

# Bilingual Identity

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# Inspiration for Our Why Question

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During our time at our Service-Learning sites we have seen many bilingual/ESL students struggle with their social identity.

- ❖ Refusing to speak Spanish in the classroom
- ❖ Ignoring Spanish/Bilingual homework
- ❖ Shyness/Lack of Confidence in bilingual or ESL students.

## Connection to our Service-Learning Sites

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Many of our Service-Learning sites have bilingual students participating in activities, socializing with other students, and working one-on-one with us with homework.

By understanding these students better we can

- ❖ Better guide them academically
- ❖ Bolster their social and academic confidence
- ❖ Foster pride in their cultural and social identity

## Our “Why” Question

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Why do bilingual students at our service-learning sites seem to struggle with their social identity?

Focus Group: Bilingual Students

## Insider/Outsider Chart

	Insider	Outsider
Child/Young Person	Sydney - Interview	
Adult	Keren Ramirez - <a href="#">UC Irvine</a>	Stafford - Interview
Adult Who Has Studied the Question	Nairán Ramírez-Esparza and Adrián García-Sierra <a href="#">UConn</a>	Chris Hedges - <a href="#">New York Times</a>

# Interview 1: Sydney

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Where it fits: Child Insider

- ❖ Sydney is a 4th grade student at 826 Boston.
- ❖ Sydney is an Asian-American student, who has underscored her heavy bilingual ties, and has frequent interactions with other bilingual students.
  - She has expressed some struggles and pressures that she faces due to her bilingual identity.
- ❖ Sydney is a good source to consider for bilingual identity because she is in an educational environment where she is the minority.

## Interview 1: Question 1

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- ❖ Question 1: “Do you feel more Chinese, American, or both?”
  - “I speak to Leon, my younger brother, and my dad in English, but I speak Chinese to everyone else in my life, such as my mom and the people in my community. For these other people, I need to act as a translator because they can’t read, write, or speak English.”.

# Interview 1: Question 1 Analysis

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## ❖ Background Info

- Her mother doesn't understand English very well so Sydney's primary communication language with her mother is Chinese.
- She is also required to use English to speak to her father and brother which means that there is a bilingual environment at home for her, where she must constantly rotate from English to Chinese and vice versa.

## ❖ Translator Responsibilities

- As a translator, Sydney is faced with many responsibilities, even ones that shouldn't be required at her age.
- Sydney faces stress and pressure from dealing with those responsibilities.



# Interview 1: Question 2

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- ❖ Question 2: "Do you think that being both Chinese and American forces you to place higher standards on yourself as an Asian American?"
  - "Yes, I feel like I must succeed more in comparison to my friends, especially in my Chinese class. The fact that I am Chinese increases the pressure for me to do well in the class. Even my parents have decided to offer me rewards for doing well in my Chinese class."

# Interview 1: Question 2 Analysis

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## ❖ Background Info

- Sydney goes to Chinese class because her parents directed her to do so.

## ❖ Sydney explains that her bilingual identity brings a lot of pressure on her in the academic context, especially in her Chinese class.

- The primary pressure comes from her parents and her bilingual identity because she is expected to excel in her Chinese class and this means that even outside of her Chinese class, she is needed to be able to speak Chinese fluently.
- She highlights the fact that her parents have even resorted to offering her gifts in exchange for academic excellence.
- Even outside of her parents, there is a social pressure because she is expected to speak Chinese very fluently, especially with the people in her community.

# Karen Ramirez: Adult Insider

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## ❖ Bilingual Mexican-American student from UC Irvine

- “When I was with my family, they would criticize me because I wasn't fluent or my pronunciation was horrible. When I was in public, or in school, people would say that I had an accent and would even attempt to imitate it. Young and naive, one day I decided that I never wanted to speak Spanish again”
- “It was comments such as “Typical Mexican speaking Spanish” or “You speak Spanish? Can you clean and make me tacos too?” I know it may sound absurd but people have actually asked me that”
- “Several Spanish-speaking children had decided to take my approach as well and now can't speak Spanish at all. They completely lost that ability and now can't pass it on to future generations and can't communicate with their relatives”

# Analysis

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## ❖ Conflicting social pressures

- Familial pressures to speak spanish well
- Pressure from friends and peers to conform to americanized culture and hide their culture and language
- Leads to an overall conflicting Identity

## ❖ Peer Pressure leads to a sense of shame in one culture/language

- Unwillingness to associate with stereotypes leads to further distancing
- Loss of one language leads to a loss of a part of one's self
- Many students couldn't communicate with family members
- Further distancing from family members and culture

## ❖ Conclusion

- Students face conflicting pressures from different groups which leads to struggles with their social Identity

# Interview 2: Earl Stafford

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Where it fits: Adult Outsider

## ❖ Who is he?

- Earl Stafford has been the director of Balfour Academy for 15 years
- Strong relationship with Northeastern (both personally and with Balfour)

## ❖ Why is he a good fit?

- There is a strong bilingual student demographic at Balfour
- He often holds one-on-one meetings with bilingual students and with parents to discuss academic and personal life.
- Contributes various perspectives as both an educator and as a listener

## Interview 2: Question 1

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- ❖ Question 1: “Do you think bilingual teens are comfortable with their identity, but struggle with other people defining them racially?”
  - “Yes. I was once on the T, standing next to a bunch of Asian kids going into Chinatown. They dropped AT LEAST 20 ‘N’ bombs, even though there were African American people also on the T. Although morally wrong, it was so fascinating that these American-born Asian kids were cussing like it was a natural part of their speech. Later, I asked why they were saying the ‘N’ word so much, and they said that kids at their school made fun of them for being Chinese, but they were left alone when they ‘spoke like them’”.

# Interview 2: Question 1 Analysis

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## ❖ Background Info

- The Chinese-American students attended an African-American dominant middle school

## ❖ Society has a tendency to oppress the minority population

- In order to avoid being targeted and ridiculed, the Chinese-American students conformed to the majority
- Ex: Spoke like them, dressed like them, listened to identical music

## ❖ Bilingual students struggle with the social and navigational pillars of cultural wealth

- Social: Limited to their own Chinese-American “clique” until they conformed
- Navigational: Bilingual students had to maneuver within unsupportive and hostile environment

## Interview 2: Question 2

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- ❖ Question 2: "What role do you think parents have in the student's bilingual struggle with their social identity?"
  - "Parents play a very important role in helping their kids identifying their social identity. Firstly, they should be very involved in both their academic and personal lives. Parents should not only be constantly checking their kid's grades, but also learning English on their own if it isn't their first language. Most of the bilingual student's parents at Balfour aren't American-born, and often try to make their children stick to the parent's home-country's roots. They should embrace the bilingual identity instead of limiting their children".



## Interview 2: Question 2 Analysis

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- ❖ Parents play a pivotal role in achieving cultural freedom for their bilingual children.
  - Parents have a proclivity of clinging to deeply rooted customs of their origin country, particularly language.
  - Their perspectives and tradition gets passed down onto children
  - Parents are unable or do not have time to learn English
- ❖ Bilingual children act as a medium of translation between their school and family.
  - Language spoken at school vs. Language spoken at home
  - Linguistic disconnection between school and home life precipitates a social identity crisis
- ❖ Cultural wealth (i.e. Linguistic and familial capital) is limited due to the parental barriers
  - Familial: Bilingual students cannot leverage their parent's wisdom/guidance
  - Linguistic: Strengthened separately, but are limited collectively due to children's role as a translator
- ❖ "But as I was coming to discover, that's part of what teaching is about: the willingness to explore with kids, to reach with them, to follow a dimly lit path together, often unaware of the dazzling surprises that may wait around the bend' (Michie 68).

# Research Insider

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- ❖ Doctorate Researchers @ UConn Language and Behavior Cultural lab
  - Nairán Ramírez-Esparza and Adrián García-Sierra
  - The Bilingual Brain: Language, Culture, and Identity
- ❖ “We are second language learners. We learned English as a second language in a bilingual school in Mexico after our first language was very well established, around 5 years of age.”
- ❖ “...the integration of two languages and two cultures is related to the degree that the mother tongue is associated with low or high social status. In the United States, English would be the high status language and it is associated with socioeconomic power, whereas Spanish would be the low status language and it is associated with less or no socioeconomic power.”

# Analysis

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- ❖ For bilingual children, ability/willingness to use one of their languages has to do with how well they perceive that language integrates into mainstream culture.
  - Those bilinguals perceive their language is a part of mainstream culture speak that language more often
  - In contrast, those who do not are less likely to use their language and more likely to eventually abandon it as a sign of "low social status"
  - "Thus, language fluency in bilinguals is associated with assimilation of their two cultures, and the social status of first and second languages."
- ❖ Conclusion
  - Bilingual students struggle with their social identity because from a young age they are conscious of "social status" and will adapt to the language and culture that is more advantageous.

# Chris Hedges: Research Outsider

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- ❖ American Journalist for the New York Times
  - "Growing Up In 2 Languages"
- ❖ "Drifting between two languages and cultures, they can feel like outsiders in both"
- ❖ "If you do not have the correct supportive structures to raise the child bilingually, the child will not be comfortable in either linguistic community... This will have consequences in school and in the child's identity; a child can feel alienated and removed from those around him."
- ❖ "His daughter, like many young bilingual children, mixes up sounds and syntax. She has the habit, while speaking French, of adding the English 's' sound to third-person...She also will use English constructions in French"

# Analysis

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- ❖ Bilingual Children can develop a sense of alienation, not quite fitting into either group
  - Sense of “otherness”
  - Could also lead to academic consequences
- ❖ Some children have difficulty switching between the two languages, mixing up certain grammatical aspects
  - Furthering the sense of not completely fitting in to either linguistic group
  - Leads to teasing in school
- ❖ Conclusion
  - Bilingual students often struggle with their social identities because they feel as if they don't fit in with either social group, and struggle to find where they fit in at all.

## Further Questions

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- ❖ How could we create an environment so that bilingual students don't face the social pressures they currently do?
- ❖ How similar are the challenge bilingual students of different cultures and languages? (i.e. Chinese and Spanish).
- ❖ What are our Service-Learning sites doing correctly to address this question and what could they improve?

# What We Learned (How Our Assumptions Changed)

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- ❖ Overall, we found the reasons why bilingual students at our service-learning sites seem to struggle with their social identity are:
  - Social pressures
    - Pressure to choose the language and culture with “higher socioeconomic power”
  - Conflicting social and cultural identities
    - Conflicting identity in different cultural environments (home vs school)
  - Feelings of alienation
    - Difficulty aligning with either group

# What We Found Surprising

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- ❖ How so many people lost their linguistic ability because of social pressures.
  - Children distance themselves from one language and culture because of teasing and negative stereotypes
  - Difficulty understanding that language and relatives later in life
  - Inability to relate to the culture and pass the language on to future generations
- ❖ Most bilingual kids act as a medium of translation between their parents and personal life.
  - Parents are unwilling or do not have enough time to learn English (*Grace's Aren't You on the Parent's List*)
  - Creates insufficient communication and understanding of bilingual child's personal life



# Implications

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- ❖ We are more aware of the challenges bilingual students face with their social identity and can better guide them.
- ❖ Guide them better academically
- ❖ Bolster their social and academic confidence
- ❖ Foster pride in their cultural and social identity

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