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Against the Odds: Literacy Sponsorship in One Migrant Student’s Trajectory to College

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Ivan (pseudonym), the son of Mexican migrant farmworkers, rarely spent more than six months in the same school and by high school was still classified as an English language learner. This article traces Ivan’s experiences as a language learner and writer, telling his story in his own words through his writing and ethnographic data collected during his junior year of high school and his first year of college. I examine how literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001) helped or impeded his reading and writing as he worked to change his life. Through Ivan’s writing and oral reflections, I argue that rather than solely supporting their reading and writing development, literacy sponsors for immigrant second language writers support learners as a whole. Central to Ivan’s evaluation of his literacy sponsors is the role of caring relationships—or lack thereof—that endured longer than the technical literacy skills he learned from any one sponsor.

IVAN’S NARRATIVE OF “CHANGE”

“Ivan go outside and take out the trash.” My mom said.

“I’m not taking nothing outside. I’m going with my friends to hang out. Bye.”

“Ivan, come back or I’m going to call your dad.”

“I don’t care.”

She slammed the door and I went outside.

A few years ago I was doing very bad. My life was on the wrong track. I was in a gang and I was also using drugs. I was very disobedient to my parents and very irresponsible. I didn’t care about school or my life in general. However, later on, something happen that made me change the way I look at life.

Before my attitude change I was with the wrong crowd. I was part of a gang fighting for insignificant things, like colors. The color that I was wearing was blue. Last year four of my friends and me were going to the store and a black car parked outside the store. Four guy came out the car wearing red that color was the color we hated. One of my friends said, “hey you norputa what are you looking at.” The other guy star hitting my friend so we jump in and it was all against all. After 3 minutes passed somebody called the police and we ran to one of my friends house. When we got there we started drinking beer and at night I went home.

I didn’t care about the trouble I was getting into. One day in school I got into a fight just because the other guy was staring at me. The security took me to the office. In the vice principal office were two guy with a bag that say gang unit. They took me to the office and I was introduce to a gang unit officer. He told me “[Ivan] what are you think with that personality you are going to ruin your life. Here is my card call me anytime.” The next day I call him and we were talking. He told me, “Theres people who do stupid thing and go to prison for live. I just had a case were a 14 year old boy went to prison for life.” That really got me scared and

*make me realize that I need to change my life.*¹

March 23, 2010

Everything that has been shown to derail at-risk adolescents had already happened to Ivan²: his migrant farmworker parents' frequent moves between Mexico and California meant he rarely spent more than six months in the same school and was still classified as an English language learner, his father was in jail, he was in a gang, and his cousins were pressuring him to quit school and use drugs. According to statistics (Kanno & Cromley, 2015; McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cranson-Gingras, 2006), he should have dropped out and faced a future dealing drugs and running from the law. But in the spring of his sophomore year at Willowdale High School (WHS), as he describes in the above narrative, Ivan was called into the vice principal's office and given a choice: get suspended or shape up with help from a police mentor. When he found out a few days later that his girlfriend was pregnant, Ivan made his decision. He called the police officer who had reached out to him and asked for help getting out of the gang. Ivan dedicated himself to graduating from high school, getting a job, going to college, and supporting his new family with the stability he had not had growing up.

Based in Ivan's desire to "tell [teachers] what your life is and what you're about," as he said in an interview, this article traces Ivan's experiences as a multilingual³ learner and writer, telling his literacy narrative through his writing and audio data collected during his junior year of high school and his first year of college. My goal is to understand how literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001) helped or impeded his reading and writing as he worked to change his life. Ivan's story demonstrates how the most powerful literacy sponsors for adolescent multilingual writers support learners as a whole, rather than just focusing on their reading and writing. While Ivan's story is, of course, unique, it is also representative of the thousands of young people whose lives have been disrupted through transnational migrations and inconsistent schooling. Because little research to date has addressed the educational experiences of the children of migrant farmworkers, particularly as they develop academic literacy, understanding Ivan's growth as a writer and motivation to persist in college can help high school and college writing teachers support learners to succeed against many odds.

MIGRANT YOUTH, LITERACY, AND GETTING TO COLLEGE

Academic literacy is essential to success in high school and college. Migrant youth, however, face powerful barriers to developing necessary literacy skills for college. These barriers include limited English proficiency, poverty, mobility, and attendance at under-performing schools (McHatton et al., 2006; Nuñez, 2009; Valadez, 2008). Though little research has addressed the literacy experiences of migrant farmworker children, more is known about multilingual youths' limited access to and success in college.

Research has documented academic and social barriers multilingual youth face through the American school system. Many have experienced disrupted schooling as they follow their

¹ Written data are reproduced exactly as written with the exception of names and places replaced with pseudonyms.

² All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

³ I use *multilingual* rather than *English language learner* because Ivan did not make his status as an L2 speaker of English prominent in our discussions. By the time I met him, although he was still classified as ELL by his school, he was a fluent user of both Spanish and English.

families across national borders and state lines (Harklau & McClanahan, 2012; McHatton et al., 2006). In school, many are placed in ESL classes and tracked into programs with limited access to college-preparatory courses (Bunch, 2009; Escamilla, 2015; Kanno & Cromley, 2015; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Their ESL classes are rarely academically challenging, and few provide information about college access (Bunch, 2009; Escamilla, 2015).

Once in community college, where the majority of Latino high school graduates matriculate (Kanno & Cromley, 2015), multilingual students continue to have limited access to the literacy instruction needed to succeed and transfer to four-year colleges (Bunch, 2009; Ruecker, 2014). Due to poorly designed or implemented writing placement tests, many place into ESL classes, even if they had placed out of ESL earlier in secondary school (Bunch, 2009). The majority of students placed in ESL courses leave college after a year; of those who stay, few take classes that can transfer to four-year colleges or count towards a degree during their second year (Bunch, 2009). Overworked community college English teachers may be unable to address the diverse literacy needs of multilingual learners (Ruecker, 2014).

Recent research, however, has identified factors that support immigrant and migrant students' successful admission to and academic persistence in college. Among these factors are positive adult role models while they are in high school who can advise them in the college application process (McHatton et al., 2006; Shepard et al., 2012) and academic support through college preparatory courses and test preparation (Nuñez, 2009). Additional factors that help students persist include family members who have attended college and can explain the application process and college resources; information about progress, organization and study skills; and positive peer support through sports and religious activities (Escamilla, 2015; Harklau & McClanahan, 2012).

An ongoing, personal connection with adults, both teachers and non-academic mentors, seems essential. Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) define *mentoring* as "an integrated approach to advising, coaching and nurturing which is focused on creating a relationship to enhance an individual's personal and professional growth and development" (p. 341). Shepard et al. (2012) underscore the importance of individual personal connections in immigrant students' development of resiliency. The high school students in Shepard et al.'s study also found meaningful engagement in family, church, work, and supporting their own children, all of which helped them separate from gangs where they had previously found relationships. Personal connections and caring relationships with adult mentors make young people feel like they matter (Escamilla, 2015; Nuñez, 2009). Following seven multilingual Mexican American high school seniors into their first year of college, Ruecker (2014) noted that those students who succeeded in their college writing classes attributed much of their progress to caring instructors.

LITERACY SPONSORSHIP

This article takes a New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Street, 2012) perspective to understanding Ivan's literacy experiences. Countering prevailing views of literacy as a static set of skills that can be acquired in one context and transferred to any other, NLS argues that literacy is a social practice in which individuals' learning and uses of literacy are integrally related to the contexts in which they live, work, and grow (Lea & Street, 2006). Ivan's literacy development, therefore, did not happen in isolation from the life events that were occurring around him. Furthermore, these literacy practices are inherently ideological and contested (Street, 2005). What is taught and learned with respect to literacy are locally-defined and

negotiated ways of thinking about and using language (Street, 2005). Power relations between actors affect who has access to what forms of literacy; this ideological nature of literacy is equally at issue in schools and out (Street, 2012).

Drawing on NLS, Deborah Brandt (1998, 2001) identified a key factor in the development of literacy skills and habits as the *literacy sponsors* who influence people's lives. Brandt argued that literacy sponsors

are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way. ... Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to – and through – individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited. (2001, p. 19)

Access to human and material sponsors varies depending on an individual's social and economic position (Brandt, 1998). Brandt also emphasizes that sponsors of literacy do not do so altruistically, but instead expect to get something out of facilitating another person's literacy development. Each sponsor has a goal that could be promoted through developing other people's literacy abilities. Teachers are, of course, professional literacy sponsors, but even they have personal motives: particularly in this era of high stakes accountability, teachers are compelled to support students' literacy development to prove their own value in the system. Many teachers, furthermore, are committed to improving students' literacy abilities in order to contribute to a more just society. As Brandt (2001) notes, however, some sponsors withhold access to literacy, whether intentionally or not. She gives as an example church programs that taught people how to read religious texts but did not want those same learners to read other texts that might foster thinking that would be critical of the core religious texts.

Research has identified human and material sponsors supporting but also limiting multilingual students' access to literacy practices. Brandt's 2001 book discussed one L2 English speaker, the daughter of Mexican migrant workers, whose bilingualism in Spanish and English was considered a resource within the immigrant community, but was completely ignored in the larger English-dominant community. Brandt suggests that the power of multilingual literacy often depends on the relative value society places on speakers of other languages, where individuals may find sponsorship to further develop their linguistic resources or may find their multilingualism dismissed as a deficit.

The NLS concept of the literacy sponsor resonates with discussions of sponsorship and mentoring in the literature on immigrant youths' access to college. Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) suggest that there is a difference between *mentors* and *sponsors*: "a mentor may be a sponsor," but "a sponsor is not necessarily a mentor because a sponsor does not incorporate the psychosocial aspects, such as role modeling, friendship or counseling, into the relationship" (p. 342). In their study of Latino students who successfully transitioned into college, they found that many had sponsors who merely provided scholarship money or networking opportunities, but not as many had mentors who were able to provide emotional support and personal guidance on the college campus. Illustrating this concern with explicit reference to Brandt (2001), Kibler (2017) found that Latino youth had networks of literacy sponsors (including scholarship providers, teachers, and technological resources) that either helped or limited their transitions from high school to postsecondary education, depending on how well the sponsors' purposes aligned with the students' goals. When students actively sought out help from sponsors (teachers, tutors, or peers) who became mentors, they made

better progress. Financial sponsorship without social support was not enough.

Coursework, college placement, and other program initiatives represent institutional literacy sponsorship. Hollander (2010) argued that course curriculum in the form of essay prompts and pedagogy can be literacy sponsorship that facilitates or restricts students' connections between their own lived experiences and identities and the discourses of the academy. When students feel a connection to the institution, they can take up new discourses and grow as writers. While Hollander noted positive effects of curriculum that promoted students' discovery of their own academic identities, Kibler (2017) found that placement into remedial college courses served as institutional counter-sponsorship that created barriers to students' achievement of their goals, in contrast with credit-bearing preparatory coursework that allowed them to continue pursuing their goals. Wight (2017) observed how a college bridge program served as a site of literacy sponsorship through both the program structure—which supported multilingual youths' access to and socialization into academic literacy practices—and a peer culture that valued students as academically able people with a capacity for transformation.

As this article examines, Ivan found positive and negative literacy sponsors in his teachers and coursework in high school and college, as well as one mentor outside school whose support had an important influence on his literacy success. Literacy sponsors can be identified through examination of individuals' retelling of their experiences learning to read and write, in oral or written literacy narratives. As Street (2012) notes, "Participants not only 'do' reading and writing, they also have ideas about what they are doing" (p. 37). Ethnographic research seeks to identify people's emic perspectives on classroom practices (including literacy) and to understand how they explain what is going on around themselves; it then attempts to contextualize those events within the broader ideologies of the surrounding culture (Street, 2012).

METHODS

The data analyzed here were collected in an ethnographic study of three English language development and language arts classes at Willowdale High School, located in a small city in central California, during the 2009-10 school year. I observed and audio-recorded class sessions, collected documents and student work, and interviewed teachers and focal students to examine the ways that multilingual adolescents learned to write and to use academic language through oral interactions with their classroom teachers (Gilliland, 2014, 2015). As a high school junior, Ivan was one of four focal students in an advanced English language development class called "Transitions to English," taught by Evelyn Chou. I collected all of Ivan's writing in Transitions during the year in which I observed his class and then followed up with him during his first year of community college. I audio-recorded two interviews with him during his junior year of high school and a third interview during his second semester of college. I also met with him after his second year of college and wrote extensive field notes immediately afterward, but did not record that meeting. Ivan expressed an interest in telling his story to teachers and teacher educators.

For this article, I focus on tracking Ivan's literacy sponsors through his own retelling of his story of change. I reviewed all data sources (interviews, field notes, memos, and Ivan's school and college writing) for discussions of literacy as defined by New Literacy Studies scholars (Brandt, 2001; Street, 2012). In the data, I identified people Ivan felt had been either supportive of or disruptive to his literacy learning and Ivan's own narrative of

transformation, which did not explicitly refer to reading or writing but did address the role sponsors had played in helping him resist gang life and become a productive member of society. I presented these analyses to Ivan for his commentary and revised them after meeting with him in June 2017. Findings are organized thematically by type (positive or restrictive) and context (in-school and out-of-school) of sponsorship.

FINDINGS: IVAN'S LITERACY SPONSORS

I have pieced together Ivan's literacy narrative through what he said in conversations with me and from what he wrote in his school and college essays. This narrative reveals a young man who has thought critically about his many teachers over the years, identifying positive literacy sponsors who supported his development as a reader and writer, and negative sponsors who denied him opportunities to learn academic literacy. Central to Ivan's evaluation of his literacy sponsors is the role of personalized, caring relationships—or lack thereof—that proved more enduring than the technical literacy skills he learned from any single sponsor.

Positive School Literacy Sponsors

Ivan identified several teachers he felt had been particularly helpful in his own literacy development and highlighted specific ways that they had contributed to his learning. His middle school English language development teacher stood out because of her readiness to individualize her help. Having grown up speaking Spanish at home and alternately attending school in Mexico and California, Ivan reached middle school still needing to learn some literacy skills that are commonly taught in earlier grades. When I asked him in an interview if he remembered any teachers who had taught him a lot about writing, he described some of this teacher's techniques in detail:

- Betsy And what did this teacher do to help you?
 Ivan She was always telling us, like went to our desk and tell us, oh, you need help, and then we asked for help, and she was helping us always, like how to write? And then when we didn't [unint]⁴, she would tell us what the words sound, and help us a lot.
- Betsy And she did a lot of going to your desk to help just you.
 Ivan Yeah, she did that with all of us.
 Betsy So what did you learn from her?
 Ivan I would say I learned from her, cause that was, when I was in middle school, I didn't know how to say look up a word, and a lot of things, cause, she told me how to, I learned from her a lot of things like how to look a word, how to use more the computer, too, cause I didn't know a lot of things and she taught me how to use a computer.

In this excerpt, Ivan notes two literacy skills that he learned from this teacher (looking up words in a dictionary and using a computer), but even more so he highlights what came to be a core quality in his descriptions of teachers who helped his literacy development: she

⁴ “[unint]” represents “unintelligible speech.”

taught him what he needed at a given moment, in addition to introducing useful skills. The seemingly minor aspect of going to each student's desk was essential to Ivan's evaluation of positive literacy sponsors. As he described other teachers, taking the time to individualize their response factored heavily into his feeling that he had improved his literacy abilities in that teacher's class.

In 10th grade, Ivan transferred from the high school in Atocha, the small town where his family had been living, to WHS, a larger school in the county seat. In the two years since that move, Ivan felt like he had had only one particularly helpful teacher, his 10th grade English language development teacher, Miss Bristol:

I was working with Miss Bristol, and she was a really good teacher, I really like her. She was one teacher who helped me a lot, she always doing everything quick, always telling me oh, good job, or always cheering you, very good, and that really helped, cause it makes you feel better. When someone says something to you, you feel better.

Like his middle school teacher, Miss Bristol took the time to personalize her approach to working with students. In tenth grade Ivan felt he had hit rock bottom; midway through this year was when he had the fight he described in his narrative essay (reproduced at the beginning of this article) and when he met Rick, the police officer who helped him turn his life around. At this point, although his test scores suggested that he needed to develop his academic literacy abilities, what he really needed was emotional support as he made a clean break from his old habits and friends and worked to turn his academic performance around. He notes how Miss Bristol not only helped him when he needed assistance, but she also "cheered" for him, thus validating his choices.

In community college, Ivan placed into a developmental writing course two levels below first year composition. He felt that his teacher had helped in ways that many of his high school teachers had not. When I interviewed him after his first semester in college, he recalled learning specific writing strategies and punctuation rules. He said of his teacher:

She's really good at explaining the essays and how they work. Like say some strategies, she's the one gave me that key word, use transition words, it makes it sound better. And she gives us a formula. Use independent, I think it's independent, comma, transition word, comma, independent.

As a multilingual learner, Ivan valued these concrete writing strategies. Beyond practical advice, however, he also said:

The teacher said she thinks I'm one of the smartest in the class. Cause she said something in you makes me, I don't know how she says it all the time. That I have, she has faith in I'll do very good.

This personal recognition echoed what Ivan had wanted from his high school teachers and valued in earlier teachers whom he had named for their good literacy practices. Ivan identified individualized support as the central factor that differentiated good teachers from those who did not help him learn.

Restrictive School Literacy Sponsors

Brandt (2001) suggests that literacy sponsors may also be those who “suppress, or withhold, literacy” (p. 19). Just as he had fond memories of teachers who had helped him become a better reader and writer, Ivan had clear memories of teachers whose approaches had not helped him. As literacy sponsors, these teachers probably did not intend to limit Ivan’s learning in their classes, but their practices suggested to him that they were not invested in helping him develop his literacy abilities.

What stands out in Ivan’s memories are personal slights that affected his ability to access the curriculum. Here he discussed one middle school teacher:

- Betsy So do you remember any teachers that you think were particularly NOT helpful?
- Ivan Yeah, there was one teacher in English, we asked her, and he was just, he got up and say read this, or but with other kids he was different.
- Betsy So he would help other kids but he wouldn’t help you?
- Ivan Yeah. It was in middle school. It was an English teacher.
- Betsy Do you have any idea why he wouldn’t help you?
- Ivan Why. I don’t know. Cause he was different. You can tell when a person is different, like you can tell when he’s talking to other person, the way he talks to them the way he talks to you.

Ivan felt that this teacher did not help him in the way he helped other students. I asked him to clarify in what ways this teacher “was different” with other students. Although he had started his explanation describing the teacher’s instructional practice as a blunt “read this,” Ivan recognized that the more telling factor was what he perceived as the teacher’s interpersonal response to him as a human being. This pattern appeared regularly in Ivan’s perceptions of teachers he felt had withheld opportunities for him to develop his academic literacy.

During the year I spent in Ivan’s 11th grade Transitions class, I observed how he interacted with his teacher, Ms. Chou. The teacher had told me that her philosophy was to push students to think for themselves through questioning rather than giving them answers (Gilliland, 2015, discusses Ms. Chou’s literacy pedagogy). In December of that year, Ivan said he understood her reason for withholding help:

Sometimes I think that, if you asks some, if you ask a teacher she’s not going to give you the answer, tell you how, explain how it’s done, or explain how to do it, he’s not gonna give you the answer, I know that. But it’s gonna help you!

As he talked more about his experiences in Ms. Chou’s class, however, Ivan started to identify ways that Ms. Chou’s practices limited his opportunities to learn.

- Ivan She helps with the [work]sheets, but sometimes you ask, for say, that’s the part I didn’t like, we were doing the sheets and you’d go ask her, and then she’d just tell you, look it up in the book or, she didn’t tell you like a clue or something, or help you whatever.
- Betsy So when you understood what you had to do with the worksheet, that was

- helpful for your writing?
 Ivan So what I gotta do her, say, read the book! Or yeah.
 Betsy OK, so you wanted more.
 Ivan More support, say, you can go to this page and read this pages and then you'll find that in this pages.

When I pointed out that he did ask the teacher a lot of questions during class time (having observed him raise his hand or walk over to the teacher's desk at regular intervals during the school year), Ivan returned to his concern with Ms. Chou's limited assistance:

- Betsy So what kind of questions did you ask?
 Ivan The question that I always asked were when the assignments were given, if I really didn't know a word or something, she didn't explain it, and I wished she could explain it so I could understand it better, instead of saying look it in the book and just read the definition. Or how to do things. It was kind of hard. She did it like twice. She didn't all the time, but she did it just because other people were talking, she wouldn't help us at all. It wasn't fair for the people who really wanted to work.
 Betsy So other students were—
 Ivan You know how like more than half the class didn't do, and it was hard, because I wish she could have helped us instead of saying you do it by yourself.
 Betsy So what you saw was a lot of students were goofing off, and she sort of decided nobody was going to get help because they were—
 Ivan They were talking.
 Betsy Cause you did go up. I saw you quite often you would go up and ask her a specific question. When you did ask her questions, did she help you sometimes?
 Ivan Sometimes. Not all the time. She did help me. I'm not saying she didn't help me. She did. But most of the times were no.

Here he noted that he felt the teacher was punishing the whole class because of other students' behavior. Although he recognized Ms. Chou's approach to pushing students to find answers themselves as a potential way to learn, he often felt like she was not focused on helping individual students learn.

Later that same year, Ivan said that he felt Ms. Chou had not liked him as a person:

I wish she was different, not different, but more close to the students. Cause it was like more of a 'here's the assignment, do this.' And then you ask and it's 'Oh, it's in the book' or 'look it up' or just very close, very short brief help. Well I think, I see other teachers and I don't know, but yeah. And it helps a lot, you learn more. Like in my other classes, I learn a lot of stuff that I really enjoy and when you get to know your teacher more close, you feel more comfortable in class and you feel more of an open mind to it. And then that way you grow within and you don't, oh the teacher doesn't like me, or you feel like oh if I ask her, she's always going to, or something.

In this statement, Ivan clearly names factors that, for him, make a teacher not just someone who provides information but even more so someone who treats students as whole people.

In Ivan's accounting, an effective literacy sponsor is someone who makes him "feel comfortable in class" and who demonstrates care for him as a person, which has important effects on his learning and allows him to "grow within."

School Assignments as Literacy Sponsorship

Academic assignments and curriculum can sponsor students' access to academic literacy and comfort in using the language of schooling (Hollander, 2010; Kibler, 2017). Ivan's memories of formal literacy sponsorship also covered the tasks and assignments he was asked to write in school and college. Just as he remembered teachers who had provided him with individualized support and praise, Ivan preferred reading and writing tasks that gave him a sense of accomplishment. He described an extensive reading activity in one of his middle school English classes fondly:

- Ivan We did a lot, we did some books in Atocha. You grab a book, and you gotta read it. It was not too much pages, it was special though, they had 'em in a box, and then you read 'em, and they give you a paper, and you get to read this, I had that class all day, and then describe the book and summarize, and tell like different parts of the story, you gotta figure out them. It was cool. Cause they were not so hard, the stories.
- Betsy And then what you wrote about it, you wrote the summary.
- Ivan Mm hm. And you wrote questions, they would tell you questions about the story.
- Betsy OK. Why do you feel like that was such a good
- Ivan Cause it was helpful, they would tell you how in a little book, and you can do it for, say, in a big one, yeah. It was more longer, you gotta read more. It had like, there was seventy or eighty pages for each book. But the words were, they weren't big, like not too big.

In this middle school reading task, Ivan relished feeling successful with the process of reading a book that was at the right level and answering questions that demonstrated his comprehension. Just as he appreciated the teachers who taught him specific literacy skills, he also valued having the opportunity to practice using those skills until he reached mastery. When he commented, "they would tell you how in a little book, and you can do it for, say, in a big one," he recognized skills that could be applied in his future literacy work. In providing the box of books and response activities, Ivan's unnamed teacher acted as a positive literacy sponsor who helped him further his view of himself as a successful reader.

Ivan's 11th grade teacher, Ms. Chou, began the school year with a series of short expository writing tasks. Ivan wrote about one rule he would make for school. Although he does not reveal any of his own story in the following paragraph, he does touch on his concerns as a reformed gangster, the value of getting to know the teacher and being able to get help from teachers. This was the first writing task in which Ivan began using school writing to explore and reveal his new identity and his desire to be known to teachers.

Paying attention in school is a good rule. For one thing paying attention is good because you learn more. By paying attention in art class you could get better at drawing. We learn how to use pastels to color a picture of a building. Also if you didn't pay attention you won't get good grades. Some students just talk

and talk playing around and never do there work. You don't get the information and you don't pass your tests. Finally if you pay attention then you get along with your teacher. You get to know more your teacher and your teacher get to know more about you to. If you get along with your teacher if someone is bothering you, you could tell your teacher and he/she will help you.

Although Ms. Chou's purpose had been to teach that academic writing should have a clear focus in the form of a topic sentence supported with evidence, Ivan remembered the paragraphs because they were one of the few writing assignments where he had a choice of what to write about. He used this task as an opportunity to develop his new identity as a dedicated scholar and to contrast his own behavior with that of his classmates, including members of the gang he had recently left. His final reason, "You get to know more your teacher and your teacher get to know more about you to," echoes the qualities he noted in our interviews about teachers who had provided him with the greatest support. Ivan saw a clear connection between learning and being known individually by the teacher.

Meaningful assignments also allowed Ivan to reflect on his recent lived experiences and develop his literacy abilities for real communicative purposes. Ivan's autobiographical narrative (quoted in full in the introduction to this article) was the first piece of writing where he explicitly told his story of "change" and named his police sponsor, Rick. Ivan explained that he felt this was a valuable writing task: "Because you get to tell your teacher what your life is and what you're about." Reflecting his critique of teachers who did not get to know him as a whole person, Ivan valued literacy sponsors who cared about him.

Literacy Sponsorship Outside of School

As he described in the narrative essay quoted at the beginning of this article, Ivan found his most enduring sponsor in the police gang officer who offered him an opportunity to break from his old life and start anew. Rick gave Ivan the emotional and material support he needed to turn his life around, providing him with a cell phone and at times a place to sleep. Making a clean break with his past required him to make some difficult choices about leaving the gang and avoiding his former friends. Rick's support was vital to this process. Ivan wrote in a draft conclusion to his narrative essay:

Every day in school I was trying my best. A few weeks later my grades went up I got rid of all those ganster cloths and bot nice cloths. Something inside was growing and it was a new me. I didn't talk anymore to my gang friends. I was teaching myself to be a better person. A few month later the gang unit officer put me in a program that is call sberiff cadet program. They show you have to be a mature person, responsiable and many more thing. I realy like my life because there is no problems with my family anymore and I get do better things.

As Ivan describes, Rick was a mentor (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006) rather than primarily a literacy sponsor. Rick's goal was to support Ivan in turning his life around, breaking with the gang, and becoming "a better person," as Ivan wrote. Rick provided Ivan with psycho-social support that went far beyond just providing material resources.

Rick, however, was also a powerful literacy sponsor whose support enabled Ivan to stay in school, graduate with honors, and complete an associate's degree in community college. Rick further served as a literacy role model: he was taking classes toward a bachelor's degree in order to achieve a higher rank with the police department. Throughout Ivan's process of

change, he turned to Rick for help with his schoolwork. In our interview during his second semester in college, Ivan commented that Rick “goes over my essays. He’s really good.” Ivan explained that he only sought out additional help when he had done the best he could on his own.

Beyond just technical support, Ivan’s relationship with Rick helped him make sense of literary themes he was encountering in his studies. In his second semester college English class, Ivan wrote an essay analyzing Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” in which he made a personal connection to a theme in the story. He decided that people’s unwillingness to change even in the face of negative evidence could connect to his experiences. His use of the word “change” reflects what he saw as the central theme of his own life story. He viewed the chance encounter with Rick in the WHS vice principal’s office as a key moment in his own change and believed that every child should have that opportunity to effect his own change. In his essay, Ivan referenced his learning and Rick’s influence:

...In “The Lottery”, it seems like it is really normal for the people who live there because that’s have been their tradition. No one in that village stands up and says something about it, or what they think if it’s wrong. I think is possible for people in general to change how they behave even though tradition says they should keep doing something bad.

... I have a three year old son name Andy and I will never be to him like my father was to me. It really affected me, especially in high school. I was getting really bad grade. I stop caring about the two first years in high school. Everything changed when I was going to have Andy in my life. He made me change along with a really good friend I met in high school, he was a police officer. Rick Cedillo is his name. I love Rick like a brother. He made me realize that I needed to finish my education for a better life for Andy, my wife, and me. If I could change I think my father could change to, but he didn’t want to change. I guess because he wanted to keep his tradition instead of being with his son in everything. I think “The Lottery”, people are related to my dad in somewhat because there also are been doing their tradition.

In this essay, Ivan focused on contrasting his own change, supported by Rick, with the way the people in the story, like his father, clung to tradition no matter the consequences. This writing assignment, although not explicitly designed to elicit students’ personal stories, gave Ivan a vehicle to explore his story of change and reflect on Rick’s contribution to his change. Their relationship served as literacy sponsorship by giving Ivan subject matter for reflection and writing.

Other than one comment about Rick’s feedback on his writing, Ivan did not describe Rick as a *literacy* sponsor. Although their relationship was not primarily focused on literacy, it was Rick’s essential literacy sponsorship that helped Ivan move from being on track to drop out of high school to being a college graduate.

DISCUSSION

Ivan’s experiences suggest that his literacy success was supported by multiple sponsors, each of whom fits Brandt’s (1998, 2001) definitions of *literacy sponsor*. As this article illustrates, Ivan credits his successful transition through high school and college primarily to a strong relationship he developed with a single mentor, Rick, as well as to a few caring teachers who supported his literacy development along the way. Writing assignments also allowed him to tell his story and practice literacy skills. While Ivan named several teachers who had positively or negatively impacted his literacy learning, he did not explicitly recognize his

police mentor as a literacy sponsor. Instead, he saw Rick as a sponsor of his entire life and a catalyst in his life change. As the person who supported Ivan to change his life and refocus on graduating from high school and enrolling in college, Rick nevertheless served as Ivan's key literacy sponsor by effectively recruiting Ivan away from a gang and into socially preferred activities that further developed his literacy abilities.

Rick represents multiple institutional interests, chief of which is the city police department, whose goal is to reduce gang violence and damage to city property and residents. His assignment required him to spend time at WHS, identify known and potential gang members, and work during school hours to keep them out of gangs or prevent gang-related crime. His support of Ivan went far beyond his job requirements, however. Rick's sponsorship promoted academic credentials that allowed Ivan to transition from risking his life in the gang to a stable life with his own family supported by his literacy abilities. Rick therefore illustrates how the most important literacy sponsors for at-risk youth may not be those whose main focus is on developing literacy skills, but rather those who provide overall support that consequently fosters literacy.

Recognizing the ideological nature of literacy from the NLS perspective (Street, 2005, 2012) allows identification of the multiple social interests served by Ivan's literacy sponsors. Rick fits well within Brandt's (2001) descriptors of literacy sponsors: he is a concrete, local agent who not only enabled but also modeled positive uses of literacy, gaining for himself the benefit of removing a potential gangster from the streets of Willowdale. By supporting Ivan to stay in school, he contributed to the local economies of literacy in ways that Ivan's teachers had not been able to do.

I, too, was a literacy sponsor in Ivan's life. I arrived as a researcher in Ms. Chou's Transitions classroom at the beginning of Ivan's 11th grade year, six months after he had met Rick and committed to turning his life around. As he had begun his "change" during the previous semester, this was his first full academic year committed to proving himself to being a good student. Ivan readily volunteered as a participant in my study. As a neutral party (neither teacher nor student) who had not known him prior to his change, I focused on him as a literacy user without preconceived ideas about him as a gangster. I listened to his stories, asked about his experiences, and provided academic help. I stayed in touch with him and followed up while he was in college and beyond. In these ways, I demonstrated caring about him as a person—a trait he felt was missing in many of his teachers.⁵

Literacy sponsors do not always make literacy their primary goal (Brandt, 2001), focusing instead on helping the sponsored individual gain literacy skills for other purposes. Because many multilingual migrant students like Ivan need far more than just literacy in order to change their lives, literacy may be a secondary effect of more socioemotional support from a mentor like Rick, whose primary goal was to prevent violence by helping Ivan get away from the gang and become financially self-sufficient. Ivan, however, craved such support from his school-based literacy sponsors, too, noting that the teachers who helped him learn to read and write were those who personalized their assistance based on what they knew about him as an individual, showing they cared for him as more than just another student.

Ethnographic research focused on understanding Ivan's own perspectives affords a view of his literacy as living, contextually determined, and ideological (Lea & Street, 2006). Ivan's status as an L2 English learner was not salient to his own analysis of his change. Factors that

⁵ When I visited Ivan and his family in 2017, his wife introduced me to their children as "la maestra que nos ayudó" (the teacher who helped us), suggesting that she and Ivan positively remembered my role in their Transitions class.

he saw as important were more related to his roles as former gang member, now good student, parent, college student, young person with professional goals, and (most important to him) a human being who cared about being respected as such. He viewed teachers who suppressed his access to literacy as withholding care and help, not language. Nevertheless, his questions to teachers (documented in my field notes and recordings) often evidenced his language learning, since he asked for help with comprehension of reading passages or vocabulary and wording of sentences he was writing. In his analysis, literacy sponsors who helped him access academic language practices did so through caring about him as a person.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND RESEARCHING L2 LITERACY

As Ivan advises, teachers should get to know their students. Being a literacy sponsor requires a degree of personal investment in each student as an individual, a human being who is not just a score on a language proficiency test. This is not to suggest that personal connections are the only thing needed. Multilingual adolescents like Ivan need explicit, scaffolded instruction in the foundations of reading and writing—including skills Ivan said he did not learn until college—while also receiving opportunities to experience success and satisfaction in reading and writing through support from teachers and meaningful assignments. As Ivan's experience shows, writing tasks that allow students to explore their own stories, to reflect on significant moments in their lives, and to connect more abstract concepts to their lived experiences give them an opportunity to let teachers know who they are and what matters to them. Teachers of migrant youth should also be aware of potential mentors and literacy sponsors who may be located on the periphery of the school community, such as police officers or community volunteers. Taken together, these practices recognize literacy instruction as seeking to understand students as whole, living people with goals that necessitate development of language and literacy practices grounded in specific contexts.

This article has also shown the value in conducting research with a social perspective on how literacy is learned and used, since a focus just on the school curriculum or students' texts misses those out-of-school sponsors who may be more important overall in the lives of migrant youth. Ethnographic methods can reveal the bigger picture of learners' social histories that inform their engagement with texts and with literacy more generally.

AFTERWORD

In June of 2017 I visited Ivan again to get his feedback on a draft of this article and catch up with his life. Now graduated with an associate's degree from Willowdale Community College, he works for an agricultural research company that has offered to fund him to complete a bachelor's degree. He and his wife had a second son and live in a family-friendly townhouse complex in Willowdale. He also told me, however, that he had just attended a memorial service for Rick, who had died unexpectedly in the spring. He said the service was crowded with police officers and young people whose lives Rick had touched.

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