When *'el intérprete' is also the 'learner':*
An Innovative Youth Empowerment Project for Immigrant Youth

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Abstract: In this paper, we present a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project that documented an innovative youth empowerment program at a community based organization. The program at the core of this paper is aimed at strengthening cultural brokering, empowerment, civic engagement, and leadership skills by engaging youth as bilingual interpreters at community events to facilitate the participation of adults with limited English proficiency. Through the research-practice integration reflected in our study, we highlight how immigrant youth, engaged in activities that facilitate reflective thinking about their roles as cultural brokers, can be powerfully supported in navigating across their multiple cultural worlds.

Introduction

The proliferation of youth leadership and empowerment programs in the past decade reflects the promise of such programs as a means of promoting youth development. However, as Rhodes and Dubois (2006) note, the widespread adoption of mentoring programs as a vehicle for youth development has occurred without much attention to empirical research on program effectiveness or on the specific program features that promote youth development. In this paper, we present a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project that documented an innovative youth empowerment program at a community based organization. The underlying assumption of the CBPR approach is that the interaction between academic researchers and community partners in a well-planned and respectfully structured research partnership will produce authentic knowledge and facilitate the working process (Trickett, & Espino, 2004). Our partnership to bridge research and practice included program staff and youth as well as researchers from a neighboring university, bringing together the voices of academic and community partners. Our emerging new perspectives, boundary crossings, and co-learning opportunities created a richly collaborative process that we are eager to share.

The program at the core of this paper is aimed at strengthening cultural brokering, empowerment, civic engagement, and leadership skills by engaging youth as bilingual interpreters at community events to facilitate the participation of adults with limited English proficiency. The youth are provided stipends for their training and interpretation practice -- contributing to their professional development and helping them meet their financial needs as members of primarily low-income immigrant communities.

Through the research-practice integration reflected in our study, we highlight how immigrant youth, engaged in activities that facilitate reflective thinking about their roles as cultural brokers, can be powerfully supported in navigating across their multiple cultural worlds. We begin with a brief description of program, its theory of change, and the scholarship that guides our conceptual framework. Then we describe the methods we used to gather data, document our collaborative process, and derive the youth narratives. Finally, through youth voices, we illustrate the processes of learning to become cultural brokers.

The Liaison Interpreter Program of Somerville (LIPS)

The Liaison Interpreter Program of Somerville (LIPS) began with a pragmatic intent to train youth for linguistic interpretation at community events; therefore, core components of the program were deliberately planned. The underlying theory of change was based on the assumption that the process of linguistic and cultural brokering requires expertise in multiple cultural worlds. It requires simultaneous focus on strengthening youth's existing affiliations and connections within their own cultural heritage and linguistic communities, as well as building the knowledge base, skills, and connections that enable them to interact and negotiate with adults representing formal social institutions. By working with adult community informants (e.g., sitting in on school committee meetings and participating in focus groups), youth are introduced to the social networks of formal institutions, while becoming aware of the networks and resilient structures in their cultural communities. By comparing and contrasting concepts in their cultural communities and those from the formal institutions, they gain practice in understanding both, communities and their role in the interpretive interaction. Core components of the program included linguistic training by a professional organization, stipends for the trainees,

strengthening affiliation with cultural and linguistic heritage communities, preparation on the content/topic of specific community events, and professional development support.

Guiding Conceptual Frameworks

Since the program focused on youth as cultural and linguistic brokers, we present selected constructs from the acculturation literature, to delineate our central focus on how youth navigate and bridge multiple cultural worlds. Then we briefly review existing youth programs with a similar focus to examine critical features of these programs.

Navigating across Cultures as Cultural Brokers
We define navigating multiple cultural worlds and identities as being able to manage effectively the process of living in multiple cultural settings (Cooper, 2003; LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Mistry, & Wu, 2010). Further, we suggest that navigating behavioral norms, language, and discourse styles may well be a unique strength of immigrant children who move through multiple cultural worlds. This can be viewed as an asset from a Positive Youth Development framework (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, Phelps, Naudeau, et al. 2006), just as there is evidence that becoming bilingual requires and advances meta-linguistic awareness and cognitive processing skills, such as heightened selective attention and inhibition of irrelevant information (Bialystok, 1999; 2005).

Cultural brokering incorporates the construct of social capital, the resources that are available to individuals through their social ties (Putnam, 2000). Onyx and Bullen (2000) further differentiate between *bonding* versus *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital emerges from the ties and networks through which solidarity, mutual psychological support, and reinforcement of group identities occur. It is characterized by dense multifunctional ties and tends to form between family members and within other homogeneous networks. On the other hand, bridging social capital emerges from wider social networks that extend beyond an individual's primary support network. Bridging social capital often develops in heterogeneous, inclusive networks where individuals with a variety of experiences can exchange information and favors and widen opportunity structures.

Access to heterogeneous networks that cut across boundaries is one element of building bridging social capital. As Lareau (2003) documents, middle class children's upbringing often reflects 'concerted cultivation' in that they receive much experience in interacting with adults as equals through participation in multiple extracurricular and leisure activities that are often orchestrated by adults representing informal and formal social organizations. Thus, developing the skills and confidence to interact and negotiate with adults outside kith and kin networks is an essential component of developing bridging social capital. We apply these constructs of bonding and bridging social capital to further our examination of how the LIPS program provides opportunities to develop each of these types of social capital.

Youth empowerment and leadership
In the context of the immense diversity of youth programs, we conducted a selective review of research on programs that had a cultural or linguistic brokering component. Programs that targeted ethnic minority youth often employed intervention and risk prevention based strategies, implemented through culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy. Examples of these programs include Family and Community Violence Prevention (Rodney, Johnson, &

Srivastava, 2005), Families and Schools Together (FAST); (Guerra, & Knox, 2008), and Joven Noble (Tello, Servantes, Cordova, & Santos, 2010). Other programs include those that promote college outreach and support (Denner, Cooper, Dunbar, & Lopez, 2005; Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Hishinuma, Chang, Sy, Greaney, Morris, Scrance, et al., 2009; Larson & Walker, 2006; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010). Although these programs address the needs of cultural and linguistic minority youth, none have an explicitly identified focus on cultural brokering.

Evidence of specific youth interpreter programs is limited. In a five-year study of young "natural" interpreters in the San Francisco Bay area, Valdes (2003) identified bilingual Latino youth who were offered a one semester translation/interpretation course in the high school. Another program, titled the "Young Interpreters Program," was located at East Palo Alto Charter School in California (Borrero, 2007). Finally, in the "Hampshire Young Interpreter Scheme," used in a school district outside of London, UK, bilingual pupils were trained to serve as interpreters for "English as an Additional Language" immigrant classmates. Although there are some other youth interpreter programs, none of these have generated empirical research.

The constructs of navigating across cultures and social capital guided our analysis of how the program provides opportunities to develop both dimensions of cultural brokering, as well as how youth made use of these opportunities to expand their thinking and their social capital. We focus on two specific aims:

➢ To document how youths participation in LIPS promoted their affiliations with multiple communities (i.e., their cultural communities and with the local community).
➢ To document how youths' interactions with adults representing formal institutions and organizations gradually created a sense of empowerment and professionalism, while also expanding their bridging social networks.

Methods
The *youth participants* represented here consisted of the 2009-2010 cohort of the program. There were 17 bilingual youth, representing six language groups (in addition to English). Our *research team* consisted of three members who represented community based organizations and four members who represented Tufts University. The community members included the founder of the Liaison Interpreter Program of Somerville, the Director of the Welcome Project (i.e., the community based program within which the program was located), and the program coordinator responsible for program implementation. The researchers included a faculty member who has had an ongoing collaboration with The Welcome Project (initiated in 2007), and three student researchers (a doctoral student, an MA program student, and an undergraduate student). The team represented diverse backgrounds, varying in terms of ethnic heritage (including European, Central and South American, and East and South Asian), immigration history (including recent immigrants, first generation, and were from families that have been long time residents of the east coast), and educational and disciplinary background (child development, education, urban and environmental planning and community organizing).

Key features of our CBPR approach
In the application of CBPR, three core features were focused on: (a) establishing the mutuality of our collaborative process, (b) active participation of all partners at all stages of research planning and implementation, and (c) incorporation of multiple perspectives. We began by explicitly identifying our individual interests in the project, delineated our common purposes,

and finally specified the mutual benefits that accrued to each partner. We thought proactively about our varying perspectives: from the programmatic needs for program evaluation to justify fund-seeking to how the program offered a natural site for research team's studies on navigating across cultures. We remained conscious of and documented examples of mutual responsiveness. For example, researchers responded to the program staff's interest in youth civic engagement by identifying potential scales to assess this. Similarly, program staff responded to the researchers' interest in examining how youth navigated across cultural settings by supporting the development of trusting relationships between student researchers and youth participants.

To ensure active participation of all members, planning meetings included program staff and researchers to jointly define next steps, potential problems, and strategies to deal with the issues that arose. Youth participants were included in some planning meetings. Finally, all steps of the research process, including analysis and interpretation, were carefully designed to ensure that multiple perspectives were continuously elicited. As the Director of The Welcome Project noted, "In our analysis, we met to discuss each stage of the research, and were actively engaged with the researchers. The researchers spent considerable effort and time walking through initial findings with program staff, impressive in its own right. But the process was much more than that, because the discussions with program staff were used to inform the ongoing research. So it has been an iterative process that has enabled us all to learn from each other, rather than asking the researchers to evaluate the program and give us a single final product in the form of a report at the end of the project."

Data Sources and Analysis Procedures
We used a multi-method approach to data collection to elicit multiple perspectives regarding the program, its implementation, and its desired outcomes. Data sources included program documents (e.g., program description prepared for grants, program brochures, announcements), key informant interviews (with program staff and others associated with the program), individual interviews with some of the youth from the 2009-2010 cohort, focus group interviews with youth from the 2009-10 cohort, and notes from team meetings and discussions. In addition, student researchers served as participant observers and attended all weekly program sessions as well as the community events where youth served as interpreters. We analyzed the data in two steps. First we identified, as a group, the specific analytic foci (e.g., delineating evidence of youths' self-awareness of own growth, shifts from self-focus to awareness of larger community) for each dataset. Student researchers selected relevant data sources and data, and then prepared the data, using data reduction techniques (e.g., charts, tables, or visual diagrams). The second step consisted of group analysis and interpretation sessions, during which all members of the research team participated.

Results

The findings are organized to document how youth strengthened their cultural awareness and affiliations with their heritage communities, while simultaneously expanding their bridging social networks. First we document the training and professional development that youth received through their participation in the program, followed by findings organized in two sections:
  a) evidence of how the program facilitated youth's **bonding social capital** (i.e., their awareness and attunement towards their own cultural communities' needs, strengths and assets) and

b) evidence of how the program provided ***bridging social capital*** (i.e., by supporting youth's relationships with high resource adults and those that represented formal institutions).

Through the voices of youth, we highlight how youth built their knowledge base and their cultural meta-awareness as they learned to navigate the boundaries between the world of their cultural communities and the world of formal institutions.

Youth's Program Participation

Youth completed 21 hours of professional training, including direct work with language coaches for each of the languages. The program provided an additional 20 sessions of professional development and preparation for specific community events at which youth were to serve as interpreters. These ranged from an Immigrant Flu Clinic and Health Fair (where they helped as huge crowds came for the H1N1 vaccine), to a community event focused on occupational health of day laborers, to surveying community businesses, and helping to conduct focus groups to find out more about immigrant parents' strengths and barriers to supporting their children's education. For each of these events, youth received additional topic-specific training that enabled them to build their own capacity for engaging in important community discussions as they gained specific vocabulary to improve their effectiveness in assisting with interpretation.

Strengthening Bonding Social Capital

Our data show that youth engaged with, experienced, and reflected upon program activities in ways that promoted their understanding of their own capacities, growth, and development. We noted how youths' meta-awareness and critical thinking were situated in and promoted through various program tasks and activities. We found *four interwoven themes* that were powerfully illustrated in the youth voices we present here:
   a) how appreciation for bilingualism as an asset sometimes grew out of an initially pragmatic approach to the stipends they received;
   b) how youths' existing affiliations and connections within their cultural heritage and linguistic communities were strengthened;
   c) the meaning-making and negotiation processes through which youth made sense of the program and its goals, and sometimes had to reconcile discrepancies between program goals and their own interest in the program; and
   d) the sometimes dramatic shift from their own individual-centric lens to a broader perspective on their communities.

Youth's growing recognition of the *critical value of their bilingualism* to themselves and their communities was striking in many of their reflections. One youth quoted a program staff member to highlight what had become her credo - "Being multilingual is a gift, use it well". In a reflective essay written during one of the weekly sessions, another youth wrote: "I found out about LIPS at my school's book fair. At first I was only going to join for the money. After a month I started thinking about the things we do in LIPS; helping people and learning things that I never knew." This processing of self in relation to program activities not only reflected the young individual's awareness of personal growth, it highlighted the analytic thinking that was being developed. The youth goes on to explain, "People that don't know how to speak English and speak another language - people always pick on them and are mad rude to them. I think LIPS helps a lot because people that don't know how to speak English - LIPS would always have someone to help them out and have someone to translate for them." This young interpreter

sums up what was appealing and powerful about the process of being involved in the program. The speaker, with a mix of local youth slang and English, commented on the language oppression that immigrants face, but also saw how his own agency as the young interpreter supports and protects his community.

Another youth, who was also initially drawn to the paid interpretation opportunity, eventually developed an analytic *appreciation for commonalities of experience* among the LIPS youth: "At first I was here mostly for the money and for the experience of learning how to become an interpreter. But as time went by, the experience of being in a very diverse group fascinated me - the fact that I was able to learn more about other cultures and see that even though many of my peers come from the other side of the world we still had so much in common." Another youth offered a specific example: "I never knew that in Ecuador they spoke indigenous languages -- I thought it was just Spanish. So I learned more about their culture, and what their values are." And yet another youth appreciated the mind broadening experience that was facilitated through expanding social worlds: "I like coming to LIPS because I get to learn about cultures. School, work and home used to cover all of my schedule. I didn't get to know anything outside my school, work and home. But ever since I have joined, I have learned many things. Taking part in LIPS program was a way to fit something different and useful."

Youths' reports of their experiences also highlighted *how they sometimes negotiated the problems* the program faced. Increasing diversity of native languages among the LIPS youth created varying challenges. Although all youth received interpretation training, not all interpreters were in high demand. For example, since many Nepali immigrants already spoke English, there was not much demand for Nepali interpreters, which may have led to some disengagement from the program. One Nepali youth, with spotty attendance, was taken to task for disruptive behavior during one of the linguistic training sessions. After clearing the air with the linguistic coach, the youth describes the critical lesson he learned: "The big thing I learned is that people judge you by your actions. They might be judging you wrong, but it's your job to go up, and you know, ask them—you know, explain to them why you're doing this. Or just, you know, explain, "I'm not this kind of person, but *this* is who I am. You might be seeing me this way, but *this* is really who I am." 'Cause sometimes people judge you wrong, and you don't want your image to be like that." [emphasis added]

Perhaps the most compelling theme to emerge from youths' experience of the program was the *shift from their individual-centric lens to a broader recognition of the community and their role as cultural brokers*. One youth explained: "I learned that I have a mission in the LIPS program to be the bridge between the American culture and our own culture. I have become a part of my community that makes possible for non-English speakers to be involved and learn about the community. This job has made me learn a lot about my culture and the values I have inherited from my country, and in that process I have learned about other cultures. I have shared my afternoons with very special people, and I never imagined we would ever bond like we did."

Another youth highlighted a similar shift of perspective: "In September, when I was sharing a table with [program staff member] at my school club fair, I didn't realize signing up for this program would have such an impact in my life. However, it has changed my views on life, and made me more conscious of my community. It has changed the way I think, because I only thought of myself before. Now, LIPS has made me more conscious of my community. I can proudly say that LIPS has helped me grow into a better person. For me LIPS is not just a job

but a calling." Another youth offered an even more specific account of the transformation of her perspective. She explained how she felt relatively unaware of community issues before her participation in LIPS. "Now I take more interest in those kinds of stuff (sic)…because I know even though it doesn't affect me now, it will in a few years. You know, because I'm gonna be living here. This is my community, and I want to change it and make it better for the people coming in, and for myself even."

Developing Bridging Social Capital
In addition to processing and interpreting their own growth within the program, youth articulated how they build the skills and connections that enabled them to interact with and negotiate with adults representing formal social institutions – thus developing their bridging social capital as emerging cultural brokers. Across individual interviews and focus group sessions, youth most frequently mentioned knowledge about "how to be professional" as a key outcome of their experience with the program. They emphasized how much they had learned about professionalism, from basics such as the type of vocabulary to use and how to dress, to the more difficult topics of how to navigate job interviews, interact with school and city officials, the college admissions process, and more. Many youth expressed their own or their parents' desires for them to participate in the "American Dream," while also acknowledging their lack of knowledge about how to "work the system."

Some youth were particularly eloquent in describing the enormous growth of their *confidence and ability to access institutions of power*. One young woman, who described herself as an introvert, credited LIPS with her emergent confidence: "I learned skills of public speaking…That's definitely helped me because before the program I was very shy and timid and not willing to come out of my comfort zone. After LIPS I started to open up and expand my circle of networks." Youth recognized that their contacts with the many service providers with whom they worked during interpretation events was a valuable future resource. One young woman reported: "I learned a lot…like, how to interact with people…Just getting to know the people in general, in the community, like the important people. Now you know who they are, and if you ever need anything, you can always go and talk to them. You have a connection." This young woman recounted her meeting with a member of a Haitian community organization during a community meeting following the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010: "With the recent earthquake in Haiti…I met the man in charge of the [names CBO]and I didn't even know who he was. But he turned out to be - my friend I knew from high school who graduated in 2008 - that was her father. I was like, 'Wow, I never knew that,' and we talked and he was really nice. And I thought, "Oh, maybe if anything happens with the Haitian community, I can go to him." She recognized the potential social capital now accessible to her through a connection established with a high resource adult.

Several youth articulated not only the instrumental benefits of their expanding networks, but also the self-empowerment that resulted. In the interviews and focus groups, they emphasized their increasing awareness of their power as individuals. They recognized that their *assets as bilingual youth made them a valued and sought-after resource in the community*. Their interactions with high resource adults (e.g., the community organizers who hired them), with whom they engaged as equals, led them to recognize that their "voices deserve to be heard." Perhaps the most compelling expression of this is the following quote: "Some people measure your success by how many cars you have or how much money [you have] but that isn't always

the case. You could be successful because you are respected by other people in the community."

Implications for Practice, Program Planning, and Research

The analysis of a youth empowerment program that we have presented underscores three important themes that are pertinent to planning, implementing, and assessing youth programs. These are:
1. the need to make explicit a program's theory of change so that program components can be deliberately based on this;
2. the need to document how program components are in fact targeting the particular areas of youth development delineated in the theory of change; and
3. the significant role of community-university partnerships in promoting mutual learning and enhanced programming as well as research.

We illustrate how our analysis addresses each of these significant points.

First and foremost, our in-depth study of the Liaison Interpreters Program of Somerville delineated critical features of the program that were designed to target specific areas of growth for the youth. Resisting the urge to rush into attempts to establish program impact on youth outcomes, our approach has been to first make explicit the implicit theory of change that had driven the development of the program. Although the program was initiated around the notion of developing and utilizing the skills of bilingual youth to promote community engagement among immigrant families in urban immigrant neighborhoods, it became rapidly evident that youth had to be trained to be both linguistic interpreters and cultural brokers. Core components of the program included linguistic training by a professional organization, stipends for the trainees, strengthening affiliation with cultural and linguistic heritage, preparation on the content/topic of specific community events, and professional development support.

Second, the program's emphasis on linguistic interpretation and cultural brokering guided our research focus because it was critical to document if program activities were in fact targeting the linguistic and cultural brokering skills delineated by the theory of change. For the LIPS program, this meant analyzing what underlying skills or orientations are necessary to gain expertise in navigating multiple cultural worlds; and then documenting if these skills and orientations were in fact evident among the youth as they experienced the program. Our careful delineation of cultural brokering highlighted that this requires simultaneous focus on strengthening youth's existing affiliations and connections within their own cultural heritage and linguistic communities, as well as building the knowledge base, skills, and connections that enable them to interact and negotiate with adults representing formal social institutions. Our research was therefore designed to document youth's awareness and connectedness with their cultural heritage, their increasing social networks both within and outside their immigrant communities, their confidence in engaging with adults from formal institutions in the schools and city, and their increasing professionalism. Through youth voices we have highlighted how immigrant youth, when engaged in activities that facilitate reflective thinking about their roles as cultural brokers, can be powerfully supported as they gain valuable expertise in navigating across their multiple cultural worlds, and use this expertise to promote the involvement of their immigrant communities in the activities of the larger city.

Third, we highlight how the close collaboration and partnership between program leaders of community based organizations and university researchers, and our use of CBPR facilitated a process of mutual learning through which program development was enhanced while the research focus was simultaneously sharpened. The program's theory of change was made explicit through the dialogue between researchers and practitioners – which had implications for the program, because it sharpened program planning focus. The program's theory of change along with constructs from research literature (brought to the planning table by the researchers) then guided the design of the methods, which were jointly constructed. The process was highly collaborative and there was mutual learning.

The value for community groups engaged in CBPR is the opportunity to reflect on the study from the perspective of the academic partners. In our mutual study of the LIPS program, several areas were identified as being worthy of future consideration and work. Among these was the need to take an expanded look at the possible enhancement of the young interpreter's experiences through the addition of an educational component that specifically called attention to the comparisons between home country and new country in terms of social capital and social networks. Another element, already identified, but given higher priority as a result of our work, is the need to provide supplemental support for the retention of the home language.

The project reported here is a successful example of a rewarding and respectful relationship that has benefited all partners and participants. The benefit to the researchers is the potential contribution to knowledge of how civic/community practice that reinforced participants' expertise in navigating multiple cultural worlds facilitated the development of personal empowerment, civic engagement, and leadership. The benefit to the community partners derived from the opportunity to apply a theory-predicated understanding of youth development to strengthen the planning and implementation of a youth program that builds on the expertise of bilingual youth.

Finally, we have also learned a valuable lesson about the nature of varying approaches to research and scholarship. One of the strengths of CBPR is the iterative nature of the process that evolves as community and academic partners work together. In fact, one of the frequently expressed observations of (and sometimes, objections to) community engaged research processes is the extra amount of time required. However, this could be conceived of as an inherent characteristic of a more complex form of research rather than as an obstacle. More 'traditional' forms of research are linear. The iterative nature of CBPR, involving as it does feedback from the engaged communities, in our case the youth and the community partners, adds deeper and, in some cases, new knowledge that would not be uncovered using more familiar straight forward forms of study. The process has generated valuable mutual learning and co-construction among our team members that replicates the important role that navigating across cultures can play in knowledge development. We realized that as we were exploring our own idiosyncratic frameworks and knowledge bases, we were reproducing at a different level, what we were observing in the youth interpreting process.

In conclusion, based on the mutual benefits derived from our community based research project, we offer the following recommendations for programs targeting youth. Youth empowerment programs can be transformative catalysts for development among youth from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, programs should build on the existing strengths of targeted youth to ensure engagement and strengthen further

development. In an increasingly global and multicultural world, we must recognize the expertise acquired by bilingual and bicultural youth who navigate multiple cultural worlds as an inherent part of their daily experience. In addition, programs must make explicit their theory of change so that program components can be thoughtfully planned, implemented, and monitored. The critical role of academic and community partnerships in bridging research and practice cannot be ignored. This is especially significant as the nation moves into an era in which universities and scholars are being called upon to be more engaged in civic life and to play increasingly substantive roles in supporting the development of all our children and youth.

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