

## Social Class, Identity, and Migrant Students

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A necessary component of the neoliberal mechanisms of globalization, migration addresses the economic and labor needs of postindustrial countries while producing new modes of social fragmentation and inequality (Crompton, 2008). As migrant students insert themselves into segmented spaces, their countries of origin are themselves implicated in a global class hierarchy, often positioning them in ways that refract this world economic order (Kelly, 2012). Operating in these transnational contexts, social class plays a significant role in determining life trajectories and the ways by which migrant students of diverse social classes exercise agency. In language education research, however, social class remains largely underexplored, compared to identity categories of ethnicity, race, and gender (Block, 2012). To address this gap, this article employs a Bourdieusian conceptualization of social class, to examine how class differences in transnational contexts can impact the social and educational trajectories of learners. Data from migrant Filipino students in Vancouver, Canada, illustrate how migrant students continually negotiate class positions in these transnational spaces and how the affordances and constraints of their social class can lead to divergent learning outcomes.

**Key words:** social class, transnationalism, migration, identity, Filipino

In the neoliberal order driven by privatization, deregulation, and the supremacy of market forces, globalized production relations and local market demands create new labor needs in highly industrialized societies (Larner, 2000). This system necessitates the flow of people, technology, money, and information and ideas across boundaries (Appadurai, 1990). As technological innovations produce new modes of productivity and new skill sets, employment becomes more precarious, creating labor conditions that leave certain categories of workers (e.g., immigrants, women, youth, minorities) vulnerable (Castells, 1999). For Foucault (2008), individuals left to navigate these market-driven spaces are inscribed as *homo economicus*, “an entrepreneur of [one’s] self” (p. 226). Negotiating new identities across time and space, the migrant student,<sup>1</sup> equipped with different forms of capital, brings a range of complex investments to new classrooms and communities (Norton, 2013).

It is precisely at this juncture of our history that issues of social class become increasingly exigent for migrant students. While the emergence of the postindustrial work order may render

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, we use the term *migrant* instead of *immigrant* to include temporary migrant workers and educational sojourners, who continue to increase in number in transnational contexts where technology and modes of transportation have facilitated greater mobility and transience.

traditional labels of *middle class* and *working class* defunct (Savage et al., 2013), class differences do exist—and continue to impinge on the life trajectories of these students in visible and invisible ways. These differences are played out in education, which has a determining role, not only in how goods and services can be produced to serve market needs, but also in how these roles and relations of power that enable such production are themselves reproduced (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Giroux, 2001). Equipped with varying levels of economic, cultural, and social capital, migrant students are positioned in society in unequal ways. As they occupy these segmented spaces, educators are challenged to create more-equitable conditions in which migrant students, both vulnerable and privileged, are able to invest fully in their learning.

Recognizing how migrant students occupy segmented spaces in their country of settlement while maintaining multistranded relations with their country of origin, this article employs Bourdieu's conceptualization of social class and connects it with the construct of transnationalism. Through this lens, we argue that social class is fluid and multidimensional, especially as migrant learners position themselves and are positioned in differential ways in transnational relations and as they gain and lose symbolic capital in fields that are no longer bound by territorial spaces. We argue that migrant learners operate with a *transnational habitus* and continually negotiate their class positions. Drawing on data from two very different adolescent Filipino migrants in Canada, we illustrate how social class impinges on the learning and social outcomes of migrant learners and thus requires greater attention in language education research.

### SOCIAL CLASS, BOURDIEU, AND TRANSNATIONAL HABITUS

The ascendance of individualism and consumerism has been concomitant with the decline of collectivist politics and the emergence of gender, race, and ethnicity as more salient social categories (Rampton, 2006), leaving social class as an underexamined construct, particularly in language education research (Block, 2012; Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012). Not only have traditional models of class structure failed to reflect the new world order, but the fluidity of social class, and its complex formulations, make definitive conceptions of class untenable. Quantitative studies, to arrive at meaningful conclusions, would have to rely on neighborhoods, ethnolinguistic backgrounds, or even immigration categories to serve as markers of socioeconomic status (Garnett, Adamuti-Trache, & Ungerleider, 2008; Gunderson, 2007; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). Social class, however, is more complex than socioeconomic status and can no longer be understood as simply a person's relation to the means of production. While social class has always been recognized as an economic position, it has also increasingly been regarded as a cultural process, marked by consumption patterns, identity formations, and bodily attributes like accent, behavior, and dress (Kelly, 2012). It reflects relationships between structure and agency, and economic and cultural inputs—relationships best integrated by Bourdieu's conceptualization of social class (Crompton, 2008). For this French sociologist, class divisions are defined by differing conditions of existence, dispositions, and levels of power: elements expressed in his theoretical toolkit of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field*. Such conceptualizations have important implications for immigrant students and their investments in the language practices of classrooms and communities (Norton, 2013).

Habitus, which can be understood as history in person (Holland & Lave, 2001), is “a system of durable, transposable dispositions . . . principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). As disposition, habitus expresses both the internalized parameters of what is deemed reasonable or possible and a tendency to generate perception and practices that correspond to these structures (Swartz, 1997). In this view, the habitus helps to explain and construct the imagined identities and imagined communities of language learners (Kanno & Norton, 2003). What agents judge as reasonable for people of their class comes from habitus, which is acquired by structures of social advantage and disadvantage and is constituted by combinations of different forms of capital. Capital is power that extends from the material/economic to the cultural and social: *Economic capital* refers to wealth, property, and income; *cultural capital* is knowledge, educational credentials, and appreciation of specific cultural forms; and *social capital* is connections to networks of power (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital are circulated and competed for in arenas of struggle or structured spaces called *fields* (Swartz, 1997). As agents, more generally, and migrant students in particular struggle for position within fields and enact different social practices, commonalities surface, and people, both consciously and unconsciously, align themselves with those who share similar dispositions and investments, forming groups or social classes. A dominant class is able to determine *symbolic capital*, that which is valued in a field, while capital of limited value is associated with less powerful social groups (Crompton, 2008). This dynamic interplay of power occurs across different fields, most notably that of education, where middle-class values and practices are normalized as natural and neutral (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

### TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY AND MIGRANT STUDENTS

Driven by diverse goals, serving different needs of the nation-state, and equipped with varying levels of capital, migrants occupy segmented spaces (Zhou, 1997) from the moment they arrive as investors, entrepreneurs, skilled workers, laborers, refugees, or sojourners. Within a globalized world, there also exists a global class hierarchy, and the location of a migrant’s country of origin in this hierarchy can also position migrants in particular ways in their country of settlement. In a study of immigrant English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Canada, for instance, Gunderson (2007) observed how the assignment of socioeconomic status to certain ethnolinguistic groups was linked to the world economic order. In his study, many Mandarin and Cantonese speakers were considered to be from affluent, entrepreneurial families, while Vietnamese speakers were understood to be refugees with limited economic capital.

With the rapid advancement of technology in recent years, the patterns of movement and socialization of migrants have changed. Through more-affordable travel, mobile communication devices, social media, and online connectivity, migrants are able to navigate more seamlessly between their countries of origin and of settlement (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994) and are able to participate in cultural, economic, or political activities within transnational networks (Lam & Warriner, 2012). In this broader, deterritorialized arena, a process of valuation and exchange of capital continues, and habitus itself is *transnationalized*. Bearing the imprint of both countries of origin and countries of settlement, this *transnational habitus* allows migrants to discern and act based on the interplay of dispositions structured by these distinct spaces. What may be a loss in one site, can be a gain in the other (Kelly & Lusi, 2006).

To illustrate this complex set of relations, we turn to Ayrton and John, two adolescent migrants in Vancouver, Canada, who took part in a small case study in 2013. The purpose of the study was to compare the language and literacy practices of two 16-year-old Filipino migrant learners of contrasting social and economic backgrounds. Data were collected by Darwin through a series of interviews and home visits in October and November 2013.

### AYRTON AND JOHN: NEGOTIATING SOCIAL CLASS IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Ayrton,<sup>2</sup> whose family immigrated to Canada through the Investor Class provision,<sup>3</sup> goes to a private school in a wealthy area of Vancouver. Everyone else in the family is university educated, and English has always been the primary language in the home. Ayrton's mother is a full-time homemaker, while his father is an entrepreneur who continues to manage, remotely, multiple businesses in the Philippines. John, on the other hand, immigrated to Canada through the Family Class provision<sup>4</sup> after being separated for 6 years from his mother, a licensed midwife, who came to Canada as a caregiver under temporary migrant worker arrangements. John's parents are separated, and before migrating, he lived at home with his grandmother and cousins, while enjoying a lifestyle financed by his mother's remittances. The language spoken in John's home has always been Filipino.<sup>5</sup> John goes to an inner-city public school, in a catchment where a great number of migrant families live. Because his mother's work shift is ends at 11 p.m. and includes weekends, John is often left unsupervised at home and has to do chores and care for his 6-year-old brother.

When John moved to Canada and was assigned to an ESL class, he says, "It was hard adjusting my English." Although he had always spoken English, the medium of instruction in the Philippines, it was not until he moved to Canada that he realized he had an "accent" and, more importantly, that this accent was not valued outside his country of origin. Negotiating a transnational habitus, but having gone through a migration in which his mother was deprofessionalized, and through which he experienced a decline in lifestyle, he adopted a discourse that reflects the marginalized position of the Philippines in a global class hierarchy. John asserts that in the Philippines, "it's hard to get a job." He recognizes that English is the language of social mobility, "the main language of the world," but his view of what purpose English serves seems to reflect a position of powerlessness and vulnerability: "When you're in trouble, you can communicate with . . . people who speak English . . . you can ask them for help." When asked which language he prefers, he says, "Filipino. . . since I speak it. Like it's part of me." He notes that the problem with the Filipino language is "you can talk to like only that zone",

<sup>2</sup>Names of participants are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

<sup>3</sup>The Investor Class is an immigration category that was designed to attract experienced business people who have a net worth of at least C\$1.6M and that requires them to invest C\$800,000 in the country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>The Family Class is an immigration category that allows permanent residents or citizens to apply for permanent residence for members of their immediate family. Temporary migrant workers, like those in the Live-in Caregiver Program, can become a landed immigrant only when their immediate family members also pass the immigration requirements.

<sup>5</sup>Filipino is the national language of the Philippines and is the formal name of Tagalog, which reflects a regional rather than national origin.

that is, it has no global market value. Although he would like to improve his English, John has little opportunity to build a larger social network where he can strengthen his English skills and enter into wider conversations about social and cultural opportunities in Canadian society. His mother and older sister, who are always at work or school, are not able to supervise his learning or to provide financial support for tutors or extracurricular activities. His circle of friends remains resolutely local, and a great majority of them are Filipino, with whom he speaks in his mother tongue. In this peer network, or field, he has valued cultural capital. However, his relative lack of progress in English compromises his opportunities for the future.

In contrast, because Ayrton was part of an elite class in the Philippines, where English is frequently the language of informal interaction, he was assigned to the English Honors stream when he joined a Canadian private school. There are very few Filipino students in this school, although there are some Filipinos who are part of the maintenance and cafeteria staff. Ayrton comments that peers or teachers usually do not recognize him as Filipino. Negotiating a transnational habitus, but having experienced a migration through which his family's capital remains of value, Ayrton, in contrast to John, maintains a strong sense of agency. Ayrton expresses that "with how the world is just connected and how information is at your fingertips, you can be anyone or anything you want to be and it's just right there." His father's entrepreneurial spirit is not only reflected in this statement, but also in Ayrton's own interests. He takes a business elective in school and a currency trading e-learning course, which his parents paid for. The family's resources afford them a lifestyle that still approximates the kind they had in the Philippines. Because he lived in a privileged and very much protected environment in the Philippines, he views his migration as a way "to get out of that isolated world" and imagine a more global future. This desire to open doors for himself is realized even more concretely in school. By joining his school's outdoor activity program, which his parents paid a premium for, Ayrton is able to discover new places in Canada and forge strong friendships with a multicultural set of friends who are equally well-resourced. When asked about his transition, he says, "I feel that I didn't need to adjust my English." Instead, he recognizes that he is just "slowly getting influenced in [his] speech", and now "stress[es] [his] syllables in a different way." By maintaining a privileged class position in his country of settlement, Ayrton not only builds greater cultural and social capital valued in transnational fields but also imagines a social future in which he is "entrepreneur of one's self."

## DISCUSSION

As evidenced in the data from John and Ayrton, social class is inscribed in the different social and learning trajectories of these migrant students. From the linguistic resources they acquire in their country of origin to the social networks they become part of in their country of settlement, their opportunities for the future are largely shaped by the affordances and constraints of their class positions. While they come from the same country where English is the medium of instruction, their exposure to and use of the language, in both the Philippines and Canada, varies. For Blommaert (2005), the linguistic resources migrants bring with them are always subject to different orders of indexicality, and John, in seeking to assimilate, struggles as an English language learner in order to achieve the level that will permit him to graduate and pursue postsecondary education. Further, because of his home conditions in Canada, his capacity to interact with a larger

network within which he can speak the target language is limited. As these two Filipino adolescents negotiate a transnational habitus, what and where they choose to speak is motivated by the valuing and devaluing of their cultural capital in different contexts. Ayrton, whose immigration to Canada did not involve a devaluing of his and his family's capital, is able to gain symbolic capital as he successfully navigates new fields in his country of settlement. Further, while John and Ayrton may have similar imagined identities and hopes for the future, their respective class positions will explain, at least in part, the extent to which these ambitions are realized.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The data from Ayrton and John is illustrative of the arguments we have presented with reference to social class and identity within the specific context of adolescent migration. As we seek to understand migrant students, we need to recognize not only that they are racialized, ethnicized, and gendered bodies, but also that their identities are inscribed by social class as well and that these social class positions can lead to different educational and social trajectories that will offer different (i.e., unequal) opportunities. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Darvin & Norton, in press), schools need not simply reproduce the social inequalities of wider society. Teachers who are more critically informed about migration and social class can provide a space that not only enriches the language and literacy development of migrant students but also empowers transnational identities. By affirming that migrant students come with valuable transnational knowledges and skills, teachers can help migrant students claim more-powerful identities from which to navigate investments in the language practices of their new classrooms and communities. In this process, migrant students, notwithstanding social class position, can become entrepreneurs of the self, who aspire not only for individual success but also for social change.

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