

Language of Exclusion: The Treatment of English Language Learners in Colorado Springs High  
Schools

By

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## Introduction

Today almost 5 million students are learning English in public schools across the United States.<sup>1</sup> These students have unique experiences in the American public school system. They face different challenges and have different needs than their English speaking counterparts. In this thesis I seek to understand the challenges that English as a Second Language (ESL) students face in Colorado Springs and how schools and teachers are meeting, and not meeting, their needs.

I first became interested in this project after spending time in an ESL classroom at Washington High School<sup>2</sup>. As I followed students through their Math, Science and Government classes, I began to spend increasing amounts of time with one particular student. José<sup>3</sup> was a freshman who had come to the United States by himself and now lived with his uncle. José was always getting in trouble in class- sometimes because he was being disruptive and other times because teachers were frustrated with the whole class and he was an easy target.

One day I was talking to the Science teacher, Mr. Harrison and he said, “all the kids are doing pretty well. Well except José. That kid drives me crazy.” I wanted to explain to the teacher that school was the only chance José had to be a kid, to tell him that José had seen things he and I couldn’t even imagine and to remind him that this was a fourteen-year-old boy living in a foreign country without his parents. Or maybe he simply didn’t understand the material and that’s why he was acting out.

I felt that José was being treated was unfairly, and that having teachers who were “hard on him” was actually detrimental to his learning process. But I didn’t know how to express these ideas to teachers, especially as a guest in their classrooms. So I decided to start this project. I

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<sup>1</sup> n.a. “Fast Facts: English Language Learners,” National Center for Education Statistics, March 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>

<sup>2</sup> Names of the schools in this study have been changed

<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed to protect the individuals in this study

began to observe students and teachers in the classroom to try and understand the challenges that ESL students face and to gain a better understanding of the role teachers play in those challenges.

To contextualize modern ESL education, this project begins with the history of ESL education and the structure of current ESL classes, both nationally and in Colorado Springs. The next section of this thesis is focused on what is happening in the classrooms I observed. The rest of the paper is divided into sections based on areas where I have seen challenges arise for students and have witnessed different teachers try to meet the needs of their students in different ways. This section begins with a discussion of how different teachers modify course content. I then move into a discussion of student/teacher relationships, beginning with an analysis of the practical challenge students and teachers face when they cannot communicate in a shared language, before moving into the interpersonal relationships teachers and students have and the effect that teachers' feelings towards students can have on students' success in school. I end by looking at the challenges that students face beyond academics. This is an attempt to provide a well-rounded view of ESL students and the many challenges they face academically, socially and personally.

### **Setting and Methods**

I carried out the research that informed this project at Washington High School in Colorado Springs from the spring of 2016 through the spring of 2018. Washington has a large population of ESL students. In total, Washington has about 2,000 students and is 50% White,

30% Hispanic, 7.0% Black and 7% Mixed. About half of the student body is eligible for free or reduced lunch.<sup>4</sup>

I also spent a month at Lincoln High to have a source of comparison. Lincoln High is also in Colorado Springs but in a different school district. It is about half the size of Washington with just under 1,000 students. Lincoln's demographics also look different than Washington's: 45% of the students identify as Latino, 30% as White, 15% as Black and 5% as Mixed race. 72% of the student body is eligible for free or reduced lunch.<sup>5</sup> Almost half of the students at Lincoln, have been part of the ESL program at some point.

To gain a better understanding of the challenges ESL students face at both schools, I relied on classroom observation, participant observation, and interviews with teachers and students. I was a visitor at Washington High for three years and regularly observed sheltered Math, Science and Government classes. I also spent some time in English classes for both beginning and intermediate students. The term "sheltered" is used to refer to content area classes specifically designed for English language learners. During the three years I worked with three different science teachers, watched the same math teacher adapt his teaching methods to better meet the needs of students and observed many different students. A few students have remained at Washington throughout all three years; however, the majority have not. I spent one month at Lincoln High observing one history teacher. He taught five periods of sheltered world history to students with varying levels of English proficiency.

Depending on what classroom I was visiting, my research methods varied from direct observation to participant observation, or some combination of the two. As defined by DeWalt

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<sup>4</sup> Public School Review, November, 2017, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com>

<sup>5</sup> Public School Review, Nov. 2017, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com>

and DeWalt, “participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture”<sup>6</sup>. Most of the time I was actively engaged with students, translating material for Spanish speakers, and helping students to complete assignments. However, there were also times when I would sit in the back of the classroom and take notes.

While I did my best to record my experiences in a way that was objective, I acknowledge that there are inherent biases in this study. My presence, as a young white woman in these high school classrooms likely changed the way students and teachers acted. As I got to know students I began to care for their wellbeing, and I would sometimes intervene when I felt they were being treated unfairly by their teachers.

In addition to my observation, I conducted interviews with a small group of teachers and students. I was able to interview a Science, a Math and an English teacher as well as two students. These interviews helped me to understand some of the challenges that students and teachers face outside of the classroom, and allowed me to hear additional perspectives about what was happening inside the classroom.

Throughout this paper I use the term English as a Second Language (ESL) even though many students speak more than two languages. There has been some attempt within the field of Education to discontinue use of the term ESL. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and English for Speakers of Other Languages are both terms that are increasingly common. However, both

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Field Workers* (Lanham Maryland: Altamira Press, 2011), 1.

Washington and Lincoln High still use the term ESL and because of that I feel it most accurately reflects the current environment within Colorado Springs high schools.

## **Background and Context**

English education has existed in the United States since the arrival of the European colonizers. However, the purpose of English language education has shifted over time and based on the groups that are being taught.

Today, education is often seen in purely positive light. It is seen as the solution to many current problems and as the key to social mobility. While education can have a positive impact on society, it can also be used to force students to assimilate to the dominant culture, privileges certain people and strips others of their language, culture and history. Perhaps the most drastic example of this is the Indian Boarding School Program.

Beginning in 1860, the Bureau of Indian Affairs opened the first Indian boarding school. The purpose of the Boarding schools was to “use education as a tool to ‘assimilate’ Indian tribes into the mainstream of the ‘American way of life,’ a Protestant ideology of the mid-19th century”<sup>7</sup> By forcibly removing children from their homes, and forcing them to learn English, the government was able to indoctrinate Native children with colonial ideals and practices. “Indian people would be taught the importance of private property, material wealth and monogamous nuclear families. The reformers assumed that it was necessary to “civilize” Indian people, make them accept white men’s beliefs and value systems”<sup>8</sup> Taking children to boarding schools where

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<sup>7</sup> n.a., “History and Culture: Boarding Schools,” American Indian Relief Counsel, Nov. 2017, [http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc\\_hist\\_boardingschools](http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools)

<sup>8</sup> n.a., “History and Culture: Boarding Schools,” American Indian Relief Counsel, Nov. 2017, [http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc\\_hist\\_boardingschools](http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools)

they were only allowed to speak English proved an extremely effective way to strip Indians of their culture, by making it difficult for children to communicate with relatives or learn oral histories traditionally passed down in native languages.

The use of English only education as a form of colonial domination is not unique to the Indian Boarding schools. Similar practices were used on Mexican-American students after the Mexican American War. “After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the world in which the Mexican-origin population found itself changed dramatically. Education also changed dramatically in the post-1848 decades, as formal instruction or schooling assumed an increasingly important role in the Southwest in general and in the Mexican-origin community in particular”<sup>9</sup>. Schools in the Southwest were incredibly segregated and there was little concern for the quality of education that Mexican-American students were receiving. By the 1870’s, “there emerged a pattern of institutional discrimination that was reflected in the establishment of segregated schools for Mexican-origin children”<sup>10</sup>. Like the Indian Boarding schools, these schools implemented strict English only policies in order to “Americanize” students. These policies were a form of social control.

Meanwhile, other immigrant communities had a completely different experience. The United States showed “tolerance of European Immigrants who were allowed to maintain and use their native languages for public and private education.”<sup>11</sup> These differences in educational

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<sup>9</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel and Richard Valencia, *From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Hopwood: The Educational Plight and Struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest*. (Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 68 No. 3, 1998) 355

<sup>10</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel and Richard Valencia, *From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Hopwood: The Educational Plight and Struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest*. (Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 68 No. 3, 1998) 357

<sup>11</sup> Bertha Pérez, *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 7.

approaches are still present today in the ongoing divide between English only education and bilingual education.

In 1968 the bilingual education act was passed which allowed public schools to fund bilingual education programs. However, it did not require schools to do so. Then in 1974, the *Lau. V. Nicholas* case was affirmed by the supreme court. The case was filed by 12 parents of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco who claimed that “Their children were being denied equal educational opportunity. The primary issue was whether non-English Speaking children in English-only classrooms were receiving an equal education and whether the school district had a legal obligation to provide special instructional programs.”<sup>12</sup> The decision that school districts do have an obligation to provide ESL education helped to create the modern framework for ESL classes.

Today, all students who do not speak English are given the opportunity to take ESL classes. In some states there are extensive bilingual programs, while others follow an English only model. These differences are informed both by local politics and the language backgrounds of the students. For example, states like California and Texas with large Spanish speaking populations tend to have bilingual programs, whereas states with more variety in the language background of their students tend to have English only programs.

While there has been much progress in the field of ESL education since the implementation of the Indian Boarding Schools, many students are still punished for using their native language in school and their language and culture are devalued and seen as “un-American”. There are legal frameworks in place which offer some protection to ESL students and guarantee, in theory, access to equal educational opportunity. However, the reality is that the

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<sup>12</sup> Bertha Pérez, *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 8.

quality of education that ESL students receive is often far below that of their English speaking peers.

### **Structure of ESL**

The ESL program at Washington High School is an English only program. This means that all instruction is in English and in many cases teachers do not speak any languages besides English. At Washington, students are placed in an ESL class and sheltered classes until they have reached a level of English proficiency that allows them to participate in mainstream classes with native English speakers. Sheltered classes are content area courses that are specifically designed for student who are learning English. Because of this the schedules of each student vary based on their English language proficiency. Mr. Laurent, teaches beginning and intermediate ESL classes and helps place all the student that come into the ESL program. He explained this process to me:

For the very beginning kids that have no English what so ever, they all get the same schedule. They get a blocked English language development class [two class periods] and then they get a sheltered math, a sheltered science, and a sheltered social studies. And then they get P.E. Then the year after that they'll have maybe have one more regular class, maybe two regular classes, but they still have the blocked ESL class. And then, little by little they move up and have fewer ESL classes until hopefully they can fly on their own in regular classes.<sup>13</sup>

The advantages of this system are that students can build community within their classes, teachers can modify the content and the pacing of the class to meet students' needs, and students can build relationships with teaches over multiple school years.

Mr. Laurent, who teaches the blocked English classes, is intentional in his attempts to build community in his classes. In an interview he told me, "Cultural celebrations I think help to create family and doing things in the classroom where they can showcase their cultures and their

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<sup>13</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

countries helps them to feel good about who they are.”<sup>14</sup> In the back of Mr. Laurent’s classroom there are paragraphs written by the students about who they are, where they are from, and who their families are. Creating assignments like this and allowing students to share their backgrounds helps to create a sense of community within the classroom. While some of the cultural celebrations only address superficial culture, Mr. Laurent also engages in culturally relevant teaching on a regular basis. Attempting to connect the material that students learn in class to their own background knowledge. When talking about Mr. Laurent in an interview one student told me, “Él le gusta que nos sabemos nuestras historias que convinimos, todo eso. Sí, me guasta la clase de él.”<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Laurent seeks to extend this sense of community beyond the classroom as well. “For thanksgiving, we frequently do a thanksgiving meal where everybody comes and everybody brings food from their countries that they prepare and then we all share. We’ve also done some activities with the kids where they get to wear their traditional dress and then everybody gets to show off their traditional dress and show their flags and what their flags mean and things like that.”<sup>16</sup> Mr. Laurent is able to build community because he has personal relationships with all of his students.

Mrs. Peters teaches a sheltered Earth Science class at Washington High. She uses a variety of strategies to make the content in her class accessible to her students. In an interview she told me, “there’s been a lot of things that I would teach in a regular class that we’re not teaching in this class because either it’s too abstract or its too difficult to explain in English in a

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<sup>14</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

<sup>15</sup> He likes when we know our history, that we feel connected, and everything. Yeah, I like his class. Direct quote as shown. Translation by author. Interview conducted by author. Oct. 2017

<sup>16</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

way that's going to make sense"<sup>17</sup> Because the ESL class is covering less information than other science classes, students are able to take more time to fully understand the material they are studying. "What might take my regular class a day to do something, it might take this class three days to do it. I'm trying to pick the most vital information. that at least gets them science content within the same concept area. Some of these kids, I'm just learning, had no formal education, much less science and now they're having to learn English in a science context and that's not easy."<sup>18</sup>

Using the current research on language acquisition, educators have created the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model of sheltered instruction for English language learners. The SIOP Model helps teachers incorporate learning strategies that have proven to be effective into their lessons and which develop language and content skills simultaneously. Mrs. Peterson incorporates SIOP strategies into her lessons on a regular basis. For example, during one class session, when students were doing a lab using tree rings, she brought actual cross-sections of trees into class so that they would have a visual reference and she taught target vocabulary before and during the lesson.

Another advantage of the model at Washington High is that students can build relationships with teachers over multiple years. For example, Mr. Laurent teaches all the blocked English classes, so everyone takes a class with him as long as they are in the ESL program. Although this is Mrs. Peters first year teaching a sheltered science class, she has volunteered to teach sheltered Biology next year. This means that most of the students in her Earth Science class will have her as a teacher again next year.

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<sup>17</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

<sup>18</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

While teachers at Washington High are working hard to help students learn as effectively as possible, there are disadvantages to the sheltered content and English only model Washington High implements. Students are isolated from their English speaking peers, they are not developing academic skills in their native language, and the sheltered classes do not always teach students the skills they need to succeed in subsequent mainstream classes.

In order to learn English, students need both exposure and practice. In the sheltered model students have some access to English through their teachers, but they have very limited contact with their English speaking peers. Beginning ESL students at Washington High only have P.E. class with native English speakers. Some of the more advanced students spend more time around English speakers, but they tend not to be friends.

There is a clear divide between the mainstream students and the ESL students at Washington. During one of my observation days, I was in the hallway outside Mr. Laurent's classroom when two native English speakers walked by. One of them looked at the other and said, "Let's go, this is the immigrant hallway". I have spoken to multiple students about their exposure to English outside of school and all of the Spanish speaking students tell me they only spend time with other Spanish speakers.

Studies of language acquisition have found that the best form of English education is additive bilingualism. "Additive Bilingualism refers to situations where both the native language and the second language are being supported and developed"<sup>19</sup>. The goal of additive bilingualism is for students to be fluent in two languages. Mr. Laurent's first and second period English class is made up of all Spanish speakers; however the class is taught almost exclusively in English.

Mr. Laurent does use some Spanish translation to make sure students understand the vocabulary,

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<sup>19</sup> Bertha Pérez, *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 13.

but there is no literacy development in Spanish. Many of the students in this class do not have strong reading and writing skills in Spanish and would benefit from bilingual instruction.

Another potential problem with sheltered content classes is that they do not always teach students the skills they need to succeed in future classes. Because content modification is the responsibility of the individual teachers, some teachers have low expectations of their students and do not teach them how to read texts, write well-constructed responses, or teach students to think critically.

The structure of the ESL program at Washington allows students to build meaningful relationships with other students in the ESL program as well as the ESL program teachers. The structure at Washington also allows teachers to modify content to meet student's needs. This can work well when they use the SIOP model, however, the responsibility of understanding and implementing SIOP techniques falls on the teachers and some do a better job than others. Sometimes teachers modify content to such an extent that students do not learn the skills they need to succeed in subsequent classes. In addition, because of the nature of sheltered content classes, students have very limited contact with their English speaking peers, which can be detrimental to their language development. Even though there is a large Spanish speaking population at Washington, there are no bilingual classes offered. There are no opportunities for students to develop their academic skills in their native languages.

### **Modification of Content**

When working with students who do not speak English proficiently, teachers must modify the content they are teaching to make it accessible to their students. "The challenges of education students who do not speak the societal language are enormous. In the United States, it

is not just a question of teaching English; rather, it is a question of providing large numbers of students with access to the curriculum at the same time that they are learning English.”<sup>20</sup> It can be incredibly challenging to balance teaching content and teaching English. At Washington there is not standard curriculum for sheltered content classes, so the responsibility of finding that balance rests solely on teachers.

One of the challenges that ESL teachers face is the variability among students as well. While every classroom has students that perform at different levels, ESL students have particularly varied academic backgrounds. While some students enter the United States with rich academic backgrounds, others have never been to school. Mr. Laurent told me in an interview:

“Well the biggest thing [student success] depends on is the academic background of the kids. And so if they have a strong academic background in their native language then they have a chance of accessing the curriculum, so you get a kid from Russia, you get a kid from Germany, you get a kid from China who’s been in school their whole life and then, you know they’re learning English, they get some modifications, they have a good chance of actually understanding the content. But if you have kids that are coming from very interrupted educational backgrounds, maybe they’ve been in refugee camps, maybe some of the kids that you’ve worked with that have never been in school in their lives, do modifications in the mainstream classroom work? No, not really. The content kind of just goes way over their heads. They have the academic language in their native language, they do not have the foundation in their native language to be able to bring things together.”<sup>21</sup>

Not only can it be challenging for students to learn academic content without the necessary foundation, it can also be more challenging to learn English. As Perez discusses in her book on about language and literacy, “When children acquire literacy in their native language with the cultural referents for which they have background knowledge, they have certain meaning-making

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<sup>20</sup> Guadalupe Valdés, *Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2001), 14

<sup>21</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

advantages that will help them to later explore English literacy”.<sup>22</sup> However, while it is easier for students who are literate in their native language to learn English, it still takes time. While they are in the process of developing their English skills, it is important for teachers to modify their lessons so that they are accessible to students with limited English proficiency.

I have spent time in two different earth science classes for ESL students at Washington High School. In each class, the teachers employed different approaches to the modification of content. Both Mr. Harrison’s and Mrs. Peters’ class were studying different types of energy, and at the end of the unit the students were each assigned a different type of energy source (i.e. wind, solar, coal etc.) to present to the class. In Mr. Harrison’s class students worked individually and were told to research their energy source in the computer lab, create a poster with information and pictures, and then present the poster to the class.

Mrs. Peters gave the students a similar assignment; however, she split the students into groups of two and three and gave them three questions that they needed to answer in a PowerPoint presentation. Below is Mrs. Peters assignment prompt:

- What is your energy source and where can it be found?
- How does it work?
- Is it renewable? Why or why not?

Mrs. Peters also asked the students to find a picture of the energy source that they could explain in their own words.

In Mr. Harrison’s class students made posters packed with information and presented them to the class. However, when the students did their presentations, they stumbled through the

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<sup>22</sup> Bertha Pérez, *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 30.

sentences they had written and it was clear that they had simply copied the information and did not actually understand the words they were reading. One student copied a passage about how natural gas is extracted. When he had finished writing it onto his poster I asked where natural gas is found. He replied, “No se. En el aire<sup>23</sup>?”

In contrast, Mrs. Peterson told the students they needed to answer the three questions in their own words. The presentations in her class were very short. Most students only said a sentence or two, but all the students seemed to understand what they were talking about. While each student was presenting, she had the rest of the class take notes on the answers to the three questions. Because there was not a lot of extra information to sort through most students were able to gain a basic understanding of how different sources of energy work.

The examples above illustrate the way that content modification works at Washington High. There is no standard curriculum for sheltered content classes and no textbooks specifically for English language learners in science or math. This means that the modification of content is the responsibility of the teacher. Some teachers invest a lot of time in making content accessible to English language learners and others do not. It is not required for content area teachers to be trained in ESL education, and while some are, many teachers do not have any training in modification of content or SIOP strategies.

When I spoke to Mr. Laurent about the problems he sees in the content classes he told me:

“One of the most common issues is that when [teachers] speak to English language learners, they do not understand how to simplify the language. So they talk using idioms, maybe they talk too fast, they use a lot of vocabulary that the kids aren’t going to understand.” He went on to explain that even when teachers recognize that students need extra support; they do not always correctly evaluate what kinds of support the students need. For example, “Maybe they’ll give them a vocabulary lesson. They’ll say, ok they

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<sup>23</sup> I do not know. In the air?  
Direct quote as shown. Translation by author.

need to know this vocabulary to do this lesson. But then, what they do not realize is that the vocabulary they use to explain that lesson, they do not get that either. Sometimes they do not understand how far back you have to go.”<sup>24</sup>

Modifying content in such a way that makes course material accessible to ESL students can be difficult. Because there is no standard curriculum at Washington, this responsibility falls on teachers. Some teachers do a better job than others when it comes to content modification. Not only do teachers need to have a clear understanding of what students are capable of, they must also take into account the variability of both language ability and background knowledge in any given subject. Because there is so much variability among ESL students, teachers must find ways to scaffold material so that they can teach to a variety of levels simultaneously.

### **Student/Teacher Communication**

Communication between students and teachers can be complex and fraught with misunderstanding in ESL classrooms. When students and teachers do not share a language, they often revert to evaluating what the other is saying based on tone and body language. This can lead to misunderstandings and sometimes conflict.

Every teacher comes into a classroom with a certain expectation of students. In a high school this can be confusing for new students because they are moving from class to class throughout the day and each teacher has a different set of expectations for students. Many ESL students are not familiar with the structure and culture of high school in the United States. In an interview one student described how overwhelming transitioning from a school in Latin America with a single classroom model was, “Mi primer día de escuela fue muy difícil para mí porque yo no sabía nada porque para mí esa escuela era muy grande. Yo estudié en una escuela en Guatemala como, es de primer piso, no tiene segundo. Nada más entraba a las 8 y salía a las 12

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<sup>24</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

de la misma clase. No cambiaba mis clases”<sup>25</sup>. This student went from having one teacher who shared his cultural and linguistic background, to having six different teachers every day, none of whom share his cultural background. This makes miscommunications much more likely to occur in at least some of his classes.

One of the most frequent misunderstandings that I witnessed centered around tests. Most high school teachers assume that if they say the words text, quiz or exam, students know they are meant to work silently on their own paper without looking at what anyone else is writing or looking at their notes. However, unless teachers explain these expectations at some point, there is no reason to expect students to know what a teachers’ expectations are.

During one of my observations at Lincoln High School, I was in a history class for English language learners and the teacher told them they were going to take a vocabulary quiz. He told students to take out a piece of notebook paper and write down the definitions of the words that he said out loud. One student in the front row began writing and then took out his notes to check his answers. The teacher saw him with his notes out, came over to his desk, took the piece of paper that his answers were on and threw it in the trash. Someone who had grown up in the U.S. school system would likely understand that they had been caught cheating, and by throwing their paper in the trash the teacher was telling them they would receive a zero on their assignment. However, this student had not grown up with the cultural norms surrounding test taking that are present in the United States. So, he immediately took out another sheet of notebook paper and started re-writing his answers. When the teacher saw this, he came back over and said, “No, I’m not going to accept that.” This was particularly confusing for the student

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<sup>25</sup> My first day of school was very hard for me because I didn’t know anything and because to me this school was very big. The school I studied at in Guatemala was just one floor, there was no second floor. I just went into the classroom at 8 o’clock and we left at 12 from the same class. I didn’t change classes. Direct quote as shown. Translation by author. Interview conducted by author. Oct. 2017

because the class was taking the quiz on notebook paper, following an almost identical process to that of taking notes on new vocabulary. However, during note taking students are allowed to copy from a peer and look at their notebooks, whereas during a quiz students are expected to work independently.

During my observations at Washington High School I have witnessed other instances where teachers confronted students for cheating when they are simply trying to translate directions to their peers with lower English proficiency. I have also seen teachers think students are cheating just because they are sitting next to each other. For example, two students were working on a quiz in a math class at Washington High. One of them finished his quiz and left it on his desk while he worked on another paper. His friend was sitting next to him struggling to complete the quiz. From the front of the room the teacher said, “You’re just going to let him copy? Cover your paper or something” to which the other student replied, “No estoy copiando. Este maestro está loco.”<sup>26</sup>

In the United States, most people share a similar understanding of what is considered cheating and what is not. However, these ideas are not universals. Problems arise when teachers assume students know what is expected of them without explicitly telling students what they should and should not do during a test. One thing that can help students understand teachers’ expectations in routine. Then, even if the students do not understand the instructions they are given they can watch their peers and imitate them until they gain a better understanding themselves. When I asked one student what he does when he doesn’t understand something he replied, “Yo solo veo los demás, que es lo que están haciendo y ya sigo yo. Por ejemplo cuando

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<sup>26</sup> I’m not copying. This teacher is crazy  
Direct quote as shown. Translation by author.

ve allí lo de gym, dice el maestro que van a hacer en el ejercicio y yo comienzo cuándo ya vio a todos, lo que están haciendo<sup>27</sup>.”

When teachers and students do not share a language, communicating effectively can be difficult. Without language, consistency and routine are important so that students understand teachers' expectations. However, there can still be misunderstandings, particularly when teachers fail to explain cultural information. Students are given the incredibly difficult task of navigating not only a new culture but also the different expectations of each of their teachers.

### **Student/teacher relationships**

The relationships students have with teachers can fundamentally change their experience in school. For ESL students building these relationships can be challenging because they can't rely on language to communicate with teachers. When teachers cannot communicate effectively with students they can resort to making assumptions about students, leading to stereotyping and misinterpretations of students' behavior.

There are a variety of things that teachers can do that damage relationships with students. One thing that can happen is that students who speak out or misbehave once can be labeled as the “disruptive student”. As a result of this reputation, the student then gets in trouble for things that would be overlooked for other students. I observed this with one freshman student named José at Washington High School. José would sometimes speak out in math class or refuse to do his work. The math teacher would punish him by sending him out of class or making him put his desk in the front of the classroom. However, he would get in trouble for everything, even when

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<sup>27</sup> I just look at everyone else to see what they are doing and then I do it too. For example, when I'm in gym class, the teachers tell us how to do an exercise and I start when I can see what everyone else is doing. Direct quote as shown. Translation by author. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

his classmates were doing the same things he was. The math teacher also began emailing other teachers about José's behavior and he would get in trouble for things he had done in other classes. For example, the security guard came into class one day to take José out and I asked the teacher where he was going. The teacher told me that he had been acting out a lot this week so he was being sent to another algebra class where he didn't know anybody to "calm down". The teacher went on to tell me that José had been acting out in other classes as well. That same day I went to science class with José. The bell to start class had just rung and students were coming into the room and finding their seats. The teacher told everybody to sit down. About half the class was still standing up including José, and the teacher sent him to the office for remaining standing when he had been asked to sit down.

Without being able to rely on verbal communication with students, teachers often make assumptions about students. These assumptions can often lead to stereotyping and misinterpretations of students' behavior. In his book "Punished", Victor Rios demonstrates how Black and Latino boys are labeled by their teachers from a young age, and the damaging effect this can have on students' self-esteem and behavior. He writes, "Oakland creates a labeling hype and culture of punishment that criminalizes young people's everyday style and pursuit of happiness, even when these did not involve breaking the law."<sup>28</sup> While Rios's study was specific to Oakland, we can draw parallels to Washington and Lincoln High , since labeling happens in schools across the country. When teachers attempt to control students style, they are resorting to stereotypes about what constitutes "good" and "bad" students and not actually forming personal relationships with their students.

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<sup>28</sup> Victor Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 73

While students in Colorado Springs are not criminalized in the same ways as the students in Rios's study, they are sometimes stereotyped. Once a student has been labeled as a "bad student", teachers tend to give them harsher punishments than their peers for enacting the same behaviors.

Students and teachers can also get into power struggles. I was in a sheltered history class at Lincoln High with all beginning ESL students when two boys walked into class late. They started walking around and shaking hands with other students and the teacher told them to sit down, telling them, "If you're going to come in late, you can't be going around shaking people's hands." The boys sat down and the lesson began. A few minutes into the lesson the teacher asked one of the boys to take his hood off. The student did nothing, so the teacher said, "Take it off, or I will make this a security issue". The students still did nothing, but his friend reached over and pulled his hood down saying, "va a llamar la seguridad<sup>29</sup>".

By asking the student to remove his hood in front of the whole class, the teacher was forced into a power struggle when the student did not comply. In contrast, I was in Mr. Laurent's history class and there was a similar situation. A student came into class with a hat on and Mr. Laurent walked over to his desk, whispered "Please take your hat off" and walked away. The student did not comply right away, but Mr. Laurent gave him a few seconds and then simply turned and looked at him. At this point the student took his hat off.

While Mr. Laurent handled the situation better, both of these teachers were attempting to control aspects of their student's physical appearance instead of their actual behavior. In the case at Lincoln, the teacher was willing to call security over an issue of students' style.

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<sup>29</sup> He's going to call security  
Direct quote as shown. Translation by author.

The way that students perceive their teacher's feelings towards them can have a huge impact on their success as well. In her book, *Subtractive Schooling*, Angela Valenzuela discusses the impact of caring teachers on students' success in school. She writes:

authentically caring teachers are sized by their students and energy flows towards their projects and needs. The benefit of such profound relatedness for the students is the development of a sense of competence and mastery over worldly tasks. In the absence of such connectedness, students are not only reduced to the level of objects, they may also be diverted from learning the skills necessary for mastering their academic and social environments.<sup>30</sup>

Teachers' perceptions of students can also change how they interact with students. For example, I was working with the two students who came in late to their history class. They were completing a reading about World War II and then asked to answer a series of questions. I sat with them and asked one student to read outloud. He stumbled over the words in the title and I asked if he knew what the word "war" meant. He shook his head. He proceeded to tell me that he didn't understand anything in the history class and that he and his parents had talked to the teacher about this during parent teacher conferences but that nothing had changed. So after class I asked the teacher about this. He told me that the boys had gone to a private school in Puerto Rico where they had learned English and that they actually understood a lot. However, I knew this was not true because the students clearly didn't speak any English and seemed to be totally lost in class. When I brought this up with the teacher, who didn't speak any Spanish, he told me, "English is the least of their problems. One of them threatened to hit me the other day." The boys got into trouble a lot, but threatening to hit a teacher seemed extreme. So I asked, "How did you know he was threatening you? Did he say he was going to hit you?" I knew he did not have the English skills to form a whole sentence, so my guess is that he made a threatening gesture that

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<sup>30</sup> Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 62.

the teacher interpreted as a threat of violence. The teacher did not respond to my question and because I was a guest in his classroom I did not press the issue any further.

However, this was a case where the student refused to do his school work because he did not understand the material, and felt that the teacher was treating him unfairly. The teacher in turn believed that the student was capable of doing the work but was choosing not to because he did not value his education. The teacher felt that English was the least of these student's problems, because they were dealing with all kinds of behavioral issues. However, behavioral issues often stem from students' inability to communicate or understand course material in English.

This inability to express needs is not only apparent in students who teachers view as "problem students". Not being able to communicate with teachers can lead to other problems as well. For example, I recall an experience from when I was in a mainstream health class with a Spanish speaking student. He was the only English language learner in the class and was having a hard time understanding the content and the directions on assignments. The class had assigned seats and he was sitting at a table with a student who did not speak Spanish. I asked him if anyone in the class was bilingual and he pointed a few different students out to me. I asked why the teacher hadn't seated him next to a bilingual student who could help him understand what was going on in class. He shrugged. I wondered if the teacher even knew which students in the class spoke Spanish.

This is an example of a teacher failing to recognize the resources he has in his class. If the student I was working with had been able to communicate with the teacher, it would have been easy for him to ask to sit next to a Spanish speaker. This student probably could have managed to make the request. It may have been hard to understand but he had some English

skills and might have been able to communicate his request. However, he did not feel comfortable speaking to the teacher. Furthermore, when I asked if he wanted me to go with him to ask he shook his head, preferring to keep struggling on his own than have a conversation with the teacher.

Student-teacher relationships can drastically affect student behavior. For example, this same student who works silently all through health class is always talking and joking with his friends and the teacher in science class. He will regularly yell, “Mrs. Peterson” from his seat in the back of the room to get her to come over and answer a question for him. Mrs. Peterson has built a relationship with him and because of this he feels comfortable joking with her and actively participating in her class.

Students’ perceptions of how their teachers feel about them can have a huge impact on their success or failure in school. When students believe that their teachers do not care about them they are less likely to do well in that teachers’ class. A student’s level of comfort in a classroom can also determine their likelihood of success. If a student feels like they can talk to the teacher about their needs then students and teachers can work together to use the available resources to help the student succeed. When teachers fail to get to know students they can revert to stereotypes about different groups of students. This can be incredibly detrimental to student success.

### **Challenges for ESL Students**

ESL students often face incredible challenges in their daily lives. Any student coming from outside the United States has to deal with the impact of immigration laws. For some students this means they went through an extensive screening process before being allowed to

enter the country. For others this means seeking asylum once they reached the United States, and for others it means entering the country without documentation and living with the fear that they, or their loved ones, will be deported.

Most of the students at Washington from Asia, Africa and the Middle East entered the country as refugees. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services defines a refugee as someone who, “Is located outside of the United States, is of special humanitarian concern to the United States, demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, is not firmly resettled in another country and Is admissible to the United States.”<sup>31</sup> Even when someone can prove all of these things it can be incredibly difficult to be granted entry into the United States.

There are similar criteria for people seeking asylum. However, while refugees are pre-approved for entry into the United States, people seeking asylum enter the country first and then must prove why they cannot return to their home countries. During this study I did not ask any students about their immigrations status. I therefore do not know which students have been granted asylum, are seeking asylum, or remain undocumented. That being said, I know that many students have ongoing immigration cases.

There are many unknowns in relation to immigration status, which can be incredibly stressful for students. Mr. Laurent explained how difficult this can be for students. In an interview he told me:

there’s another girl, we’re trying to help find a lawyer for her because her dad’s in jail right now ready to be deported and she’s only 16 and she’s trying to figure out what she’s going to do and where she’s going to go. She has immigration court in March but no lawyer and for people that come across the border without papers, the government

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<sup>31</sup> n.a., “Refugees,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Oct, 2017, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/refugees>

doesn't provide them with free legal services so they have to find a pro bono lawyer or they have to come up with money to pay for it, which is difficult<sup>32</sup>

Even for students who are not in immediate danger of being deported, the possibility can be incredibly stressful. I was in a math class and the police came in to search the classroom for drugs. They brought a K9 unit and the students were instructed to leave their backpacks in the classroom and line up in the hallway with their backs against the wall. No one told the students why this was happening and I heard one student whisper to another, "Nos van a deportar<sup>33</sup>".

In addition to the challenges posed by the government, many students come to this county alone. When they arrive they are placed with relatives if they have any in the area. If they have no relatives and are under the age of 18, they are placed into the foster care system. If they are over 18, they are placed in independent living. All of these situations can place an incredible amount of stress on students. One student from El Salvador told me, "[Mi hermana] se metió en una programa de Foster Care donde se ayuda bastante. Yo no logre aplicar porque ya tenía 18."<sup>34</sup> Because he was too old to enter the Foster care system, this student now lives with his older sister. Mr. Laurent weighed the benefits and drawbacks of the foster care system, telling me:

For the unaccompanied Refugee Minors, a lot of them are placed into foster care with American families, so they can get some support there as well. Although for a lot of them it's kind of hard to live with families and rules when they haven't been doing that for a while before they came and then you add the cultural thing. There's different cultural rules and food and things like that, so living with foster families can sometimes be challenging as well. So we end up with a good deal of kids living on their own in independent living and then when they do that, when they go home they do not have the same level of support as the ones that are in foster care do.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2017

<sup>33</sup> They are going to deport us.

Direct quote as shown. Translation by author.

<sup>34</sup> My sister is in a Foster Care program where she gets a lot of help. I was not able to apply because I was already 18 years old.

<sup>35</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2017

Money can be another cause of stress for students. Students who are here without their parents need to find ways to support themselves. One student told me in an interview, “si no trabajo, nadie me mantiene a mi porque mi papa no está aquí, mi mama no está aquí, están en guatámela entonces yo estoy solo aquí con mi hermano pero como él tiene mujer, tiene gastos para ellos, entonces por eso yo trabajo un par de horas para poder mantenerme<sup>36</sup>”. Others are not legally allowed to work which can be challenging as well. “No trabajo porque no tengo permiso de trabajo todavía. Mi abogado dice que está aplicando para una cosa pero no sé si mi va a salir o que. Yo quería tener un part-time<sup>37</sup>”

In addition, some students arrive in the United States with debt. Mr. Laurent explained the situation that some of his students are in, saying, “a lot of them have to pay off the bill for the smuggler who got them here and that can run into the thousands of dollars.” One student had to take a year off of school so he could work full time to pay back the smugglers who got him across the border. Even without debt, money can be a source of stress for students. Mr. Laurent told me, “We had one kid that was getting phone call after phone call after phone call from one of his brothers in Africa, asking for money. And he was actually becoming suicidal because he was not able to help him.”<sup>38</sup>

Being an ESL student can be incredibly challenging and school work is not always going to be a students’ top priority. Many teachers fail to take into account everything that a student is going through outside the classroom. ESL students in particular may have different needs than

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<sup>36</sup> If I do not work, no one is going to take care of me because my dad isn’t here, my mom isn’t here. They are in Guatemala so I’m here alone with my brother, but he has a wife and expenses for his family which means I have to work a few hours a week to take care of myself.

<sup>37</sup> I do not work because I do not have a work visa yet. My lawyer says he’s applying for one but I do not know if I’m going to get it. I wanted to have a part time job. Direct quote as shown. Translation by author. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

<sup>38</sup> Direct quote as shown. Interview conducted by author. Feb. 2018

other students and teachers need to take into account what is going to help students be successful.

Learning English is the most important step in helping ESL students succeed in the United States. Being able to communicate is vital to success in school and outside of school. However, this is not the only support that students need. In order to effectively teach students English, teachers must recognize the challenges students face both at school and outside of school and find ways to make what students are learning in school relevant to their lives.

ESL students face incredible challenge both in and outside of school. In order to best serve these students, ESL teachers must have some understand of the challenge these students face in their daily lives. The process of arriving in the United States can be grueling and many families are separated. Although the immigration process affects different students and families differently, every student who enters the United States has been effected in some capacity. Money can be another case of stress for students, whether because their families need them to work, or their parents are not in the country so they need to find ways to support themselves, or because they have family members in other countries depending on them for money. While there are some resources in place to help ESL students, not everyone has access to them and many are dependent on the availability of volunteers.

### **Conclusion**

By law, every student in the United States has the right to equal opportunities in education. However, in practice this is not happening. ESL students face incredible barriers to education and although many teachers are working hard to provide all students with a high quality education, that is currently far from the reality in public school. Especially in English only programs, such as the ones at Washington and Lincoln High .

ESL students face academic, social and personal challenges both in and outside of school. Not only do they have to assimilate to High school in the United States, they also have to learn grade level content in a new language. When students have strong academic backgrounds, they have a good chance of understanding at least some course content. Especially when teachers modify their lessons to be more accessible to non-native English speakers. However, many students have lack the academic foundation for the content they are trying to learn. When students have a limited academic foundation in their native language it is much more difficult to access content in English.

Outside of academics, ESL students need to find ways to communicate in a language and culture that is not their own. Especially when they first arrive, students can have a hard time communicating with teachers and they have to work incredibly hard just to understand what teachers expect from them in the classroom. This can be challenging because different teachers have different expectations of their students and teachers often assume that students have cultural knowledge that they may not actually have.

In addition to having trouble communicating, ESL students can sometimes have trouble connecting with their teachers. While some teachers go to great lengths to get to know each of their students personally and to make sure they feel comfortable and valued in the classroom, others revert to stereotypes and fail to connect with their students. Students' self-esteem and effort can be greatly reduced when they feel a teacher does not care about their wellbeing. Even a relationship in which a teacher is ambivalent towards a student can be detrimental to their success because ESL students may not feel comfortable communicating their needs to their teachers.

Teachers often have very little sense of the types of challenges that students face outside of the classroom. Teachers receive very little information about each student when they enter the school which means that if they do not have a personal relationship with the student they are unlikely to gain an understanding of the types of challenges the student faces on a daily basis, or their needs outside of the classroom.

All of the ESL students at Washington and Lincoln are refugees or immigrants. Many of the students faced some kind of trauma before arriving in the United States and some students were separated from their families. Beyond the everyday challenges of navigating a foreign county, many ESL students face financial pressure, stress about their immigration status, or that of their family members, and the trauma of being separated from their loved ones.

The current systems in place to help ESL students succeed are largely based on the actions of individual teachers. While there are some legal protections in place to protect ESL students and some structures within schools that provide support to students, the majority of the support comes from dedicated teachers who volunteer their time to stay after school to help students, or who spend extra time modifying their lessons to be more accessible to all of their students. While there are many amazing teachers in our education system, we cannot continue to have the success of ESL students depend on individual teachers going above and beyond what is expected of them.

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