which language works to define their identities and assist them to explore possibilities that may have remained hidden for them. In the process of learning how languages have an impact on their lives, bicultural students might also develop the linguistic skills that enable them to use languages more precisely and specifically to describe their experiences. Darder envisions that this approach can awaken bicultural students to become social agents.

Along a similar vein, sociolinguist H. Samy Alim has written extensively on pedagogical approaches that educate linguistically profiled and marginalized students about “how language is used and, importantly, how language can be used against them” (Alim, 2010, p.214, see also Alim, 2004, 2005). Through approaches that utilize questions like “How can language be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations?” and conversely, “how can language be used to resist, redefine, and possibly reverse these relations?” (ibid), students come to understand their own position in the society and what to do about it. One exciting aspect of Alim’s approaches is to teach students to become ethnographers and study their social worlds through an analysis of the speech data collected from their own local communities and peer groups. His

projects aim to arouse critical language awareness of high school students, especially those who speak African American English and whose ways of speaking are described as “abrasive and “not respectful” by their teachers in his research school due to cultural differences between the teachers and students. Alim argues that a process of examining many taken-for-granted language assumptions and ideologies of race, class, and gender helps educators and students “make the inaudible audible” (2010, p.227) and think deeply about difference and discrimination across race, class, and other social identities.

While Alim is never doubtful about the importance for linguistically marginalized students of learning Standard English, he points to the danger of viewing their learning of Standard English as a stepping stone for upward mobility. Standard English fluency alone cannot lead to economic success because factors like race, class, gender, etc. also work in complex ways to influence one’s chances for success. In addition to helping socially marginalized students develop the capacity to express themselves in Standard English and ways congruent to their own communities (cf. hook, 1989), Alim argues that it is crucial for this group of students to recognize that languages and their use are implicated in power, hierarchy, and dominance, but they are also sites for contestation, resistance and transformation. The ultimate goal of this teaching is that when students are more conscious of their communicative behaviors, they also become more conscious of the ways they can transform the conditions which limit their potential.

My study also indicates that African American students and Asian/Asian American students’ unique ways of speaking sometimes incurred teachers’ different perceptions that rendered some students’ strengths invisible to teachers who were from

different backgrounds. Gee (2000) defines how students construct and sustain their ways of being through discourse as “Discourse identity” (or D-identity) and in the case of PCCS, some African American and Asian/Asian American students’ D-identities were unfortunately perceived from a deficit point of view by some teachers. However, when teaching students from diverse backgrounds, it is crucial for teachers to understand the historical, social, and cultural connections between language and identities because only through such an understanding can teachers stay away from a deficit view towards students’ language use and provide support to their learning. Freire (1998) firmly believed in the need for teachers to accept students’ ways of communication and use them as supports while teaching them to expand their linguistic repertoire:

When inexperienced middle class teachers take teaching positions in peripheral areas of the city, [cultural and] class-specific tastes, values, languages, discourse, syntax, semantics, everything about the students may seem contradictory to the point of being shocking and frightening. It is necessary, however, that teachers understand that the students’ syntax, their manners, tastes, and ways of addressing teachers and colleagues; and the rules governing fighting and playing among themselves are all part of their cultural identity, which never lacks an element of class. All that has to be accepted. Only as learners recognize themselves democratically and see that their right to say “I be” is respected, will they become able to learn the dominant grammatical reason why they should say “I am”. (p. 49)

It is time for PCCS teachers to reflect on the extent to which they accept or reject students’ ways of communication, and how their lack of understanding of students’ community language practices might contribute to the circulation of stereotypes that disadvantage students in connecting to other students at PCCS.

### **9.5 Understanding African American students at PCCS**

This research suggests that even though PCCS' teaching and curriculum attempted to address students' racialized experiences, teachers in general seemed to have more difficulty in addressing the unique experiences and needs of African American students than Asian/Asian American students. African American students were perceived by some teachers to have more behavioral problems and engage less in the classroom. However, African American students' lack of eye contact and so-called disrespectful or disruptive classroom behaviors at PCCS might be linked to their racialized experiences and social positioning as inner-city Black youth beyond PCCS.

In seeking explanations as to why many African American and Latino high school students avoided eye contact with others and looked disaffected at a local school, Rosenbloom (2010) resorted to Elijah Anderson's research on "code of the streets" (1990, 1994, 1995). The "code of streets" is a set of rules developed among poor inner-city blacks on how to navigate the social world where they cannot trust the police and the judicial system for protection because of the dominant white society it represents. In response, a cultural system of street behaviors, including when and how to display deference, make or avoid eye contact, and utilize, expect, or avoid violence is developed and circulated in the Black communities. Rosenbloom's study reveals that a general mistrust of adults and peers among African American and Latino students at her research school is similar to Anderson's notion of street code. The use of surveillance cameras and presence of police at school, for example, sent the messages to the students that they could not be trusted. In such a school climate, many African American and Latino

students sought to stay away from fights or accusations of looking at someone the wrong way by not making eye contact or wearing hooded jackets that could cover much of their faces. In many ways, these behaviors, Rosenbloom argues, are similar to Anderson's discussion of showing deference and avoiding eye contact on the street.

Turning the focus back to PCCS, some African American students' oppositional behaviors, such as lack of eye contact and classroom participation should be understood in the broader social and educational context where African American students oftentimes experience disrespect and discrimination. At schools, teachers tend to interpret these students' non-participation in classroom activities and disrupting behaviors as classroom management problems, but rarely see these behaviors as students acting out their resistance to cultural domination. As Darder (2012, p.118) states,

Seldom does it occur to most teachers who are faced with such behaviors to consider the manner in which cultural subordination, culturally irrelevant schooling, and prevailing social hostility toward differences might serve as the genesis of classroom resistance.

Darder's words serve as a nice reminder of the need for educators to look beyond minority students' immediate classroom behaviors to better understand their lived experiences and how those experiences influence their learning at school.

It is worth keeping in mind that many African American students at PCCS had been to schools where teachers did not respect their cultures or in one PCCS African American student's words, "teachers don't really care nothing happen" before they came to PCCS. Many of them also lived in neighborhoods where their parents needed to be vigilant about protecting them from drug and violence abuse. Even at PCCS where teachers were generally perceived as caring by most students, it is still possible that some

students did not build a high level of trust with school authorities who were from different backgrounds and thus might display resistant behaviors in the classrooms.

In discussing culturally relevant pedagogies for Asian/Asian American and African American students, Parsons and Wall (2011) state the need for educators to develop different pedagogies for the two student groups because their group orientations are perceived differently by U.S. mainstream education. Some scholars (e.g., Mau, 1997; Zhou, Siu, & Xin, 2009) contend that the chance for Asian/Asian American students' success in U.S. society is enhanced because this group's values and orientations align with mainstream U.S. society. For example, the belief that hard work can overcome shortcomings is congruent with the idea of meritocracy, and willingness to adjust to life situations as they are complements a perspective in the U.S. that minorities should assimilate into the society. As a result, Parsons and Wall suggest that culturally relevant pedagogies for Asian/Asian American students should assist them in articulating, comprehending, and critiquing their cultural system and the mainstream one. Because African Americans' culture is oftentimes demeaned in mainstream educational institutions, culturally relevant pedagogies should not only assist African American students in articulating, comprehending, and critiquing the two cultural systems but also facilitate them to affirm their own culture. Although Parsons and Wall's understanding of Asian/Asian American cultures is limited and limiting because it ignores the vast diversity within the Asian/Asian American communities and culturally relevant pedagogies for Asian/Asian American students should also be affirming, their work is

valuable in pointing out the importance of recognizing different adversities that Asian/Asian American and African American students face at school.

As an Asian American-led school, PCCS teachers seemed to be better at providing education for Asian/Asian American students that affirms their identities. While Asian/Asian American students had many Asian/Asian American teachers to identify with and relate to, African American students had less opportunity to do so because very few teachers were of African American heritage during the time of my study. In view of the fact that a lower percentage of African American students at PCCS achieved proficiency level than their Asian/Asian American peers, PCCS teachers need to better understand African American students' unique racialized experiences and how these experiences impact on this group of students' learning at PCCS. Only through an approach that draws upon African American students' lived experiences can PCCS ensure that all students have equal chance of achieving success through receiving education that is truly affirming.

## **9.6 Understanding Mandarin FL Education at PCCS**

PCCS' provision of Mandarin education for all students is itself a laudable educational alternative, especially since there still exists a prevalent view in the U.S. that foreign language education is an enrichment for the culturally and linguistically advantaged, rather than basic education for all (Ortega, 1999). Students of color, African Americans in particular, have been underrepresented in foreign language study in K-12 settings, and PCCS Mandarin education seems to serve as a corrective to the general trend. However, data from the Mandarin FL classrooms indicate that students had much

difficulty and frustration in learning this “super hard” foreign language. Due to limited hours of instruction, much class time was dedicated to the teaching of basic language knowledge that could not help seventh and eighth graders express their identities. Therefore, students’ investment in Mandarin was diminished and so was the effectiveness of PCCS’ Mandarin program.

PCCS Mandarin foreign language program also had to grapple with its legitimacy among students. From a linguistic ecological point of view, Mandarin has relatively short history in the local school curriculum and ecology, compared to other European languages. Mandarin has just recently become a subject in K-12 foreign language education and thus many PCCS students were doubtful about their future Mandarin learning beyond PCCS because few local high schools offered Mandarin education. Listening to Mandarin FL learners at PCCS reveals that they did not necessarily have much interest in learning this language that receives growing prestige in current U.S. education. While there is a burgeoning research interest in Mandarin foreign language education, much has focused on how to improve current pedagogies (Everson & Xiao, 2008; Xing, 2006) as little is known about teaching Mandarin to speakers of other languages. However, students’ investment in Mandarin has received little examination. Examination of PCCS Mandarin FL learners reveals that many of them had little investment in learning a language that was super hard for English speakers, was offered in very few local schools, and had low representation in their social networks at PCCS.

In a time when the Chinese government has strenuously promoted Mandarin beyond the borders of China (e.g., establishing Confucius Institutes that send low-cost



Mandarin teachers and free textbooks abroad) and many countries have invested hefty resources in the teaching of Mandarin because of its marketability, there needs to be more work that looks at students' social experiences and investment in Mandarin in order to make pedagogies efficient. If PCCS students continue to resist learning Mandarin as documented in my study, it is unlikely for them to even develop basic knowledge in Mandarin since this is a language that requires much effort and practice for English speakers.

Investigating PCCS Mandarin foreign language program also points to the importance of setting reasonable goals for students who have no exposure to Mandarin beyond classroom settings. For schools that could only afford to offer Mandarin education no more than two hours per week, teachers and administrators need to be realistic about what their students can accomplish with such a learning schedule. English speakers who learn Mandarin as a foreign language will likely need much more time to achieve proficiency that makes them feel functional than those who learn European languages that share similar script and sound systems. As a result, students might be frustrated about the possibility that they are still at a beginning level after years of learning, especially if the weekly hours of instruction are low. Without a reasonable and feasible learning goal for this group of students, both teachers and students might feel rather disempowered in Mandarin language classrooms and it is doubtful that students will remain invested in learning Mandarin long enough to help them reach the functional proficiency level that can actually empower them.

This is by no means to say that non-immersion Mandarin programs like the one at PCCS are not valuable. The PCCS Mandarin program demonstrates that it is a site for critical teaching and learning about contemporary Chinese societies, which is equally important for global citizens to engage in international affairs. Guiherme (2002) writes about the need for foreign language curriculum to play a more active role in creating a critically aware and reflective citizenry for the future. She contends that when language and culture are taught from a critical cultural perspective, foreign language curriculum can help develop citizens who are critically and socially responsible for the world. According to Guiherme, foreign language teachers should not be viewed as ambassadors of a foreign culture or ideal native speaker models, but as concerned about issues of communication and solidarity, placing as much focus on the educational, political, and social aspects of foreign language teaching/learning as on static linguistic/cultural code (p.159). When teachers and students become more critically aware of power, subordination, and human struggles both locally and globally, it is more likely that they become involved in transformative action dedicated to the empowerment of disadvantaged people.

Along a similar vein, Osborn (2000) also proposes that foreign language pedagogy move from an emphasis on the word to the world (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1987). He re-envision a language pedagogy that moves beyond producing competent speakers of language by shifting focus from the internal mechanics of language use to external political, economic, and cultural factors related to linguistic diversity. Both Osborn (2000) and Guiherme (2002) see the potential for students to develop critical cross-

cultural understanding in the foreign language classroom that would make them reflective and responsible world citizens. Osborn (2000) believes such pedagogy is more relevant for foreign language learners in the U.S. for two reasons. First, the prospect of increased marketability is not strong because there is always a good supply of native speakers of any language needed for finance in the U.S. Second, the benefit of foreign language study related to employment enhancement usually requires considerable linguistic skill that few foreign language learners are actually able to achieve. This is particularly true for Mandarin in the U.S. because of a great number of Chinese students from China over the years. It is time for PCCS to rethink the goal of its Mandarin program for FL students: it might be more realistic and meaningful to help students develop critical cross-cultural awareness in the FL classroom than developing functional language proficiency to compete with other Mandarin speakers.

### **9.7 Understanding Mandarin HL Education at PCCS**

The data show that the very term “Chinese” that is often used in public and scholarly discourse is insufficient to capture the important nuances of linguistic realities that the HL students live in. While Chinese in the form of Mandarin is currently heavily emphasized in language teaching and research arenas and is increasingly assumed to be the HL of Chinese diasporic communities, the data suggest that a diversity of Chinese languages has existed and continues to exist in the local U.S. ecology. The field of “Chinese” HL education in the U.S. is currently facing a critical juncture that requires those involved in language policy and planning to be especially mindful about the

repercussions of Mandarin hegemony on non-Mandarin Chinese HLLs. Low-cost guest teachers for K-12 schools and free textbooks from the Chinese governmental agency of Confucius Institutes, compounded with the fact that the U.S. hosts the most Confucius Institutes worldwide and depends heavily on guest teachers from China for their “critical” language programs have important ramifications for Mandarin education in the U.S. First, how well the guest teachers are prepared to teach Mandarin in K-12 settings remains to be seen, not to mention the fact that in reality, many K-12 students are actually taught by academics at U.S. universities sponsoring Confucius Institutes (Fischer, 2012). In May 2012, the U.S. Department of State sent a policy directive to universities that host Confucius Institutes, stating that foreign professors, research scholars, short term scholars, or college/university students cannot teach in the K-12 system because doing so violates the terms of their visas and that Chinese teachers in this category must leave at the end of the academic year in June. While Fischer (2012) claims that it is unclear why the State Department issues such a policy statement, this statement points to the growing concerns that some educators and officials have on the role of Confucius Institutes and the teachers they send to K-12 schools.

Second, Confucius Institutes’ emphasis on Mandarin teaching and learning also renders funding for other varieties of Chinese unavailable and deepens the power imbalance between Mandarin and non-Mandarin Chinese languages. Wiley (2008) writes,

The status of Mandarin as a common “heritage” language for all ethnic Chinese is open to debate. Despite this fact, there is currently little attempt in the U.S. to promote HL instruction in other Chinese languages (with the exception of

Cantonese) such as Taiwanese or Hakka. As these are languages of the home and local communities, they could also be considered HLs. (p. 96).

Voices from PCCS students reveal that other Chinese languages, such as Cantonese or Fujianese, should absolutely be considered as HLs and an “I-identity” in the “Chinese” HL classroom should be not constrained only to the one that speaks Mandarin. As the data show, a mismatch between students’ true HLs and the institutionalized surrogate HL (Mandarin) did influence investment in learning Mandarin; it was often those who are not exposed to Mandarin at home that experienced the most frustration and alienation in the classroom. In creating a more equitable language-learning context for all students, researchers and educators should be attentive to the experiences of students from non-Mandarin Chinese-speaking backgrounds, especially when this population is sizeable and continues to grow. In fact, most of the long-standing community members of Chinese diasporic communities in the U.S. and some South Asian countries are speakers of varieties of Cantonese, Fujianese, and Hakka (Chan & Lee, 1981; Chang, 2003; Liang & Morooka, 2004). In particular, Fujian province surpassed Guangdong and became the number one emigrant province in China by the mid-1990s; resulting in burgeoning Fujianese immigrant associations in metropolitan cities like New York and elsewhere. This population also represents a lower level of the socioeconomic stratum (Liang & Morooka, 2004).

In many Chinese diasporic communities where varieties like Cantonese, Fujianese, Hakka, and Shanghainese are home languages to many ethnic Chinese, it is critical that those involved with research with Chinese Americans do not reinforce

“Chinese equals Mandarin” ideology but rather use Chinese diasporic spaces to provide counter-hegemonic discourses. As Ang (2001) proposes, Chinese diasporic communities offer an arena that allows Chinese living outside China “to be Chinese in his own way...living a de-centered Chineseness that does not have to live up to the norm of ‘the essential Chinese subject’” (p. 38). Teachers of “Chinese” heritage language students should recognize these students’ unique status as border crossers and develop pedagogies and curricula that take into consideration their multilingual backgrounds. In the current macro-ideological order, which is increasingly ignoring linguistic diversity within Chinese languages in overseas Chinese societies, there is a need for a closer look at the language experiences of Chinese students from non-Mandarin backgrounds because doing so provides a rich ideological and implementational space (cf., Hornberger, 2002) for institutional “Chinese” heritage programs.

If we aim to create an inclusive learning environment that fosters our diverse Chinese HL learners, there is no doubt that the contemporary language classroom must do more to understand the language ecology that these students reside in. In line with the view that all language teachers are engaged with bottom-up language planning (Hornberger, 1997; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996), educators need to recognize and value multiple Chinese languages as well as re-envision and reconceptualize the multiple discourses of “Chinese” in diasporic communities in the U.S. so we can bring multiple Chineses forward (cf. Hornberger & King, 1996).

My study also reveals that “Chinese” HL education that re-envisions a community of practice where students’ heritage languages like Cantonese or Fujianese have their

own values that Mandarin cannot replace, might avoid the risks of furthering alienation of minority students or of exploiting the minority group for the greater benefit of the majority group (cf., Ricento, 2005b). A more flexible bilingual approach that allows the use of multiple languages to convey meanings and negotiate identities is receiving growing scholarly attention in HL research (Anderson, 2008; Creese & Blackledge, 2010) because of its potential to promote HL learning. When the PCCS HL teacher allowed her students to use multiple Chinese languages in the classroom, students became very expressive and highly engaged in the classroom. This is also similar to Hornberger's (2003) argument that paying attention to the traditionally less powerful literacy contexts and content is more likely to promote multiliteracies and that learners' language learning is maximized when they can draw from their existing language skills and knowledge. As the data show, a flexible and multilingual approach to HL teaching seems to enable PCCS HL students to construct a more fluid "D-identity" (cf., Gee, 2000) in their classroom interaction that affords them the possibility to discuss issues pertinent to them. In other words, when multiple varieties of Chinese are valued in the classroom, students' linguistic fluency of Mandarin is also improved because students used it as the linguistic vehicle to discuss linguistic plurality and contest dominant language ideologies. Such pedagogical practice also helps the students remain connected with their families and preserve their language varieties that would otherwise be lost in face of prevalent English and Mandarin hegemony.

The examination of PCCS HL students' learning also points to the unexplored potential for the Mandarin language classroom to become a site where students' critical

language awareness is fostered. To better address Chinese American students' multilingual backgrounds in ways that can value their home languages and support their investment in the Mandarin HL classroom, my colleagues and I propose a critical language awareness perspective to "Chinese" HL education that attempts to raise consciousness about linguistic diversity within the Chinese diasporic communities (Leung & Wu, 2011a, 2011b; Wu, Lee, & Leung, 2013). Critical language awareness is closely related to the goals of critical applied linguistics, which views the teaching of language as a political act to promote social change (Alim, 2010; Fairclough, 1992; Pennycook, 2001). In critical language awareness, teachers need to recognize that their actions and lack of actions can challenge, ignore, or blindly accept wider society's dominant power structures. Related to the Mandarin HL context, a critical language awareness perspective in "Chinese" HL education would interrogate how and why Mandarin has enjoyed a strong support in HL programs despite the U.S.'s long history of non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants. Instead of accepting Mandarin's presence in Mandarin HL education as natural and neutral, a critical language awareness approach is concerned with raising consciousness about Mandarin's dominance and ways to transform the status quo.

Spanish HL scholars have also written about the need for HL programs to incorporate sociolinguistic training that addresses the unequal power relations across languages when users speak less prestigious forms of Spanish (Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2003; Ruiz, 1996). Similarly, Mandarin HL education needs to confront this imbalance of power among different varieties of Chinese. To challenge the normative view that often



upholds Mandarin as the sole Chinese “language” and makes the rest of the varieties “dialects,” Leung and Wu (2011a, 2011b) choose the term “Chineses” to refer to all varieties of Chinese language as an attempt to raise readers’ critical awareness of how Mandarin has been marked as the Chinese that wields the most capital in the global linguistic marketplace. If the perceived need to pursue Mandarin language learning continues to spread worldwide without critical questioning, the dominant language ideologies will possibly continue to eradicate the rich linguistic heritage of Chinese American students and reproduce the inequality among Chineses. Although Mandarin HL educators may be well-intentioned professionals, without critical language awareness as part of their pedagogy, they run the risk of reinforcing negative attitudes and oppressing students whose HL is not Mandarin.

### **9.8 Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions**

Having laid out these findings in light of relevant prior literature, I now reiterate implications and suggestions from my research. While these points are directed towards PCCS, other urban schools seeking to better serve their diverse students may also find them relevant. It should be noted that the suggestions presented here are not meant to highlight shortcomings in PCCS because as my research has shown, PCCS is a rather successful school in fostering not only students’ academic performance but also their identities. The suggestions here are meant to further PCCS goal and mission in offering quality, affirming, and agentive education to linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **9.8.1 On Nurturing Interracial/Interethnic Friendships at PCCS and beyond**

Students' interracial/interethnic interactions and friendships would benefit from receiving more attention from the teachers. For PCCS, racial and ethnic segregation among students has to be acknowledged and discussed at school. Both teachers and students could be part of the discussions. There should be more explicit and consistent talks on racial and ethnic stereotypes in the regular classroom setting. Teachers can guide students to discuss where their stereotypes of African American students being "loud," "threatening," "brash," and Asian/Asian American students being "quiet" and "smart" come from. Students could also have the opportunity to critically ponder upon how stereotypes are able, or unable to capture their individual experiences, what it means to be someone who meets or breaks specific racial and ethnic stereotypes, and what intent is behind the use of racial stereotypes. It is hoped that through democratic discussions, students would be able to develop acute insights into their interracial/interethnic interaction and resolve their differences in ways that do not discriminate against one another.

Both teachers and students also need to recognize that what counts as an appropriate way of communication often differs across communities and to understand the importance of respecting different ways of communicating. Teachers can incorporate ethnographic projects in their teaching that help students study the language use in their own communities or their peer groups and talk about similarities and differences in different communities. Teachers can also include discussions of stereotypes since many stereotypes, like being loud or quiet are closely related to how different cultural or racial

groups are perceived. Teachers who are interested in projects of this kind can consult with the website of “School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society (SKILLS),” led by Dr. Mary Bucholtz and her colleagues at the University of California at Santa Barbara. As an innovative program for California’s public school students, SKILLS guides students to carry out research on language use in their own peer groups, families, and communities. SKILLS’ website provides not only samples of student work, but also curriculum for teachers to adapt for their own lessons.

### **9.8.2 On Mandarin FL Education**

Mandarin FL students’ frustration of learning a super hard language needs to be better addressed. The first step can be setting reasonable and realistic goals that take into account the instructional time as well as students’ lived experiences. Educators could also be more attentive to students’ investment in Mandarin and not assume students would be invested in learning this language that is positioned as critical to economic success and national security in the macro-discourse. Teachers can have needs assessment with students about their Mandarin learning experiences, such as what they hope to accomplish and get out of learning Mandarin, and what learning Mandarin means to them. With this information, teachers and students can set short-term and long-term goals that could better help students move closer to their imagined communities.

Mandarin FL classrooms have the potential to cultivate students’ critical cross-cultural knowledge that helps them to become socially aware and responsible world citizens. This means that teachers need to move beyond teaching major Chinese holidays

and customs and start to introduce socio-political-historical issues in Mandarin-speaking countries and how these issues are interrelated to their lives in the U.S. Doing so might encourage students to become more aware of international relations as well as of their political decisions and ethical responsibilities in making the world a more just place for all.

### **9.8.3 On Mandarin HL Education**

In view of HLLs' lived experiences and their linguistic realities, future teaching should professionally recognize multiple varieties of Chinese in Chinese diasporic communities. In a time where the Chinese government has strenuously promoted Mandarin beyond the borders of China and where a growing number of countries have invested hefty resources in the teaching of Mandarin because of its marketability, there needs to be more work that looks at, values, and celebrates the plurality of languages used by Chinese diasporas across the world. Educators should look at the experiences of speakers of non-Mandarin Chinese languages and view their languages and heritages through the lenses of additive and flexible multilingualism.

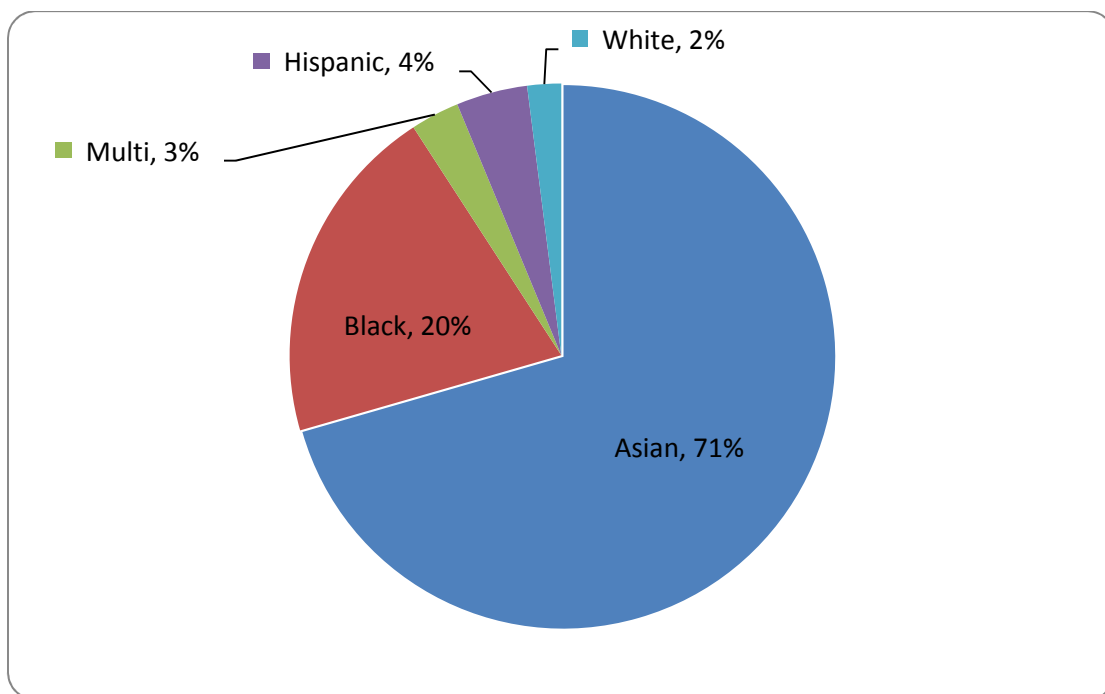
Mandarin HL teachers can develop a “socially sensitive” pedagogy (cf. McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008) that recognizes the various ways in which Chinese are used within the local communities and explores specific functions or purposes they serve. A pedagogy that captures this complex sociolinguistic diversity is especially suitable to raise heritage learners' critical awareness of different Chinese and how speakers of non-Mandarin Chinese are positioned in the current Chinese-as-Mandarin ideology. Leung and Wu's (2012) study of Philadelphia Chinatown shows that teaching materials (e.g.,

pictures, posters, menus, signage) drawn from local contexts can provide an authentic and contextualized input and the richness of multiple Chinese uses or texts can expand the notion of school literacies, in which monolingual and written texts from the majority culture or language group are often privileged. Mandarin HL teachers can take advantage of the rich linguistic resources that the Chinese diasporic communities offer and develop pedagogies that are better at helping students become competent language users in their own contexts and beyond.

## **9.9 Conclusion**

In conclusion, my findings have contributed toward a better understanding of innovative teaching and learning for linguistically, culturally, and racially students in the U.S. My dissertation research at PCCS offers me ample opportunities to ponder upon possibilities and creativity for educating students from diverse backgrounds at this changing time. I hope my work “lights a candle” at a time when many minority students are still perceived to be less academically competent. By revealing their voices and how educators can exert their agency to offer high quality education for all students, my work illustrates the urgency for other scholars to further pursue this line of research. I conclude this dissertation with great hope for a more equitable educational future that we can envision and create for all the students that we serve.

**Appendix A: Racial Diversity of Student Body at PCCS**



**Appendix B: Ethnicities within Asian Students**

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Chinese	186	41.52%
Indonesian	63	14.06%
Cambodian	33	7.37%
Vietnamese	16	3.57%
Cambodian/Chinese	4	0.89%
Chinese/Vietnamese	3	0.67%
Laotian	3	0.67%
Cambodian/Laos	2	0.45%
Hmong	1	0.45%
Chinese/Korean	1	0.22%
Indian	1	0.22%
Indonesian/Vietnamese	1	0.22%
Korean	1	0.22%

**Appendix C: Sample Student Interview Questions**

1. Tell me your experiences at PCCS. What do you like and dislike about the school?
2. What subjects do you do well in? What subject is most challenging? What subject do you like most? The least? Why?
3. What can your teacher do to help you learn better?
4. Who are some of your friends? What do you enjoy doing with your friends?
5. What do you usually do at home? Do you have any chores?
6. What is your neighborhood like?
7. What are some goals you have for the new school year?
8. What do you want to do in the future?
9. How has the Chinese class been at PCCS? (Too hard/too easy?)
10. What does learning Chinese mean for you?
11. Will you take Chinese in high school if that's offered at your school?
12. Tell me the three countries that you would like to visit.



**Appendix D: “I am a Peacebuilder, I Pledge” by PCCS Eighth Graders**

**ALL: I-I am a peacebuilder, I pledge: To praise people**

When my friends look nice, when they succeed

When they talk things out, when they do a good deed.

**ALL: I praise people!**

**ALL: I- I am a peacebuilder, I pledge: to give up put-downs.**

Put downs are insults that just hurt our peers. A simple insult could cause many tears before you give one.

Put yourself in their shoes--- you wouldn't like it if they insulted you!

**ALL: Give up put downs!**

**ALL: I- I am a peacebuilder, I pledge: to notice and speak about hurts I have caused.**

I'm feeling so guilty about that person I put down. Man I hate that guy when he throws me down.

Why don't you say sorry? How does that sound?

Man that was the past. Could we be friends now?

**ALL: I talk it out!**

**ALL: I- I am a peacebuilder, I pledge: to seek wise people.**

People with experience have the solutions.

Make friends with the smart people. You should hang around.

If you're not with the right crew, they just weighing you down.

**ALL: I seek wise people!**

**ALL: I- I am a peacebuilder, I pledge: to right wrongs.**

If you mess up, fix it.

Bonds have been broken, trust has been stolen.

Let's take a pause for the moment, rewind.

Take it slow motion, if you mess up, fix it. Don't try to twist it.

We're an army of peace, and we all just enlisted.

**ALL: I- I am a peacebuilder, I pledge:**

**I will make peace in my home, in my school, and in my community**

**Each day!**

**Appendix E: A Replica of Teacher Meihua's Drawing on the Blackboard**

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