

Storied Lives: Exploring English Language Learners' School Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative bricolage approach (Kincheloe, n.d., 2008), this study explores the everyday school life of immigrant students enrolled in an Advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a high school in southwest Virginia. The overarching objective of this study is to examine how these students—five from Mexico, three from Honduras, and one from China—experience school. I present my research in two manuscripts: “*Just Like Me: How Immigrant English Language Learners Experience a Rural High School*” and “*I’m NOT Stupid!*” *The Trouble with JanCarlos*. In *Just Like Me*, I use figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) and positioning theory (Davies, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as analytical frameworks to present how the students rely on their positions as English language learners in an ESL program, on the ESL faculty, and on one another to co-construct a variety of practices that create opportunities for agency in the school space. I describe how they co-construct a world, vis-à-vis their everyday practices, in and through which, they navigate the institution, meet academic needs, and establish networks of care. I also examine the “dissonant threads”—elements of data that resist perfect codification—to deepen analysis and to portray a complex portrait of ESL II (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In *I’m NOT Stupid*, I trouble the school experiences of JanCarlos, a student in the advanced ESL class. Using dialogue and reflexive internal dialogue, I story two events that altered the trajectory of his school life—an emotional argument with the ESL teacher and punishment for drawing graffiti on a bathroom wall. I present how each of these events represented “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1998; Webster & John, 2010) in my research as they interrupted my objective stance and altered my interpretations (Poulos, 2009). As I “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, xix), I use autoethnography to critically examine each event. As I watched events unfold, I routinely asked the relational ethical question—“What should I do now?” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). In so doing, I make transparent my position and power in creating knowledge (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012).

To *Ms. Esperanza*, an amazing teacher and friend. You embody this “name” every time you step into the classroom.

To the nine students whose resiliency and courage inspires me to be a better researcher and educator.

*Adriana*  
*Audelio*  
*Chuy*  
*Diana*  
*Genesis*  
*Ilyn*  
*Jackie Chan*  
*JanCarlos*  
*Venus*

And to my nieces and nephews who generously share their joys, youthful discoveries, troubles, and questions with me. You are my “teachers” as you continuously show me the incredible ways that young people powerfully contribute to this life and world. Thank you for helping me become a better person and teacher.

*Adam*  
*Katie*  
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*Caleb*  
*Sam*  
*Kristin*  
*Maggie*  
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*Hannah*  
*Betsy*  
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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Diverse Students' Experiences in Schools: A Critical Examination**

The diversification of US schools receives increasing attention. Research reveals daunting obstacles and bleak outlooks for the educational success among students of color. For example, English language learners drop out of secondary schools at high rates (Gil & Bardack, 2010). Latino youth alone experience a 41% drop-out rate (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). Students of color, including those living under the conditions of poverty and those learning English as a new language, score lower than white students on state and national assessments measuring academic achievement in reading, math, and science (Darling-Hammond, 2007, 2010). Thus, the achievement gap, “the difference between the academic achievement of White, middle-class students and their peers of other social and cultural backgrounds, especially African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, as well as some Asian Pacific Americans” (Nieto, 2005, p. 45) remains steady (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

While graduation rates and academic achievement in core content subjects, such as reading, math, and science are important issues that must be addressed, too often researchers, policy makers, and practitioners position students of color, including immigrants, as deficits to be made whole or empty receptacles to be filled (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Critical scholars provide ample evidence that the achievement gap stems from sociocultural and socioeconomic inequalities facing schools (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; McNeil, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). They challenge us to engage in equitable school reform. Their call is great given the current state of affairs in US schools. Currently, public education in the United States is driven by neoliberal market approaches to education, which emphasize standardization and large-scale quantifiable measurements of human learning (e.g. standardized tests) (Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008). Esposito (2011) succinctly describes neoliberal thinking in the following way:

Drawing from classical liberalism, neoliberals focus on the individual and believe that, under conditions of freedom, all individuals are naturally competitive and inclined to seek wealth and recognition by making rational calculations of what will serve them best. Furthermore, neoliberals invest a religious-like faith in the powers of the free market to ensure personal liberty, economic growth, efficiency, and fairness (p. 4).

A neoliberal approach to education, then, assumes that students will strive and compete. In an effort to level the metaphorical playing field, the neoliberal approach standardizes curriculum by determining the content that should be taught (and tested) within particular subjects/disciplines. Often standardized curriculum sets guidelines regarding how to teach content, when students should learn content, and how uniform content should be across locations (Kohn, 2004). For example, teachers in Virginia public schools are expected to teach the same content in core content subjects, such as math, science, social studies, and English. With the standardization model, content learning is largely measured by standardized tests. Such standardized tests measure students' academic achievement, as well as the subsequent achievement gap(s) among differing ethnic groups (Nieto & Bode, 2008). The dominant notion of school success, then, stems from this neoliberal standardized model (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlet, 2007).

However, standardization only widens the achievement gap and creates obstacles to school success for many. As McNeil (2009) writes, "Over time, the longer standardized controls are in place, the wider the gap becomes as the system of testing and test preparation comes to substitute in minority schools for the curriculum available to more privileged students" (p. 384). Furthermore, this model to education reinforces deficit notions by implicitly, or even explicitly, framing the attainment of academic achievement in individualistic, as well as cultural, terms (Kumashiro, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Noguera, 2009). Often students are designated by "subgroups" (NCLB, PUB L, 107-100) on standardized test result reports and other school documents. For example, in Virginia, students for whom English is not the first language are identified as "LEPs" (Limited English Proficient students) ([doe.virginia.gov](http://doe.virginia.gov)). With these designations, schools risk making simplistic inferences about the connections between characteristics of cultural groups and test scores, which may blame students (and their parents and cultures) for poor academic performance (Noguera, 2009). In short, scholars increasingly critique the neoliberal approach to education. Among other critical arguments, they posit that neoliberal education oversimplifies learning, falsely assumes that standardization is the great leveler, and ignores, as well as reproduces complex sociocultural and socioeconomic inequalities (e.g., Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Kohn, 2004). Even original proponents of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which mandates the current standardization approach to education, now critique NCLB for the inequalities and hidden assumptions embedded in such a system (Ravitch, 2010).

Nevertheless, the neoliberal standardization model of education continues to have a stronghold. However, despite the emphasis on standards, students of color disproportionately attend underfunded and overly crowded schools staffed by untrained faculty (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Often, these underfunded schools do not have access to current curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Students of color also experience more control and surveillance in schools (Monahan, 2009). School officials often pathologize students of diverse backgrounds and enforce “Zero Tolerance” behavioral management policies, which lead to many students being “pushed out” of schools through school suspensions and expulsions (Zweifler, 2009). English language learners further experience discrimination regarding language use in schools. False assumptions about language learning lead educators to overcorrect and even discredit the English spoken by English language learners, especially when students use dialects or shift back and forth between native language(s) and English (Grill, 2010; Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003). Schools often silence ethnically and linguistically diverse students by failing to recognize the wealth of linguistic knowledge and cultural experiences they bring with them to school (González & Moll, 1993; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Similarly, larger social inequalities impact students’ everyday lives, but they are mostly ignored in schools. Instead, students are reduced to deficits, test scores, and “gaps” (Kincheloe, n.d., 2008). Ethnically and linguistically diverse students are too often assumed to be “problem[s] confronting schools in the United States” (Souto-Manning, 2006, p. 562).

Finally, the neoliberal idea that students will act “rationally” by striving to make good grades and score well on standardized tests deserves critique. Academic achievement is presumed to be “what will serve them best” (Esposito, 2011, p. 4). However, such an assumption ignores the social, relational, and emotional factors that influence students’ experiences in schools. What happens when emotional and social needs conflict with academic ones? Can the development of caring relationships in school be as rational as academic achievement? Could the development of supportive relationships serve their needs better than making good grades? For example, by adolescence, immigrant students find themselves in the position of being “cultural and linguistic brokers” (Jones & Trickett, 2005) for their families. At the same time, they increasingly, and paradoxically, “learn to forget” their linguistically diverse heritages (Baez, 2002). Therefore, students experience a host of social, cultural, and emotional issues that

influence their school decisions, actions, and goals. At times, these issues just might outweigh academic ones.

### **The Research “Problem”**

With this study, I respond to critical scholars’ challenge to critique and reveal deficit explanations about ethnically and linguistically diverse students in schools. I examine immigrant students’ experiences in a rural high school in an effort to break away from reducing students to “gaps” and from labeling their lives as “problems” (*cf.* Carger, 1996). I focus on their everyday experiences in school in an effort to paint a portrait of the challenges and “goodness” experienced by immigrant English language learning youth (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). The shift to “goodness” does not simply replace research reports of failures and gaps with those of triumph and success. Rather, an inquiry based in “goodness” encompasses a balanced search and portrayal of educational challenges and triumphs. Such an inquiry documents moments of subversion and control, inquires about negative and positive experiences, and represents the delicate balance between struggle and hope (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997).

My desire to discover “goodness” and critique deficit notions of students in schools originated in my work as a curriculum planner for a family literacy program serving Mexican and Honduran communities (Tilley-Lubbs & McCloud, 2012). During the two years I held that position, I realized all too well how “seductive” and “natural” deficit explanations for student behavior, attendance, and classroom engagement/performance can be (Kumashiro, 2008). I struggled for a year and a half to create a meaningful curriculum for the middle and high school youth participants who sporadically attended. Frustrated, I interpreted their (seeming) lack of engagement when present or lack of attendance altogether as character flaws and reflections of the (de)value they placed in learning and education. After honest self-reflection I realized that too often refrains like “they just don’t care,” and “they are not motivated” ran through my head. I am ashamed to admit these thoughts publically. However, I must share them to illustrate how insidious deficit framing can be: I began thinking in terms of deficits, “lacks,” and gaps without even realizing it. Reflecting back, I realize that I conveniently shifted the scrutiny from *my* practice and curriculum to the “*others.*” I cast them as problems that did not fit into institutional practice (Tilley-Lubbs & McCloud, 2012). I relied on individualistic and deficit explanations; explanations, incidentally, that did not enhance the program or solve the “problem.”

Therefore, in an effort to continue troubling my own former deficit thinking, I strive to understand how immigrant English language learning youth experience the educational challenges that they face. I also want to know how they might subvert the challenges that too often disrupt their lives. I aspire to understand the joys, successes, and creative possibilities of their lives along with the problems. I position adolescents as active agents who are able to reflect and act on their own experiences. Instead of framing young people as passive subjects that are socialized upon (Thorne, 2004), I take “[their] experiences and values....seriously,” which in turn presents “new paradigms for understanding human experiences” (Moinian, 2006, p. 231). There is clearly an urgent need for new paradigms that value and affirm the rich, diverse experiences of English language learning youth.

Thus the “problem” for me is the need to understand the school experiences of immigrant English language learners as they live them. Educators share the responsibility of understanding their experiences so that as curriculum planners, teachers, and policy makers, we are able to come to know their strengths, possibilities, and needs so that we may serve them well. Nowhere is the call to an inquiry of experience more urgent than in areas relatively new to educating English language learners. As Virginia and other states in the SouthAtlantic region become more linguistically and ethnically diverse, many educators find themselves in the position of working with a relatively unknown group of students, a group with whom they do not share similar sociocultural, socioeconomic, or sociohistorical trajectories. By understanding the school experiences of immigrant English language learners, educators may be more willing to subvert deficit notions, examine student possibilities as they strive to address educational challenges, rethink dominant (neoliberal) notions of school success, and critically explore how and in what ways these youth contribute to the landscape of school (Greene, 1994; Hermes 2005; Kincheloe & hayes, 2007; Michie, 1999).

## **The Study**

### **Context**

I conducted qualitative research in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a high school in River Town, Virginia,<sup>1</sup> a community of approximately 7,000 people. River Town has experienced dramatic demographic changes within the past twenty years. Prior to 1990, the Latino population comprised less than one percent of the population. By 2010 the

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<sup>1</sup> All names of places and people are pseudonyms.

number had grown to 14 percent, with the majority having emigrated from Mexico and Honduras. Whites comprise 78 percent and African Americans equal six percent of the population. American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and those self-identifying as two or more races together make up two percent of the population (census.gov).

Drawn to the area by the agricultural industry, such as Christmas tree and pumpkin farms, as well as factory work, such as furniture manufacturing and meat canning, immigrants have moved to the area to pursue economic opportunities. The majority of immigrants live in two large trailer parks along the outskirts of the city center. Several immigrant-owned businesses have sprung up along the highway, including a Mexican family-owned car wash, several “*tienditas*” [convenience stores], and a Mexican restaurant. Area churches, such as River Town Baptist and River Town Pentecostal Holiness share facilities with Spanish-speaking congregations of the same denominations. A Chinese family owns and operates a Chinese restaurant.

470 students attend the high school, 80 of whom are English language learners. The majority of English language learners are immigrants from Mexico and Honduras. One student is from China. I focused my study on an Advanced English as a Second Language class, known as ESL II. The class met daily and provided English language instruction to the nine students enrolled in the class. The course emphasized reading and writing literacy. One ESL teacher provided ESL instruction for the middle and high schools. One ESL instructional aide assisted in the classroom and shadowed ESL students to classes throughout the day. I present introductory information about the students, ESL teacher, and ESL instructional aide in Table 1.

Table 1 <i>Introducing the ESL Students, ESL Teacher, and ESL Instructional Aide</i>		
<b>Student Participants<sup>2</sup> &amp; Country of Origin</b>	<b>Grade Level During Study</b>	<b>Grade Level When Enrolled in River Town Schools</b>
Adriana (Mexico)	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Audelio (Mexico)	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Chuy (Mexico)	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Diana (Mexico)	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Genesis (Honduras)	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade
Ilyn (Honduras)	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Jackie Chan (China)	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade
JanCarlos (Honduras)	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Venus (Mexico)	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Kindergarten
<b>ESL Faculty &amp; Country of Origin</b>	<b>Years of Teaching in the High School</b>	
ESL Teacher: Ms. Esperanza (United States, River Town)	10 years	
ESL Instructional Aide: Ms. Rodriguez (Costa Rica)	7 years	

### **Bricolage Methods**

I adopted a bricolage approach to research, which is an approach that relies on a variety of methodological and theoretical frameworks to make sense of research phenomenon (Kincheloe, n.d.; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012). In my study, I employed bricolage to understand the school experiences of the nine students enrolled in ESL II. I utilized ethnographic methods, portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2008; Poulos, 2009). I generated data across 44 non-consecutive school days. I averaged five to seven hours each day I spent in the school. For approximately two months before fieldwork began, I spent one day a week volunteering in the ESL classroom, getting to know the students, and learning the school terrain. I returned after fieldwork for follow-up conversations, observations, and member-checking.

**Fieldwork and making sense of the data.** I spent the majority of my time in the ESL classroom conducting observations and facilitating students' creation of written narrative artifacts. I also observed in the cafeteria, hallways, school assemblies, and bus stops before and after school. Data sources included ethnographic fieldnotes in which I wrote detailed

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<sup>2</sup> Students selected their own pseudonyms. Students also selected the pseudonym for the ESL teacher.

descriptions of the setting and participants' activities/interactions (LeCompte & Priessele, 2003); open-ended interviews with students,<sup>3</sup> faculty, and administration (Fontana & Prokos, 2007); and, student-constructed narrative artifacts depicting school experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000). Examples of narrative artifacts included: maps of the school representing student movements; comic strips illustrating school experiences (Ramos, 2007); and a poem describing their families, homes, interests, and friends titled *Where I'm From* (Christensen, 2000). The student-constructed narratives served as "field texts," which provided the opportunity for students to express their experiences in concrete ways (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Thus, narrative artifacts served as the *entry* into students' school experiences, not end research products. Artifacts "evoke the worlds" of participants and provide the opportunity for participants to create and expand on their worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 63).

Serving as opening prompts for the second student interview, I asked students to discuss experiences represented in their artifacts. I also asked students to expand on topics and issues that I observed while in the classroom. During the first student interviews, I asked students to describe when and how they enrolled in River Town Schools. I generated follow-up questions as each interview progressed. When interviewing faculty, staff, and administrators, I asked them to describe experiences with English language learners.<sup>4</sup> Informal conversations with students, teachers, and administrators also contributed to the data. After such conversations occurred, I returned to my fieldnotes and described conversations in as much detail as possible.

I followed well-established qualitative data analysis, which begins with the premise that analysis and data generation occur simultaneously and iteratively in the field (Mayan, 2009; St. Pierre, 1997). Once I generated an abundance of data, I performed cross-case analysis of interviews, fieldnotes, and narrative artifacts. I coded, categorized, and determined themes in the data (Mayan, 2009).

## **Two Manuscripts**

I present my research in two manuscripts. In manuscript one, "*Just Like Me: How Immigrant Students Experience a Rural High School*," I examine the everyday experiences of the

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<sup>3</sup> I interviewed eight of the nine students twice. I interviewed one student only once.

<sup>4</sup> I conducted interviews in English, my first language, and Spanish, my fluent second language. I followed participants' lead regarding the language of choice for the interview. However, since I do not speak Chinese, I conducted interviews with the Chinese student in English.

nine students enrolled in ESL II. I rely on figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998) and positioning theory (Davies, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) to explore how the students co-construct success by the ways that they navigate the institution, address academic needs, and establish networks of care. I argue that the ways in which students develop relationships and navigate the institution with one another, with Ms. Esperanza, and with Ms. Rodriguez, challenge educators to re-examine dominant measures and notions of success (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007). I demonstrate how the students demonstrate agency in their daily lives. I also examine the “dissonant threads”—elements of the data that resist perfect codification (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)—to further “complexify” analysis (Kincheloe, n.d.).

In manuscript two, *I'm NOT Stupid: The Trouble with JanCarlos*, I establish a line of inquiry by building on the analysis of the first manuscript. I analyze the experiences of JanCarlos, a student from the ESL II class. Though JanCarlos engaged in many of the same daily activities as his ESL II classmates, his particular experience provided dissonances to the research pattern. As I attempted to make sense of his experiences, I found it necessary to “employ” autoethnography to “the unfolding context of the research situation” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012, p. 21). Therefore, I add a layer to the bricolage by incorporating autoethnography to “describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*), personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, History of Autoethnography section, para. 1). In this manuscript, I trouble and analyze two events that altered the trajectory of JanCarlos’ school experience. As I watched events unfold, I was pulled into events and experienced moments of discomfort and doubt. These moments sparked reflexivity that altered and shaped my interpretations (Parker-Webster & John, 2010; Poulos, 2009). Throughout, I raise ethical questions regarding my role in interpreting both his experiences and my relationship with him and Ms. Esperanza (Ellis, 2007). I make my reflexivity transparent and trouble my own “position in the web of reality...and the ways [it] shape[s] the production and interpretation of knowledge” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012, p. 21). In so doing, I trouble two events in JanCarlos’ school life, as well as my position as researcher.

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Chapter 2: “Just Like Me:”

How Immigrant English Language Learners Experience a Rural High School

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Abstract

Using a qualitative bricolage approach (Kincheloe, n.d., 2008), this study explores the everyday school life of immigrant students enrolled in an Advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a high school in southwest Virginia. The overarching objective of this study is to examine how these students—five from Mexico, three from Honduras, and one from China—experience school. By using figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) and positioning theory (Davies, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as analytical frameworks, I present how the students rely on their positions as English language learners in an ESL program, on the ESL faculty, and on one another to co-construct a variety of practices that create opportunities for agency in the school space. I describe how they co-construct a world, vis-à-vis their everyday practices, in and through which, they navigate the institution, meet academic needs, and establish networks of care. I also examine the “dissonant threads”—elements of data that resist perfect codification—to deepen analysis and to portray a complex portrait of ESL II (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

*Keywords:* immigrant students, experiences in schools, figured worlds, positioning theory, ESL/ELL

*When the bell rings to announce the end of lunch, the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom erupts with activity. Ilyn, Genesis, and JanCarlos<sup>5</sup>, jump up and throw away their cafeteria-issued styrofoam lunch containers. They eat daily in the ESL classroom where they brush crumbs off the table and go out in the hall to chat with friends before the second bell rings to announce the start of class. The other students leave the cafeteria and begin to arrive in the ESL classroom. Chuy and Jackie Chan plop down on the second-hand sofa that sits along the maroon cement wall. Chuy's routine question, "What are we going to do today, Ms. Esperanza?" is followed by Jackie Chan's half-moaning, half-laughing, "That's too much!" to Ms. Esperanza's reply, regardless of actual amount of work described. While they relax on the sofa, Audelio enters the room. He goes to the back of the room and fiddles with papers on Ms. Esperanza's desk, quietly talking to her while she gathers materials for class. Adriana and Diana enter, gently lay binders and well cared for imitation designer purses on their table, and continue their conversation in hushed Spanish. Venus shouts last minute comments in Spanglish—a mix of English and Spanish—to friends in the hallway as she breezes in just before the bell. She places her binder on the back table where Ilyn, Genesis, and JanCarlos join her as the bell rings. Jackie Chan, Audelio, and Chuy gather at their table and the ESL II class begins.*

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, I examine the school experiences of nine immigrant English language learners in ESL II, an advanced English as a Second Language class in a high school in River Town, Virginia. The class, represented in the opening vignette, consists of five students from Mexico, three from Honduras, and one from China. In this paper, I address how the students interact with one another and faculty, and I examine how they handle academic, social, and institutional challenges. In so doing, I illustrate how students demonstrate success and agency in the ways that they navigate the institution, address academic needs, and establish caring relationships. In so doing, I move beyond reductionist explanations that occur when we reduce student learning to test scores and refer to non-Standard English use or diverse home cultures as causal indicators of school success or failure (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kincheloe, n.d.; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009). I

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<sup>5</sup> All place and participant names are pseudonyms. Students chose their own pseudonyms.

center my inquiry on students' practices to examine how they experience school through their interactions, student positions, and relationships (Davies, 2000; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

### **Theory and Methods**

#### **Figured Worlds and Positioning Theory**

As I analyze students' school experiences, I use positioning theory to examine how the students position themselves in the context of the school (Davies, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). I rely on figured worlds to investigate the ways that students develop their positions and identities in the school space through their everyday actions (Holland et al., 1998). Positioning theory examines how an individual may "position oneself" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 16) as, say, a powerful protagonist in a story, as well as "take up a position" (p. 16) that reflects an archetypal social subject, such as an ESL student. Positioning encompasses acts of agency when in taking up positions individuals "become aware of [their] insertion into a context of decision, choice, and intervention" (Freire, 1998, p. 73).

Figured worlds is a theory that examines how individuals create their identities and agency through every day actions (Holland et al., 1998). By adding the lens of figured worlds to positionality, I demonstrate that a person's actions as an individual or member of a group take place in a particular context, which is always connected and related to "positions of possible activity" (Holland et al., p. 44). Figured worlds hold the premise that "identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5). Individuals construct who they are through individual and collective activities in a variety of cultural contexts. Thus, individuals are subjects in specific contexts that hold certain expectations, even scripts, for action(s) and personhood. Yet they are also agents capable of changing contexts and culturally prescribed scripts through their actions. Participation in figured worlds provides the opportunity for individuals to take up, resist, renegotiate, or improvise identity positions (Holland et al., 2001; Urietta, 2007). In this way, individuals are both subjects and makers of history (Freire, 1998) as they "figure" out who they are through actions and relations with others in the same context (Holland et al., 2001; Urietta, 2007). Individuals enact agency through everyday decisions and acts as they "rework" and "replay" their positions in their own terms and in their own ways (Giroux, 2011, p. 71). Agency, then, refers to the ways that students take control of their own lives through their positioning, actions, and interactions.

### **Methods: A Bricolage Approach**

I use a bricolage approach, which allows me to draw upon multiple theoretical and methodological frameworks (Kincheloe, n.d., 2008). In addition to positionality and figured worlds, I rely on ethnographic methods, portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 & 1994). I generated data across 44 non-consecutive school days, averaging five to seven hours each day I visited the school. Data sources include audio-recorded and transcribed interviews;<sup>6</sup> student constructed narrative artifacts, such as poems, maps, and comic strips; and ethnographic fieldnotes. Informal conversations with students, faculty, and administration also provide data.

I made meaning of the data by performing cross-case analysis of interviews, fieldnotes, and narrative artifacts (Mayan, 2009). I coded, categorized, and synthesized themes in the data (Mayan, 2009). Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) shapes the representation of data as I portray a portrait of ESL II: a narrative that illuminates the themes and the “dissonant threads” that emerge from the data pattern. Dissonant threads are data that resist perfect codification. Dissonant threads “lend clarifying contrast to the coherence of . . . interpretation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 233). Dissonant threads deepen analysis by recognizing and further examining themes that emerge from the data pattern. By writing as mode of inquiry, I further hone interpretations (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Even descriptions of context—the high school and participants—are embedded with interpretations that foreshadow, refract, and enrich analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

**Context. High school.** The high school is situated in River Town, Virginia, a community of approximately 7,000 inhabitants. Within two decades, the Spanish-speaking Latino population of River Town grew from less than one percent to 14%. African Americans make up six percent of the population and whites equal 78% of the population. American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and those self-identifying as two or more races comprise two percent of the population (census.gov). Student demographics reflect those of the River Town community. The majority of the faculty at the high school is white.

The high school houses 470 students. School curriculum offers academic as well as career and technical education. Much of the instructional time focuses on the Virginia Standards

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<sup>6</sup> I interviewed eight of the nine students twice. I only interviewed Venus one time. Herein I cite the language used in the interview, providing translations when necessary.

## JUST LIKE ME

of Learning (SOL), standardized end-of-year evaluations of core content subjects (e.g., math, science, social studies, and English). The tests provide evidence for state and federally mandated accreditation measures. Courses associated with SOL tests carry verified credits; in other words, students must pass assessments designed by teachers and the SOL tests in order to fulfill graduation requirements. According to the program of study for the high school, a student pursuing a standard diploma must attain six verified credits: two English, one science, one math, one history/social science, and one student's choice. All of the students in ESL II pursue a standard diploma. Teachers devote class time, study halls, and even Saturday schools to SOL test preparation. Since 2005, the school has achieved annual state accreditation by meeting the required passing rates on SOL tests.

The state identifies 80 of the 470 students as Limited English Proficient (LEP) due to performance on the annual Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) proficiency assessment. Administered by the ESL teacher, the ACCESS test determines English proficiency levels, which help determine the accommodations English language learners receive on SOL tests, such as the use of bilingual dictionaries. Proficiency levels also determine which students benefit from explicit ESL instruction. 20 students make up the following daily ESL classes: Alternative English I (ESL 1), Alternative English II (ESL II), and ESL Math. One teacher, Ms. Esperanza, provides ESL instruction for the middle and high schools. One instructional aide, Ms. Rodriguez, assists with ESL instruction at the high school.

***ESL II students.*** ESL II convenes daily during fifth period. The students share the same lunch period, which takes place immediately before class. Here I present brief portraits of the nine students in ESL II.<sup>7</sup>

**Adriana:** An eleventh grader from Mexico, Adriana enrolled in River Town Schools in sixth grade. She primarily talks with her best friend, Diana, yet occasionally makes witty and pointed remarks to classmates' comments. Unison "ohhhs" always resound in reply. She and her *esposo* [husband],<sup>8</sup> Isaac, share a trailer with their 16-month-old daughter, Nuria. Adriana adorns her

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<sup>7</sup> After explaining pseudonyms, I passed a sheet of paper around the room. I asked students to write down the pseudonym they wanted me to use throughout the study. I maintain students spelling of names. Ilyn, a female Spanish-speaker, spelled her name as I write it here, yet pronounced the name like the English name, Eileen or the Spanish name, Ailín. JanCarlos, a male Spanish-speaker, also provided his own spelling and pronounced the J with a soft "ssh" sound, which is more reflective of a Portuguese pronunciation than a Spanish one.

<sup>8</sup> Students use terms indicating marriage even in the absence of an official civil or religious union. A male partner with whom one lives is called an "esposo" [spouse]. His mother is called a "suegra" [mother-in-law]. I use these terms to maintain students' language and self-identification(s).

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binder with Nuria's baptismal pictures. She exudes confidence as she frequently volunteers to read or answer questions during class discussions.

**Audelio:** An eleventh grader from Mexico, Audelio also enrolled in sixth grade. Some days he works diligently; other days he lays his head down on the desk and doodles graffiti-style on his schoolwork, binder, or arms. He is generally jovial and affable with his classmates. He shares a table with Jackie Chan and Chuy where they work together on assignments and talk. Proud of being a wrestler and soccer player, he says that he works hard with his teammates "*para llegar a una meta que siempre queremos llegar*" [to reach a goal that we want to reach].<sup>9</sup>

**Chuy:** A ninth grader, Chuy emigrated from Mexico and enrolled in River Town Schools in fifth grade. Chuy likes to be first. Regularly arriving early to class, he completes assignments quickly, announcing, "Finished!" In his attempt to get a task done, he demands teacher direction: "What do you want me to write here?" He jokes frequently with his classmates. His sister, Diana, is an ESL II classmate.

**Diana:** Enrolling in seventh grade after moving to River Town from Mexico, Diana is in eleventh grade. Noticeably shy, she speaks in a whisper and averts her eyes whenever Ms. Esperanza asks for volunteers during class discussions. Like Adriana, she balances caring for her 11-month-old son, Christopher, and schoolwork. She and Christopher live with her *esposo* [husband] and his family, which includes JanCarlos, her spouse's younger brother and her ESL II classmate.

**Genesis:** Now in tenth grade, Genesis enrolled in River Town schools in third grade after emigrating from Honduras. Genesis is soft-spoken, yet gregarious. Always in-the-know about school gossip, she shares updates about who dates whom, who threatens to fight so-and-so, who is suspended from school, and so on. She even asks/informs Ms. Esperanza about school news: "Is it true that....?" or "I heard...." She freely participates in class and makes analytical comments during lessons.

**Ilyn:** A tenth grader from Honduras, Ilyn enrolled in fifth grade. Huddled at her shared table with Ilyn, Venus, and JanCarlos, she whispers and giggles about school, community, and family events. She shares a family-like connection with JanCarlos and Diana. Ilyn's mother lives with

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout this paper, I maintain students' grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary usage in citations. I also maintain the language (e.g. English or Spanish) used by the students in conversations and interviews. The Spanish-speaking students have had little opportunity to formally study Spanish in schools. Furthermore, as they increasingly learn and use English, they often form Spanish sentences using English syntax and/or direct translations.

JanCarlos' older brother, Humberto. Ilyn lives with her mother and Humberto in a trailer next to JanCarlos' family where Diana lives. JanCarlos affectionately calls Ilyn his *sobrina* [niece].

**Jackie Chan:** The only non-Spanish speaking student, Jackie Chan is a tenth grader from China. He enrolled in fourth grade. Jovial and extroverted, he shares school gossip and is a member of the soccer team. Jackie Chan peppers his speech with Spanish. He enters and leaves the ESL classroom with *hola* and *adios*, and jokingly tells his classmates to *cállate* [shut up] and *no mames*, a crude colloquialism used by many of the Spanish-speaking students.<sup>10</sup> His parents own a Chinese restaurant. He voluntarily attends Saturday school during SOL preparation to get out of working at the restaurant.

**JanCarlos:** A repeating ninth grader from Honduras, JanCarlos enrolled in fourth grade. He is uncle to Adriana's son and his older brother lives with Ilyn's mom. JanCarlos sometimes eagerly participates in class discussions, but he often lays his head down on the table and sleeps. He sits and talks primarily with Ilyn, Genesis, and Venus. They share a love of reggaeton, a form of dance music that fuses Caribbean rhythms, hiphop, and rap. Genesis, Ilyn, and JanCarlos routinely share earbuds to listen to the newest music while they work on class assignments.

**Venus:** A ninth grader from Mexico, Venus enrolled mid-year in Kindergarten. She is the middle of nine children attending River Town Schools. She competes with Chuy to be the first to answer during teacher-directed class discussions. Never too shy to insist on a clearer explanation, she asks, "What do you mean?" until the task is clear. She routinely wears an earbud in only one ear to quietly listen to music while she works. She discretely hides the cord behind her long dark hair. Unlike her classmates who are often reprimanded for breaking the "no-Ipods-in-class" school-wide rule, Venus avoids reproach. A proud member of the girls' soccer team, she exudes energy. She sits with Ilyn, JanCarlos, and Genesis, and chats with all of her classmates.

**ESL teacher.** A white River Town native and self-proclaimed advocate for immigrant students, Ms. Esperanza<sup>11</sup> is fluent in Spanish, holds a professional teaching license in K-12 ESL, and has a Master of Arts in Reading and Literacy. The first ESL teacher in the school division, she has developed the ESL curriculum/program at the middle and high schools

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<sup>10</sup> *No mames* has a variety of English translations, depending on the context and tone. "Don't screw with me" and "Don't kid with me" are English colloquial equivalents. Said in a more jovial tone, it can mean, "No fooling?"

<sup>11</sup> During the ESL teacher's absence, I held a class discussion with students to select a pseudonym for her. One student, Adriana, suggested Ms. Esperanza. All of the students enthusiastically agreed on that name. Therefore, though she is a white, non-native Spanish-speaker, her pseudonym reflects a Spanish-speaking name. I refer to her as Ms. Esperanza, rather than by her first name, to represent her teacher position.

throughout the ten years she has served as teacher. Her relationship with students and their families extends beyond school day hours and even beyond the school itself. She routinely provides translation and interpretation services for her students' families. She teaches many of their mothers, older siblings, and other extended family members in her adult English and Spanish GED classes held on Tuesday and Thursday nights in her classroom. She visits families in their homes to discuss school issues, and she provides home-bound teaching services for students on maternity or sick leave. Families regularly invite her to special events like *la fiesta de quince años*<sup>12</sup> and baptisms.

Ms. Esperanza is one of three Spanish speakers in the building, though she is among the most fluent in both English and Spanish. Consistently called upon to interpret in the administrative offices, she makes phone calls to Spanish-speaking parents/guardians to inquire about the whereabouts of an absent student. She also informs parents/guardians of a pending disciplinary action and asks about missing documents required by the school. In addition, she requests a parent/guardian's presence at the school. Depending on the nature of the event, these interpretation interludes range from several minutes to an entire class period or more. She is called upon to interpret almost daily with some days requiring her to leave her classroom more than once.

**ESL instructional aide.** Ms. Rodriguez, the ESL instructional aide, supports Ms. Esperanza as she designs course curricula, performs the ACCESS assessments, and interprets for Spanish-speaking ESL students. She has worked as an instructional aide at the high school for seven years. She is a wage employee with no benefits and no formal ESL training. Her daily tasks include accompanying individuals or small groups of Spanish-speaking ESL I and II students to core content classes. She also assists Ms. Esperanza in the ESL classroom, especially during ESL I and ESL Math. Most mornings she accompanies Audelio, Diana, and Adriana to their shared eleventh grade (non-ESL) English class.

Ms. Rodriguez moved to River Town when her husband, an ordained Baptist minister, accepted a pastoral position for the Spanish-speaking congregation at the River Town Baptist Church. She and her husband are originally from Costa Rica, but lived in Texas for many years before moving to River Town. Her position as wife of a minister affords her a leadership role

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<sup>12</sup> *La fiesta de quince años* is a fifteenth birthday party celebrated in Spanish-speaking Central and Latin America. The party is held in honor of a girl turning fifteen. It tends to be an elaborate event with a formal dinner, entertainment, and public presentation of the guest of honor.

among many in the River Town Spanish-speaking community, and she goes about her tasks at the school with a sort of missionary zeal. She tells students that God loves them and leaves the results of tests or athletic games in God's hands by adding "*si Dios quiere*" [God willing] at the end of such conversations. She frequently hugs students, affectionately calling the boys "*papi*" and the girls "*mami*." She speaks almost exclusively in Spanish with the students and Ms. Esperanza.

### **A Portrait of a Classroom Figured World: Analysis & Discussion**

Diana describes the ESL classroom as a space where "*siempre pasamos divertido*" [we always have a good time]. What is it about this space that leads her to describe it in this way? How do they use this space? How do the students interact with one another, with Ms. Esperanza, and with Ms. Rodriguez? Throughout my time in the school, the ESL classroom served as a locus of ESL II students' activities. Transcending the fifth period spatial framework of the class itself, students came and went throughout the day for a variety of purposes and activities. In this space, students interacted and problem-solved. In so doing, they created identities that reproduced their positions as English language learning students with learning and social needs. At the same time they created agency as they constructed their own safe havens and power within the institutional space of school (Holland, et al., 1998). Thus, the ESL classroom space is a figured world—a site of agentive identity production where students position themselves and relate to one another through a realm of activities, "social encounters," and practices (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). The ESL II students leverage the ESL classroom space, ESL faculty, and their positions as English language learners to navigate the institutional terrain, meet academic needs, and establish networks of care.

### **Navigating the Institutional Terrain**

**Early navigations: Feelings of isolation.** The students in ESL II entered the River Town school system at different times in their school careers. Some enrolled in elementary school and others in middle school, but they all share how difficult it was to get along in those early days:

**Chuy:** I didn't understand nobody. Talking a different language I don't know.

**Adriana:** *Me sentía muy nerviosa, en veces hasta quería llorar porque yo me sentía mal en la escuela. Miraba a otros y todos hablan inglés casi y así llegaba a mi casa en meses triste porque no sabía.* [I was very nervous, sometimes to the point of wanting to cry

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because I felt bad at school. I looked at other people and almost everyone is speaking English. Then I came home sad for months because I didn't know [English].]

**Diana:** *Para mí era difícil porque no tenía amigos. Yo no entendía nada tampoco.* [It was very difficult for me because I didn't have friends. I didn't understand anything either.]

**Genesis:** It was terrible because I didn't know nothing about anything. I didn't know any English or didn't have any friends. Nothing.

**Ilyn:** *Estaba como asustada porque no entendía lo que me decían las maestras y no sabía adonde ir siempre me perdía.* [I was like scared because I didn't understand what the teachers were saying, and I didn't know where to go; I kept getting lost].

**Audelio:** *Fue muy duro.* [It was very hard].

The difficulties of English comprehension, anxiety over the physical environment, and lack of friends coalesced to create unsettling experiences for these students as newcomers. They had not yet created networks and relationships that would help them navigate school.

Upon enrollment, the school system immediately placed them in ESL programs. They reflect on how the elementary school ESL teacher or Ms. Esperanza met them in the office on the first day to help them. Audelio, Adriana, Diana, and Ilyn, for instance, share that Ms. Esperanza interpreted for them and helped them get settled in the middle school. Ms. Esperanza explained institutional practices foreign to them in Spanish, such as locker use, assignment of lunch and class schedules, dressing out for gym classes, and so on. Adriana sums up their recollections: “*Me dijo que iba a estar bien, que me iba a ayudar.*” [She told me that everything was going to be ok, that she was going to help me.]

**Early navigations: Finding someone “just like me.”** Students soon dealt with the difficulties of life in a new environment by connecting with other English language learners, which began to ease the anxiety and fear they had experienced. After several months, Diana met Adriana who had been at the school since the previous year. For both, their meeting signaled a positive change since they were able to support one another as friends and co-navigate the school system together. “*Después conocí a Adriana y nos hicimos amigas y ya fui entendiendo cómo iban las clases, como entender a los maestros y lo que hacían. Nos ayudábamos entre las dos.*” [After a while, I met Adriana and we became friends and then I began to understand what the classes were all about, how to understand what the teachers said and did. We helped each other.] Adriana likewise cites Diana as her support system. “*Diana siempre, con ella siempre he estado,*

## JUST LIKE ME

*ella siempre. Cuando llegó ella, este, cuando estaba en el siete y ya, y... ya después ya empezó a cambiar mi vida.*” [Diana always, I have been with her forever. When she arrived, you know, I was in seventh grade and then after that my life began to change.] Genesis also cites her Spanish-speaking friends as the reason for having better experiences at school.

Some students used family and community connections to network with other English language learners in order to ease the entry into the school space on the first day of school. Ilyn shares how she used family connections: “*El primer día fui a la oficina con una amiga, ella sabía inglés y ella me ayudó. La mamá de ella es amiga de mi mamá.*” [On the first day I went to the office with a friend, she knew English and she helped me. Her mom is a friend of my mom.] Jackie Chan was also able to use his parents’ community connections to pair up with a former Chinese student. He describes how the partnership helped him:

So I made a friend over there. Somebody got to help you with anything new, you know what I’m saying? *Just like me*, so like friends you know what I’m saying? Having a friend over here, that’s a lucky thing. I was kind of lucky over here the first time (emphasis mine).

Partnering with someone “just like me” is significant because it demonstrates how aware students were (and are) of their cultural and linguistic differences within the school space. Building relationships with other English language learners provided the opportunity for students to enter into the school’s social and institutional context as English language learners. Through these interactions, they learned the practices and strategies necessary to be a successful student at the school. Thus, as newcomers, they engaged in the “recruitment to and personalization of the figured world” (Holland et al, 1998, p. 121) of English language learners. Ilyn articulates this activity when she states, “*Siempre me juntaba con niñas que sabían inglés y español y ellas me ayudaban.*” [I always hung around with girls that knew English and Spanish and they helped me.] The girls to whom she refers were not newcomers. The girls had already spent several years in the River Town school system and the ESL program. Therefore, they had attained a level of bilingualism and had established an institutional history in the school. Adriana and Venus also describe developing friendships with Spanish speaking girls with similar institutional histories. Adriana says, “*Las niñas que hablaban español, ellas me ayudaban mucho.*” [The Spanish-speaking girls helped me a lot.] Venus says, “I wanted to talk about school ‘cause I didn’t understand anything or what to do. I asked a girl that knew how to speak Spanish and English. I

asked her how to say some words.” These girls shared their knowledge of English and school practices with Ilyn, Adriana, and Venus. In so doing, they benefited from the girls’ perspectives and histories as English language learners in a predominantly English speaking school setting.

Similarly, Ilyn, Jackie Chan, Adriana, Diana, Genesis, and others immediately positioned themselves within a specific “racial map” (Olsen, 2008, p. 107). Olsen writes, “[A]s newcomers become aware that fluency in English is not the only requirement for being accepted in their new land, they experience pressures to locate themselves on the “racial map”....For immigrants encountering this system, the question becomes, where do I fit?” (p. 107). Newly arrived immigrants routinely seek assistance from others of their country of origin for language translation, emotional support, information on school practices, and help in school orientation (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Ms. Rodriguez succinctly describes how students position themselves among other English language learners: “*Ellos buscan la colonia de ellos.*” [They search for others like themselves.] Searching for others like themselves creates community and belonging, which is so important to Latino student’s success in school (Sánchez, Colón, & Esparza, 2005).

**Institutional positioning: ESL & the tricky nature of cultural forms.** For these ESL II students, the racial ESL map in which they were positioned as newcomers, and continue to be positioned as veteran students, enables them to identify themselves with other English language learners for social and institutional support. The ESL II students in those first days of school at River Town were recruited (Holland et. al, 1998) into the position of English language learners in an English language dominant school setting, and they “figure[d] out who they [were] in relation to those around them” (Urrieta, 2007, p. 120). The students have “develop[ed] through and around the cultural forms by which they are identified” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 33). The school system, indeed, the state with its standardized language proficiency assessments, placed them within the institutional ESL/LEP cultural form.

However, though the students identify with others for whom English is not the first language, they do not use ESL/LEP nomenclature to describe themselves. Of all the students, only Genesis knew the significance of the ESL acronym. Chuy, aware that the E stood for English, did not know what the other letters represented. Diana laughed saying, “*siempre me he preguntado qué significa*” [I have always wondered what it meant]. Ilyn, Adriana, and Venus remembered seeing it on their class schedules at the beginning of each year, and JanCarlos had

noticed the term in “Ms. Esperanza’s room.” Jackie Chan recalled hearing the term from “some college student,” a friend of his cousin. However, all of the students know that the term has something to do with what Ms. Esperanza teaches, though they simply call it “Ms. Esperanza’s class” or “English with Ms. Esperanza.” The students do not use the institutional cultural form (e.g., ESL, LEP) to refer to themselves or the courses that they take. However, the institution positions them as such, which influences who they are, how they behave, and how they leverage their positions as students in “Ms. Esperanza’s class” within the institutional sphere.

Their placement in Ms. Esperanza’s class influences how students collectively create experiences and subjectivities, which in turn shapes who they are within the institutional sphere (Rowan, Knobel, Bigham & Lankshear, 2001). Their “[English language learner]” subjectivity...is made possible because as ‘[English language learners]’ they are spoken into existence through the same collective set of images, metaphors, and storylines as other [English language learners],” (Davies, 2000, p. 75). The students are positioned as English language learners through institutional discourses/cultural forms. Through their actions and interactions, they reproduce, resist, and/or redefine those positions (Davies, 2000; Freire, 1998; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Holland et al, 1998).

**Present day navigations: Continuation of peer networks.** Students’ self-positioning and co-development with other English language learners is not limited to their first days in the school system. Even after multiple years in the school system, these students mostly associate with other English language learners, which is typical of first-generation immigrants, especially among those from the same country-of-origin (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). A shared language, as in the case of eight of the nine students, also contributes to the strength and maintenance of a social peer network within the institution (Feng, Foo, Krestschmer, Prendeville, & Elgas, 2004). JanCarlos exemplifies the bounded nature of his network when he says, “I don’t talk to white kids that much.” Ilyn and Genesis eat lunch daily with JanCarlos and meet up with one another before and after classes. They “*textear*” [text] during classes and use each other’s lockers interchangeably. Adriana and Diana eat lunch together with two Spanish-speaking girls from the ESL I class. They sit and work together in other classes. Audelio and Venus spend a lot of time with soccer teammates, almost all Spanish-speaking. Chuy spends time with other Spanish-speaking students, stating, “I talk Spanish with my friends.” Finally, Jackie Chan sits with Audelio, Chuy, and other English language learners

in the cafeteria. He says, “I sit with Audelio or some sort of other friend. He’s a Mexican.” Significantly, when the students selected a pseudonym for the high school, they collectively chose “New International High School.” Though they hold a minority position in the school, they subvert that minority status by choosing a name that celebrates their own international positions. In this naming, they demonstrate agency and collectively construct identities in relation to other immigrant English language learners (Holland et al., 1998; Kim & Lee, 2011).

**Ms. Esperanza: Relying on ESL faculty to navigate the institution.** In addition to co-navigating the institution in peer networks, they also rely on Ms. Esperanza to navigate and address institutional policies and procedures. Students often circumvent the administrative offices by going to Ms. Esperanza. For instance, one morning about ten minutes before first period, Audelio realized that he had left his wrestling uniform, needed for the team picture, at home. Though school had not yet started, he was already on school property and needed school and parental permission to leave. Rather than going to the main office to call his mom, he asked Ms. Esperanza if he could drive home to get the uniform and whether she would write him an excused tardy note for first period upon his return. He told her that his mom was at work and said, “*Sabes que no la puedo hablar.*” [You know that I can’t call her.] Ms. Esperanza gave him permission: “Drive slow and be careful!” Thirty minutes later he returned with the uniform in hand and she wrote him an excused late note. The main office was never informed of the event. On another occasion, Diana also navigated school policy by going to Ms. Esperanza’s room rather than the main office in order to go home early. Though school rules require students to turn off cell phones during school hours, Diana had received a text from her mother-in-law, Leti, during third period telling her that she needed to come home because Diana’s toddler was sick. Leti told Diana to wait outside for a family member to pick her up. However, checking out per school policy required Leti, Diana’s official guardian, to inform the office before Diana would be allowed to leave the premises. Leti herself had circumvented the call to the main office, yet Diana knew that she could not simply leave the school. She explained the situation to Ms. Esperanza in Spanish, after which Ms. Esperanza told her to go to the main office, tell the secretary that she had to go home to care for her sick son, and that Diana had talked to her, Ms. Esperanza, about it. Diana went to the office and successfully checked out.

These two events illustrate how the ESL II students often use their positions as English language learners, and Ms. Esperanza’s position as ESL teacher, to navigate, if not totally

circumvent, school policies and procedures. Both Audelio and Diana position Ms. Esperanza, not the main office, as the authority figure in these situations. Both rely on Ms. Esperanza's understanding and knowledge of family contexts to serve as the basis for their actions. Audelio trusted in Ms. Esperanza's knowledge that his mother's factory boss would not be forgiving of her being called from the factory floor for a phone call, as evidenced by his use of *sabes* [you know]. Using *sabes*, the informal second person conjugation of the verb "to know," with an authority figure implies a level of intimacy and familiarity, as well as refers to her pre-existing knowledge about his family situation. Diana's explanation to Ms. Esperanza demonstrated faith that she would believe the sincerity of her story. Diana did not need to explain that the mother-in-law, Leti, had limited English ability, and perhaps limited knowledge of school policy to make the call to the school. The absence of that detail in her story illustrates the intimate knowledge that Ms. Esperanza has of the students' lives, and Diana's confidence in that knowledge. Nor does she fear reproach for having her cell phone turned on during school hours. Furthermore, Diana implicitly relied on Ms. Esperanza's own relationship with Leti, a student in her adult English class, to legitimate the request. Finally, Diana's ability to rely on Spanish with Ms. Esperanza demonstrates a linguistic coping strategy. In the main office, she would have been required to orally narrate a complicated story to personnel, a difficult task for Diana. She speaks much more Spanish than English throughout the day. Whenever she speaks in English in class or with faculty, her round cheeks turn bright red. In this way, Diana takes up a particular relational identity regarding with whom she feels comfortable, competent, and entitled to speak (Holland et al., 1998). Thus, embedded in all of these actions are the positions and histories that Audelio and Diana share with Ms. Esperanza as English language learners in the ESL program (Holland et al., 1998). Furthermore, these interactions co-construct teacher-student relationships based in *confianza*—the "mutual trust [that] develops when interactions in the classroom make students feel comfortable, valued, and trustworthy" (Salazar & Fránquiz, 2008, p. 186). Diana and Audelio demonstrated *confianza* in Ms. Esperanza by making their requests. She, in turn, demonstrated *confianza* in them by trusting the veracity of their stories. Ms. Esperanza also performs as an "advocate educator" by helping the student navigate institutional practices by supporting their decision to circumvent the office in these instances (Salinas & Reyes, 2004).

***Institutional positioning of Ms. Esperanza: A resource for students.*** Even if unknowingly, Audelio and Diana leverage the school's positioning of Ms. Esperanza. Students

know that Ms. Esperanza interprets for Spanish-speaking English language learners, especially since she is called down to the office so frequently during ESL II. Upon her return, students ask, “What happened?”; “Was it about *Fulana de tal?*” [What’s her name?] These questions indicate tacit knowledge that Ms. Esperanza assists with administrative issues concerning English language learners. Tacit knowledge is made explicit by Mr. Foster, the principal, who says that he delegates much of the decision-making related to ESL students to Ms. Esperanza. He says, “Quite honestly and frankly, she knows more about the day to day operations up there than I’m able to know.” Faculty also position Ms. Esperanza as authority figure and mediator of institutional practice for ESL students. Mr. Ingles, the eleventh grade English teacher, confers with Ms. Esperanza whenever he has a concern about an English language learner. He says, “I go to Esperanza. I pretty much have since she first got here and I found out her job was liaison.” The fact that he describes her position as liaison highlights how faculty position her as mediator of institutional information between themselves and English language learners. Ms. Esperanza matter-of-factly describes how administration and faculty rely on her to help address issues related to English language learners: “If they’re brown, they send them to me.”

Thus, by coming to her for assistance, Audelio, Diana, and others acknowledge that Ms. Esperanza is an authority figure in the building, at least in regard to English language learners. They know that a late note for first period from Ms. Esperanza or her acceptance of a story about a sick baby gets things done. Through these interactions, Audelio and Diana do the work of developing their student positions at the same time that these interactions construct their figured world at the school (Holland et al., 1998). By going to Ms. Esperanza to deal with these issues, they reproduce their positions and identities as English language learners who need support from an advocate and mediator, yet they simultaneously demonstrate agency by using Ms. Esperanza’s institutional position and her intimate knowledge of their lives to serve their needs (Holland et al., 1998).

### **Addressing Academic Needs**

The students rely on ESL faculty and their own positions as English language learners to address academic needs, such as preparing for SOL tests, studying for quizzes and tests, and completing homework and projects for core content classes. Indeed, relying on ESL faculty for academic support aligns with the purpose of ESL II. According to the program of study, the course objective is to “continue to instruct English Language Learners in the English language.

Greater emphasis is placed on reading and writing skills. Also content area classes are closely monitored and content area instruction is scaffolded and reinforced” (2011, p. 34). Fulfilling the school’s charge to promote reading and writing literacy, Ms. Esperanza incorporates multicultural literature in the ESL II curriculum. For example, the students completed a unit on *Jesse* by Gary Soto, a coming of age novel about a Mexican-American boy. Although tasks progress from simple comprehension to higher-level analysis, a significant amount of time is spent on vocabulary defining and sentence writing. She credits the pressure of SOL preparation and testing:

I really hate making them look up words in the dictionary. They hate it and complain about it, and I know that it isn’t the best way. But, it is an SOL skill. They can use those exact [Spanish-English] dictionaries [during the SOL tests] and they get Teflon brain; they’ll forget how to use the dictionary if we don’t practice it.

SOL tests are a persistent theme in the class. Among others, students must pass two English SOL exams— reading and writing—in order to graduate. Thus, reminders about the importance of building vocabulary, writing complete and descriptive sentences, and understanding how to use a dictionary are common refrains. Most Fridays, too, are unstructured days in which students can work on individual core content assignments with Ms. Esperanza’s assistance. When students do not have individual assignments to complete, they are allowed to play educational games like *Scrabble*, word searches, and crossword puzzles as classmates complete assignments.

**Reworking course structure to meet academic needs.** While students are granted the opportunity to prepare for SOL tests and work on core content subject assignments at various times during ESL II, significance lies in the ways that students use the ESL classroom and faculty, as well as their positions as English language learners outside of the ESL II fifth period framework to address their academic needs. In order to visit Ms. Esperanza’s class at other times of the day, students depend on their ESL/LEP status and teachers’ notions of what being labeled as such means within the school (Holland et al., 1998). Jackie Chan sums up why teachers allow him to go to Ms. Esperanza’s room whenever he asks: “They say yes. Because I’m a Chinese kid, you know? They know that second language very hard. Ms. Esperanza can help you for that.” The students confirm that it is easy to get permission to go to Ms. Esperanza’s room throughout the day. Chuy says, “They [teachers] say, like, bring me a paper that says her name and I sign it and you can go.” Ilyn adds, “*En general, sólo hay que pedirles.* [In general, all you

have to do is ask them.] By virtue of being linguistically and ethnically diverse (e.g., a “Chinese kid”) teachers are lenient about ESL II students leaving class to work in the ESL classroom. Adriana describes how her seventh period art teacher allows Diana and her to go to the ESL classroom for assistance:

*Ella miraba cómo nosotras estábamos pues, nosotras solas haciendo tarea. Acabamos de dibujar lo que hacíamos en la clase y sacábamos nuestros libros o le pedíamos permiso para hacer un trabajo. Me dijo que lo podía agarrar como la clase de tareas y me da permiso de ir para ella.* [She saw that we were alone doing homework after we finished drawing in art class. We would take out our books or ask her permission to work on other assignments. She told me that I could use it (art class) like a study hall, and she gives me permission to go to her (Ms. Esperanza).]

The ESL classroom buzzes with activity during sixth and seventh periods as ESL II students come and go to get help from Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez. Knowing that Ms. Esperanza teaches high school ESL 1 during sixth period and ESL Math during seventh period, the students overwhelmingly choose these two periods for getting extra assistance.<sup>13</sup> Ms. Esperanza occasionally laments the students’ use of the ESL classroom during her afternoon classes, yet acknowledges the importance of responding to students’ needs during these periods. Pointing to well-organized lesson plan binders on her desk, she says:

I have lessons for math that I’m not using. This isn’t math. And, I’m not teaching English either. This is homework help. But, what else can I do? There’s a lot of pressure for them to pass the SOLs. You’ve seen it; they can’t do this stuff on their own without our help. Ms. Rodriguez confirms Ms. Esperanza’s point. She says, “*Si ellos tuvieran que hacer ese trabajo solos, con el sistema que tenemos, no... eso sería imposible... ellos no podrían... no podrían... te digo... porque no tienen el inglés suficiente.*” [If they had to do this work on their own, with the system that we have, no...this would be impossible...they couldn’t do it, they couldn’t do it...I tell you...because they do not speak enough English.] When Ms. Rodriguez refers to “the system,” she refers primarily to SOL tests. Indeed, the pressure to pass the SOL tests is felt strongly by Adriana, Venus, and Diana. In comic strips in which the students represented one memorable negative and one memorable positive school experience, the three

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<sup>13</sup> During first, second, and third periods, Ms. Esperanza teaches middle school ESL courses where the curriculum is more structured. Though the middle school classes are held in her classroom in the high school, ESL II students rarely come to her room during the early middle school periods for help on academic work.

girls depicted scenes associated with SOL tests. Both Adriana and Diana depicted failing Science and Algebra SOL tests as the negative event. They represented passing the retake of those SOL tests as the subsequent positive event. Venus drew a scene depicting how a teacher joyously informed her about her passing score on an SOL test.

Given the pressure for students to perform well on SOL tests and in core content classes, a typical afternoon involves Ms. Rodriguez helping Adriana and Diana on projects for social studies or Mr. Ingles' English class. Ilyn and JanCarlos work on science homework with Ms. Esperanza as often as they work on math for the ESL Math course. Occasionally, their science teacher comes to Ms. Esperanza's room during his planning period to tutor Ilyn and JanCarlos one-on-one. Students come and go as upcoming tests, quizzes, or projects demand. For example, Chuy came by for several days as he studied for an upcoming English SOL practice test. Similarly, Jackie Chan came to use Ms. Esperanza's computer to work on a presentation for his Spanish class. Although Audelio says that most of his teachers sufficiently explain content to him, he goes to Ms. Esperanza whenever they cannot. He says: "*Si no le vengo a decir a Ms. Esperanza y ella nos explica.*" [If they can't, I go to Ms. Esperanza and she explains it to us.] Significantly, Venus is the only student who rarely comes to Ms. Esperanza's room for extra academic help during sixth and seventh periods. Where Audelio and others go to Ms. Esperanza for further explanation and assistance, Venus finds that too many explanations conflict and confuse. She says, "It kind of messes things up because sometimes I don't understand what she's [Ms. Esperanza's] saying. The other [core content] teacher says another thing. I just prefer doing it by myself." With Venus as exception, the students use their positions as English language learners to get academic help during sixth and seventh periods from Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez when needs arise.

**Relying on one another: Copying and translating.** Students also rely on one another for academic support, though often this support takes the form of copying work from one another. All of the students admit to copying homework assignments from one another. Yet they do differentiate between copying homework and copying tests. Genesis articulates this distinction:

A test is like what you know. Homework it's just like...just do it because is for a grade. It really don't matter. Yo, I don't cheat [on tests] *porque cuando* [because when] the SOL

comes, *no te va ayudar chitear* [*sic*] [cheating isn't going to help you], so, *que es* [what is] *el* [the] point of cheating if you're not gonna, like, do well?

The students unanimously confirm that most teachers do not scrutinize homework assignments, but rather check whether it is or is not completed. The students use this knowledge to achieve full participation on homework assignments by copying and sharing answers.

The students also help one another on academic tasks by translating directions into Spanish for one another. During ESL II, Adriana frequently translates directions into Spanish for Diana, as Chuy does for Audelio, or Venus and Genesis do for Ilyn. Though none of his classmates are able to translate tasks into Chinese for him, Jackie Chan relies on his Spanish-speaking classmates to give him answers on his Spanish homework. "Ms. Riggs [Spanish teacher] makes you translate [English sentences into Spanish], but you kind of translate with a Spanish friend that's all. It's easy." When he doesn't ask ESL II students for answers on Spanish, he asks Ms. Esperanza for help since she speaks Spanish fluently. He says, "I can ask Ms. Esperanza too."

**Maintaining an academic "opportunity narrative."** The students' actions of relying on the ESL faculty and on one another for academic help reflects the "opportunity narrative" (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007, p. 182) they tell about school. That is, they see graduating from high school as means to a better life, better job, and better pay. They all name graduating from high school as an important goal. For example, Adriana says: "*Para mí es muy importante graduarme y le estoy echando muchas ganas para poder pasar los SOLs.*" [Graduating is very important to me and I am working really hard to pass the SOLs.] She enrolls in business classes during her elective periods to fulfill her dream of becoming a secretary. Jackie Chan wants to graduate and go to college so that he can "work with computers." His dream job is designing computer games. Genesis also articulates a specific career goal: "I want to finish high school, go to college, and be a lawyer." Diana and Ilyn both see graduating from high school as the opportunity for a better life and for a job that does not require manual labor. Diana says, "*Es importante porque si tienes tu diploma, pues no tienes que escoger trabajos duros si quieres trabajar.*" [It is important because, if you have your diploma, well, you don't have to choose hard jobs if you want to work.] Ilyn echoes this sentiment: "*Quiero una vida mejor. Mi mamá trabaja en las fábricas y no quiero trabajar así.*" [I want a better life. My mom works in a factory and I don't want to work like that.] Chuy credits English language proficiency and a high

school diploma from the United States as the opportunity to find high-paying work in Mexico. He says, “My dad says we graduate here and we know English and everything so when we go to Mexico, like there’s like better jobs [for] whoever talks English like in a hotel. He said they pay good.” Even when the students do not articulate a specific career goal, they say that graduating is important to them.

The maintenance of immigrant students’ opportunity narratives depends on the academic and social support that they receive at school (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007). Given teacher’s leniency about allowing students to go to Ms. Esperanza for help at various times of the day and the ESL faculty’s position on helping them, the ESL II students receive academic support. In turn, the students demonstrate the desire to pass their classes and SOL tests by seeking out academic assistance.

**Seeking academic assistance as agency and mobility.** Overall, the ESL II students rely on one another, on the ESL faculty, and on their positions as English language learners to get support on core content subjects. In so doing, they enact agency as they achieve mobility to move about the school space by leaving other classes to go to the ESL classroom. This agency reworks the organizational structure of the ESL program when they alter Ms. Esperanza’s sixth and seventh period curriculum to meet their academic needs. In addition, they use their positions to engage in social networking at the same time that they engage in academic work. Adriana articulates the integration of socializing and completing academic work in her *Where I am From* poem (Christensen, 2000). In a line where she describes what she does with her friends, she writes, “I am from Alicia who talks to me a lot, Diana who copies homework from Alicia, Maria serious and quiet girl.” Alicia, an ESL I student in seventh period ESL Math, sits with Adriana and Diana when they leave art class to work in the ESL classroom. They complete homework, their stated reason for going to the class, but also socialize with their friend Alicia who, according to Adriana, allows Diana to copy homework. Chuy underscores how students use their ESL position to get academic help, but also how they use this position to go to Ms. Esperanza’s room to get out of boring classes, even when they do not need academic assistance. He says, “I go to Ms. Esperanza’s class sometimes to do homework or more things like if we are doing nothing in other classes.” The “more things” include stopping by for a quick hello or even staying the entire period to play a game of *Scrabble* with ESL I students. All nine students stop by at various times of the day between and during classes, even if just to wave to Ms. Esperanza,

pick up personal textbooks stored in the ESL closet, or sit on the worn sofa for several moments between classes. Here the students rework and redefine their ESL/LEP institutional positions to address academic needs in ways that grant them mobility and freedom within the school space, as well as provide opportunities to socialize with friends and Ms. Esperanza (Giroux, 2011; Holland et al., 1998).

### **Social Networks of Care**

Students use the ESL classroom, ESL faculty, and their positions as English language learners to establish caring support networks and safe havens. The student-teacher relationship is one in which students share personal problems with Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez, who in turn provide support and care. Student-teacher relationships based in “authentic caring” (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999) contribute to immigrant students’ success (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007). Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett write, “authentic caring comes about when teachers of Latino students embrace a culturally congruent definition of *educación*, one that includes not only book knowledge but interpersonal relationships” (2007, p. 181). Teacher-student relationships based in care contribute to immigrant students’ resiliency and academic achievement (Hersi, 2011). In addition, first generation immigrants tend to “see teachers as more caring and accessible” than US-born students or second and third generation immigrants do (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 9). Salazar and Fránquiz (2008) describe four key elements that are essential to Chicano/Mexicano students’ resiliency in schools: “*Respeto* [respect], *confianza* [mutual trust], *consejos* [verbal teachings], and *buen ejemplo* [exemplary model]” (p. 186). When teachers establish these elements and value students’ diverse life circumstances, students experience academic, social, and institutional support (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Salazar & Fránquiz, 2008).

**Creating *confianza*, *respeto*, *buenos ejemplos*, and *consejos*.** More than just being a good example, *buen ejemplo* means establishing “relationships with resourceful caring adults” (Salazar and Fránquiz, 2008, p. 186). Thus, the ways in which Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez assist the students in navigating the institution and meeting the demands of academic work provide a foundation for *buen ejemplo*, which is strengthened by the ways in which students share personal issues with them. *Respeto* [respect] comes about when students and teacher(s) establish a relationship based in co-constructed trust. Ms. Esperanza asserts how care—*respeto*, *buen ejemplo*, *confianza*, and *consejos*—is integrated throughout her teaching practice. She says,

## JUST LIKE ME

“When you are an ESL teacher you are a mother, a doctor, a teacher, and a bank.” “Mothering” includes setting high expectations for students’ behavior and providing assistance and advice on matters such as family conflicts and school bullying. RESPECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS is one of her classroom rules posted at the front of the classroom, to which she often refers her students. “Doctoring” occurs when students come to her for Band-aids or to take naps on the sofa in the ESL classroom when stomachaches and headaches occur. An impromptu bank emerges in the days leading up to the beginning of soccer season, as soccer players, including Venus and Audelio, buy soccer cleats with her assistance. Knowing that most of her students’ families do not have credit cards, Ms. Esperanza orders each player’s cleats on-line with her personal credit card. Students pay her in cash when the shoes arrive. She has also paid for families’ medical and utility bills. Concerned that many of her students do not have enough food to eat over the weekend, she started a Backpack Buddies program with several special education teachers. The program provides a backpack filled with food to any student who is eligible for free-and-reduced lunch and who signs up to participate. Every Friday Ms. Esperanza and the special education teachers fill backpacks with granola bars, dried fruit, microwavable soups, applesauce, and other non-perishables. After school, Ms. Esperanza lines the front wall of her classroom with approximately fifteen backpacks designated for her students. Diana, Chuy, Venus, Adriana, and JanCarlos participate in the program. They stop by on their way to the bus stop to collect their backpacks, which they return empty on Monday. Significantly, the pseudonym the students selected for Ms. Esperanza underscores the caring and resourceful relationship they share. Meaning Ms. Hope in English, the name signifies the powerful position she holds in their school lives.

Caring for students is also central to Ms. Rodriguez’s work. One way that she demonstrates her care is to find ways to implicitly work against the larger system by encouraging students and by affirming their intelligence. She candidly states that SOL tests put English language learning students at a disadvantage since they do not take different English proficiency levels into account. She says:

*La estructura gramatical de la pregunta es la misma. No es un SOL en un inglés más sencillo. No es justo. [No pueden hacerlo como] un estudiante que ha estado desde kínder aquí.”* [The grammatical structure of the question is the same. There is no SOL in

a simple English. It isn't fair. (They can't do it) like a student that has been here since kindergarten.]

Therefore, she works hard to build up students' self-esteem. She further states:

*Entonces la autoestima de ellos se afecta muchísimo y ellos entonces creen... ellos asumen que es el problema de ellos. Ellos no se dan cuenta... de que no es la culpa de ellos, es el sistema. Una estudiante siempre me lo dice: "es que soy muy burra" "... le digo: "no quiero oír esa palabra más en tu boca... por favor, no eres burra... no eres burra. [Then their self-esteem is greatly affected and they think, they assume that it's their problem. They don't realize that it isn't their fault. It's the system. One student always tells me, "I'm just stupid." I say to her, "I don't want to hear this word from your mouth again. Please, you are not stupid, you are not stupid.]*

Ms. Rodriguez, then, provides care and encouragement when she feels "*el sistema*" does not.

Both Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez provide advice and *consejos* [verbal teachings] to students. For example, one day Genesis shared her regret with Ms. Esperanza about moving out of her grandmother's trailer to live with her boyfriend. Sitting together on the couch while other students finished up vocabulary definitions, she quietly told Ms. Esperanza that she did not like living with him. No longer in school, he complained that she spent too much time away during the day. She told Ms. Esperanza that she felt lonely and that she missed her grandmother. Ms. Esperanza talked to her about the importance of making decisions that would help her stay in school and that would make her feel safe and loved. She advised her to move out. A couple of weeks later, Genesis told Ms. Esperanza that she had moved back in with her grandmother. Ms. Esperanza shared her news with me, saying, "[Genesis] whispered, 'I'm back home,' so I gave her a big hug and told her how proud I was of her and how everything was going to be great, and if she needed me to let me know."

Other examples of students seeking advice and comfort abound. For instance, Audelio came to Ms. Esperanza for advice when his girlfriend told him that she might be pregnant. For several days, he came to Ms. Esperanza before school and during lunch to share his concerns, telling her that he would get a job to support them. He later shared his relief with her upon learning that his girlfriend was not pregnant after all. JanCarlos routinely shares personal problems with Ms. Rodriguez. He said, "I feel like she's like my mom sometimes. She's like, I

think she cares about me, too, and we talk a lot about like past or I don't know, we'll talk about a lot of stuff.”

Diana and Adriana rely on one another and on Ms. Rodriguez for child rearing advice. On one occasion, Ms. Rodriguez turned to Adriana and Diana for advice. She planned to lead a discussion for young women about how to address family conflict at the River Town Baptist Church. She asked Diana and Adriana to give her ideas regarding what young women need to know about dealing with mothers-in-law. Laughing, Adriana said, “*Tengo suerte. No vivo con mi suegra. Pero, Diana, ella le puede contar mucho!*” [I’m lucky. I don’t live with my mother-in-law. But, Diana, she can tell you a whole lot!]. Laughing, they told stories about Diana’s bossy mother-in-law. Ms. Rodriguez positions Adriana and Diana as gendered traditional wives, yet experts (Davies, 2000). She legitimates their experiences as mothers and wives, albeit without a civil or religious certificate, rather than silencing those aspects of their identities that “disaccord with traditional notions” of high school identity (Cuero, 2009, p. 151). In her research on the figured worlds of Latino fifth graders, Cuero demonstrates that specific school identities, such as good student, lazy student, etc. depend on the specific context experienced within the school (e.g., classroom, teacher-student relationship). In this ESL classroom context, Diana, Adriana, and Ms. Rodriguez resist dominant school discourses that silence female sexuality and adolescent motherhood (Fine, 2009) and claim motherhood/wife identity positions. Adriana and Diana build on this position by operating within a culturally specific gender identity, yet in so doing, they demonstrate agency as they proudly claim their positions as mothers and wives. These co-constructed *consejos*, provide an education that transcends facts and figures. It constructs knowledge about how to “be *una mujer de hogar* [a woman of the home], while at the same time knowing how to *valerse por si misma* [be self-reliant]” (Villenas & Moreno, 2001, p. 673). Together they (re)create a caring network that values their experiences and identities.

**Safe haven.** For JanCarlos and Jackie Chan, caring teacher-student relationships and the ESL classroom itself provide a safe haven from bullying experiences. JanCarlos eats lunch in the ESL classroom to avoid those who torment him in the cafeteria. He says, “I don’t like getting lunch because it’s too annoying. Sometimes they just start bullying me. I don’t like that.” Ilyn and Genesis eat with him daily in the ESL classroom. Thus, for him, the ESL classroom becomes a safe haven, and Ilyn and Genesis serve as a peer support network. Jackie Chan, also a victim of bullying, told Ms. Esperanza about a boy in his first period class who called him names and hit

him. She got his schedule changed even after the window for schedule changes had closed. She replaced first period with a study hall in her room and signed him up for a social studies course taught during another class period. Another time she intervened when a student hit him in the cafeteria, which resulted in the offending student's suspension. Together with Ms. Esperanza, Ms. Rodriguez, and one another, the students construct networks of care that support their daily lives.

### **Dissonant Threads**

Whereas the nine students use their positions as English language learners to navigate the institutional terrain, achieve academic support, and establish networks of care, dissonances emerge. Dissonant threads are issues, topics, or questions that resist perfect codification within analytical themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Jackie Chan and JanCarlos' experiences provide dissonant threads that deepen and "complexify" (Kincheloe, 2008) analysis.

Jackie Chan's very position as an English language learner is unique. By virtue of his immigrant language learning position he claims association with other ESL II students, yet his language and culture set him apart. His positional identity, which refers to "behavior as indexical of claims to social relationships with others," is one of insider-outsider (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127) In his early days he credited a former Chinese student, not just any ESL classmate, for help in navigating the school. Though he socializes with other ESL students, he does experience isolation. When asked about how it feels to be the only Chinese student in the school, he replied, "Nothing special. Just don't have friends to talk about it that's all." That is, he does not have friends with whom to discuss a shared minority position. His inability to share experiences with classmates in Chinese is particularly indicative of his insider-outsider position, especially as positional identities are "mediated through the ways one feels comfortable or constrained... to speak to another" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127). His classmates' tendency to communicate with one another in Spanish sometimes makes him feel excluded: "It's only fair thing, I want to understand what they say that's all." He often performs a Latino identity by using Spanish curse words and slang, but he still remains on the periphery culturally and linguistically. However, his is not simply a story of isolated sadness. He does stress the language learning advantages of not having anyone with whom to speak in Chinese: "You know when I'm here only language you can use is English. No speak is Chinese. Like the Mexican kids they don't speak English. [They] wouldn't be good in English like me." However, his linguistic and cultural positions limit his

relationship with Ms. Rodriguez. She routinely speaks in Spanish with the Mexican and Honduran students, which prohibits him from joining any of these conversations. He describes Ms. Rodriguez as “nice,” but she rarely works with him on assignments and does not shadow him in core content classes.

His experiences of bullying from “white kids, black kids,” and a Honduran boy on the soccer team also illuminate his insider-outsider positional identity. Ms. Esperanza advocates for him as she did when she got his schedule changed and opened up her classroom as a study hall. Yet, he acknowledges her limitations to fully solve the situation, saying, “Sometimes adults can’t do anything about you.” He further adds that white students get away with bullying due to racism. “[R]acist. That’s all I can say. The principal is white, too. That’s all I’m going to say about that.” As the only Chinese student in the school, his unique linguistic and ethnic identities stand out in sharp relief, limiting complete association with ESL II students and even the ESL aide.

JanCarlos also offers a contrast. Unlike Jackie Chan, he shares a Honduran culture with Ilyn and Genesis and can speak in Spanish with Audelio, Chuy, Diana, Adriana, Venus, and other ESL students in the school. He lives with Diana and is uncle to her son. He affectionately calls Ilyn his niece since her mother is in a relationship with his older brother. He claims a mother-son type relationship with Ms. Rodriguez, eats in the ESL classroom to avoid bullying in the cafeteria, and he receives academic help from Ms. Esperanza. Yet he experiences limitations. Increasingly, JanCarlos refused individual help on academic subjects, claiming that he did not care about it. He increasingly put his head down on the table and slept during classes, and missed full days of school. Despite his use of the ESL classroom as a safe haven from bullying during lunchtime, he experienced bullying at other times and places. By January, JanCarlos held an F average in his classes, putting him at risk of repeating ninth grade for the second time. He experienced in-school suspension for drawing graffiti on a bathroom wall, and he and Ms. Esperanza had an argument that undermined their relationship. He stopped eating lunch in her room and did not speak to her for several days. Soon after these events in mid-February, he decided to transfer to a neighboring county school system. Despite his mother-son type relationship with Ms. Rodriguez, his friendships with classmates, and the availability of academic support, he chose to transfer to a different school.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Despite these significant dissonant threads, the ESL II students overwhelmingly use their positions as English language learners to navigate the institution together, achieve academic support, and establish caring relationships. They experience school with and among other English language learning students, Ms. Rodriguez, and Ms. Esperanza. Together the students use their positions as English language learners within an ESL program to navigate the institution by building relationships with other English language learners, especially during their early days in the school system. In later navigations, students continue to network with one another and use Ms. Esperanza's authoritative position in the school to problem-solve within the institution. Students further use their positions to attain academic support on core content subjects in ways that grant them mobility within the school space. They rework this mobility in order to socialize with friends. Finally, students build networks of care with one another, with Ms. Esperanza, and with Ms. Rodriguez. Through these practices, they co-construct a figured world where they use their positions as ESL students to their advantage (Holland et al., 1998).

The ESL II students enact agency through their everyday practices and challenge the dominant discourse of school success, which is based in student ability and is measured by test scores, graduation rates, reading levels, (Standard) English proficiency, and so on (e.g., Kincheloe & Hayes, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008, Souto-Manning, 2009). The ESL II students subvert such limited ability-based definitions. They call us to "restructure" success by including the ways in which English language learners build relationships and navigate institutional demands as indications of success (Michael, Andrade, & Bartlett, 2007, p. 186). By including everyday problem-solving and relationship practices in our definitions of success, we can realize that English language learners are not deficit or disengaged. As the ESL II students demonstrate, they co-construct figured worlds of agency, resourcefulness, and success through everyday practices.

### **Yet, Not Quite a Victory Narrative**

While the ESL II students illustrate how they successfully navigate school through their figured world of relationships and networks, challenges remain. To begin, the dissonant threads highlight where more work can be done. Though Jackie Chan and JanCarlos problem-solve bullying issues by going to Ms. Esperanza, there is a limit to her power, as Jackie Chan asserts. In short, she cannot be everywhere all the time. Jackie Chan's and JanCarlos' experiences beg

for a critical interrogation of the larger school structure (Kincheloe, 1991). What social inequities regarding race and ethnicity are at work in these bullying experiences? How can the school as a whole address, either through curriculum or other initiatives, racist mindsets and discourses that contribute to bullying in the first place (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009)? Therefore, while Jackie Chan and JanCarlos demonstrate agency by using the ESL classroom as a safe haven, Ms. Esperanza's advocacy alone does not sufficiently address the bullying they face. In a similar way, JanCarlos' experience underscores the unintended consequence of the caring networks shared by the ESL II students, Ms. Esperanza, and Ms. Rodriguez. A variety of factors contributed to his decision to transfer mid-year, yet one of the factors had to do with his argument with Ms. Esperanza. Thus, while the caring teacher-student relationship contributes to their success at school, when that relationship is strained, students experience a disadvantage.

Finally, the ESL II students face tremendous pressure to pass the SOL tests. While their everyday activities challenge us to expand the notion of success in schools, a pervasive and prevailing criterion of success comes from standardized tests. The emphasis on standardized tests reflects the larger societal move towards a neoliberal approach to education, which applies free market values and measurements to human learning (Giroux, 2011; Kumashiro, 2008). This move reduces student learning to quantifiable test scores (Kincheloe, n.d.; Kincheloe, 2008). However, standardized tests present an additional challenge for English language learners. The attainment of academic English can take between seven and ten years (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). Therefore, even after multiple years in the school system, the students of ESL II continue to develop academic English. While they utilize the ESL classroom and faculty at various times for academic support for core content coursework, a bilingual dictionary is all that provides assistance during testing. As Ms. Rodriguez laments, there is no SOL written in a simple English and "el sistema no es justo" [the system is not just]. Since the students must pass six SOL tests in order to graduate, the students of ESL II face a serious challenge for graduation.

Every day, Audelio, Adriana, Chuy, Diana, Genesis, Ilyn, Jackie Chan, JanCarlos, and Venus demonstrate agency, resiliency, and success in the ways that they navigate the institution, address academic needs, and co-construct networks of care. While the everyday practices and actions of a small group of immigrant English language learners in River Town alone do not transform systemic inequalities and reductionist measurements of success, their actions do provide a glimmer of *esperanza* [hope].

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Chapter 3: “I’m NOT Stupid!” The Trouble with JanCarlos

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## Abstract

In this autoethnographic paper, I trouble the school experiences of JanCarlos, an immigrant student studying in a rural high school in Virginia. Using dialogue and reflexive internal dialogue, I story two events that altered the trajectory of his school life—an emotional argument with the English as a Second Language teacher and punishment for drawing graffiti on a bathroom wall. I present how each of these events represented “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1998; Webster & John, 2010) in my research as they interrupted my objective stance and altered my interpretations (Poulos, 2009). As I “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, xix), I critically examine each event. As I watched events unfold, I routinely asked the relational ethical question—“What should I do now?” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). In so doing, I make transparent my position and power in creating knowledge (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012).

*Keywords:* autoethnography, relational ethics in research, reflexivity, immigrant students

### **JanCarlos' Story**

Throughout the time I conducted qualitative research in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom at a rural high school in River Town, Virginia,<sup>14</sup> JanCarlos, a ninth grade student from Honduras, increasingly experienced difficulties and strained relationships. Two events that occurred in mid-January stood out as significant as I grappled to understand his school experiences. The first event involved a heated argument between JanCarlos and the ESL teacher, Ms. Esperanza, and the second concerned graffiti on a bathroom wall. Each of these events altered the trajectory of his schooling experiences, as well as my own experience as a researcher.

I identify these two events as critical—pivotal and experience altering. However events are not isolated in time and place; they are always embedded within evolving processes and sociocultural contexts that influence actions, decisions, and identities (Davies, 2000; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Kincheloe, 2005). JanCarlos' critical events emerged from complex school and home experiences. Already a repeating ninth grader, by January, he was at risk of failing ninth grade again. He increasingly arrived late to classes, slept during classes, did not complete schoolwork, and missed full days of school. He experienced bullying in the school cafeteria and in his neighborhood. He told me that he had problems at home, but never elaborated on them. Therefore, these events are embedded within a variety of personal and sociocultural events/contexts of which his teachers and, especially I, were only partly aware. Furthermore, even as I identify these events as critical, JanCarlos may not consider them in this way, although these two events did indeed influence and shape future events. However, in calling them critical, I recognize that I discursively construct reality in my writing (Davies, et. al., 2004). Therefore, my writing and reflexivity shape not only my interpretation of events, but influence what I deem an “event” in the first place.

#### **His/My Story: Critical Events Spark Critical Incidents**

JanCarlos' critical events sparked “critical incidents” in my research (Tripp, 1998)—incidents that interrupted my “objective stance,” pulled me more deeply into observed situations, and altered my interpretations (Poulos, 2009; Tripp, 1998). Parker

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<sup>14</sup> Names of people and places are pseudonyms.

Webster and John (2010) describe critical incidents as research discoveries that stir reflexivity. They write:

This means that the researcher is involved in trying to understand the phenomenal world and at the same time is also examining the way her developing understanding changes her and her relationship to the phenomenal world, which, in turn, changes how she is observing and understanding it (p. 179).

JanCarlos' critical events altered his school relationships and experiences, and they, in turn, incited critical incidents in my research, thus altering my interpretations of his school experiences. Therefore, JanCarlos' critical events and my critical incidents as a researcher conflate. In order to represent the interaction between critical events and critical incidents, I identify them throughout the manuscript as critical events/critical incidents.

Critical events/critical incidents stirred strong emotions within me—concern, uncertainty, care, frustration, and, unfortunately, even judgment. As I observed and reflected on events, I struggled with the “relational ethical” (Ellis, 2007) question, “What should I do now?” as I tried to act from “my mind and heart” and “to initiate and maintain conversations” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). As I was pulled into events, I questioned my authority to ask JanCarlos' about these troubling school experiences. I increasingly grew cautious of the power I wielded in interpreting and representing them (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Davies, 2004).

These two critical events/critical incidents highlight how I experienced a blurring of selves, leading me to question how JanCarlos' experience of events intersected with my experience of events as I watched them unfold and talked about them with Ms. Esperanza (Davies, et al., 2004). JanCarlos, Ms. Esperanza, and I experienced events through our own perspectives and identities, yet in my analysis and writing, the selves of the research blur and intermingle. Thus, “the self who carries out research and the self who is the subject of the researcher's gaze is thus not denied in this [reflexivity] model, but neither is it made central or separate” (Davies, et al., 2004, p. 364).

The blurring of selves also relates to how I experienced a multiplicity of selves throughout the research process. As a former high school Spanish teacher and supervisor of university students seeking teaching licensure in English as a Second Language, I

easily fell in stride with high school practices and norms. I followed the faculty dress code, led class discussions and activities as part of my research, and, on many occasions, helped JanCarlos and his ESL classmates with schoolwork. As a white middle class woman, my manner and appearance aligned with that of the mostly white middle-class teachers that worked in the school. The students addressed me as a teacher, calling me Ms. McCloud. They listened when I spoke and treated me with respect. Yet, although I was performing teaching, I was officially there as researcher, conducting observations and interviewing JanCarlos, his classmates, and faculty. To further complicate my position, the ESL teacher and I met in college when we studied abroad in Barcelona, Spain, during our junior year. Then we shared a dorm room our senior year. Based on our long-term friendship, I continuously shifted from teacher to researcher to friend and back again, sometimes seamlessly, but sometimes in jarring and unsettling ways (Ellis, 2007). Throughout this manuscript, I portray the multiple relationships and selves of the research—JanCarlos, the ESL teacher, the ESL instructional aide, and me—as I analyze the two critical events in JanCarlos’ school life.

### **Autoethnographic Storying: Method**

I use autoethnographic storying as a method of making meaning. Story is “imaginative *and* analytical” (Goodall, 2008, p. 14, emphasis in original). Story, or narrative, is an epistemology—a “way of knowing” (Goodall, 2008). Story provides a powerful way to study experience because narrative “is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). Even though I do present events in chronological order, story is much more than a chronological or descriptive telling of events. Through these stories, I trouble and analyze those events.

I story events using scene setting, dialogue, and autoethnographic reflections. I cite verbatim from transcribed interviews with JanCarlos and the ESL teacher and incorporate direct quotations from ethnographic fieldnotes to create dialogue, often editing and rearranging for clarity and readability (Holman Jones, 2004). I also reconstruct dialogue from descriptions in field notes. I follow Carolyn Ellis’ (2004) lead in relying on “ethnographic details” to create dialogue that “could have been,” even if words spoken/represented are not literal or verbatim (xx). I rely on my fifteen years of

friendship with the ESL teacher and on “emotional data”—my intense personal and emotional responses to the research phenomenon—to reconstruct dialogue (St. Pierre, 1997). In reconstructing dialogue, I “investigate those worlds [of participants] by opening up language for redeployment” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 176). Thus, I strive to represent an ethical “verisimilitude” of events and to “evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (Ellis, 2004, p. 124). Traditional notions of validity are under “erasure” (St. Pierre, 1997) as the criteria for validity become how described events are authentic to the context and experience, not how literally accurate they are (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

In italicized sections, I reflect on events/incidents and “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, xix). In these reflections, I trouble events by portraying my uncertainty as I watch events unfold, question my position and response(s), trouble my power as researcher, and make connections to literature and theory. I reenter events through dialogue. While I portray the events and italicized reflections in the present tense, the analysis and troubling occurred both as events unfolded and after they occurred. Therefore, reflections of the past and present blur. In this way, I “pleat and unpleat the stories and their interpretations in a frontward and backward motion that results in the interaction of past actions and voices with present theorizing, analysis, or simple explication” (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009, p. 70). Through this process, I “look outward...and inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) in order to make my position and power transparent in the construction of knowledge (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012). Finally, I raise questions that seek to “recognize and value the mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4).

My stories represent the messiness of meaning making and offer up more questions than answers (Goodall, 2008; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). I do not have answers for JanCarlos’ complex, heartbreaking, and difficult experiences. I offer no easy pedagogical fix for teachers of immigrant students or provide advice to researchers interested in immigrant communities. Rather, my hope is that this writing reveals, interrogates, and, ultimately, resists deficit notions of immigrant students in schools. Being a student, a

teacher, or a researcher in a high school is not for the faint-hearted. To persevere, we embrace the complexity, keep sight of our evolving, yet “unfinished humanness” (Freire, 1998), and hold on.

### **Critical Event/Critical Incident 1: Seventh Period Showdown**

The bell rings to announce the beginning of seventh period, the last class of the day. Its stridency reprimands latecomers. JanCarlos ambles through the doorway several seconds after the bell has abruptly gone from shrill to silent. He flops down on the worn second-hand couch that sits along the side wall. He stretches his baggy-jean-clad legs out across the floor, blocking the walkway for passers-by. I watch as he settles into the cushions, scrunches the shabby pillow behind his back, and shoves both hands in the square front pocket of his hoodie sweatshirt. Even though he has arrived late to ESL Math, he remains unhurried. Today’s late arrival represents yet another in an increasing habit of lateness, lack of energy, and disinterest.

The other five students gather around the four large hexagon-shaped tables in the room, pulling out books from bags and getting ready for class. A Dry Erase board takes up the entire length of the front wall and provides the backdrop for their before-class activities. Its shiny whiteness stands out against the maroon cement blocks that make up the walls of the spacious rectangular classroom. From his vantage point on the couch, JanCarlos could look out at the treetops through the large windows lining the wall across from where he sits. But, he doesn’t seem to be admiring the soft January sunshine that lightens the room and casts shadows on the cream-colored floor tiles. Instead, he sits hunched down, looking at his shoes. Ms. Esperanza, the ESL teacher, busily collects class materials from the well-organized trays and stacks of papers on her desk at the back corner of the classroom. The desk provides a perfect diagonal view to the door. Though she continues to gather materials, her multi-tasking teacher eye has been observing the students, door, and bustling hallway outside since the bell began its shrill ringing. Ms. Rodriguez, the ESL instructional aide from Costa Rica, greets students and pulls out materials from the canvas bag that she carries with her as she accompanies Spanish-speaking students to core content classes throughout the day. Today the relaxed class starting time reflects the usual laid-back atmosphere of seventh period. As students work, they are free to walk around to select books from shelves and talk quietly with one

another. Ms. Esperanza allows them to relax on the couch and wicker chair after completing assignments, but never before or during work. JanCarlos does not follow the usual class routine and remains on the couch.

“Are we going to talk today?” he asks me.

I know that by “talk” he refers to the first of two interviews I mean to conduct with him. We had spoken earlier in the day about going to the guidance office during this period to interview. I answer, “I’m pretty sure, but we need to double-check with Ms. Esperanza. We need to make sure that nothing has come up that requires you to be here.”

He shrugs and pulls his black hoodie up around his face. He slouches further into the couch, laying his head back and closing his eyes. Ms. Esperanza crosses the room from her desk to the couch with arms full of textbooks and papers. She plops down beside him and playfully slaps his knee. In a mock reprimanding tone, she says, “JanCarlos, why were you late?” Students rarely arrive late to her class even though she is not overly strict with enforcing the tardy policy. When students do occasionally arrive just after the bell as JanCarlos has done, she tells them to “pay better attention next time” and gets on with class business. But, JanCarlos has been increasingly late, so I wonder if she will give her usual light-hearted warning.

JanCarlos disregards, or perhaps misinterprets, her teasing tone. He gruffly replies, “I don’t know. I just was.” Then he stands up and walks out of the room.

Ms. Esperanza and I look at each other in surprise. She jumps up, unloads the books she’s holding onto the table where I am sitting, and hurries to the doorway. With the jovial tone erased from her voice, she calls him back. Her voice shifts as she slips into her habit of dropping the “g” at the end of words when hurried, excited, or upset: “JanCarlos, get back in here. Where do you think you’re goin’? You do not just walk out of this classroom without askin’ first.”

JanCarlos stalks back. He sidles past her in the doorway and drops back down on the couch. He glares at her with arms crossed. “I need to go to the bathroom.” His tone is tight.

“Not right now. I’ll let you go in a minute. But, first we need to talk about what just happened. You do not leave this room without permission.”

Ms. Esperanza crosses her arms across her chest, reflecting JanCarlos' stance. While each stance mirrors the other, Ms. Esperanza's black slacks, white blouse, and rubber-soled loafers stand in dramatic contrast to JanCarlos' too-big-for-him hoodie, sagging jeans, and tennis shoes. The different coloring of their skin suddenly seems more pronounced. Even though she is not from Spanish-speaking heritage, normally her dark hair and fluent Spanish allow her to blend in with the Mexican and Honduran communities that reside in River Town. But she seems whiter now. The Spanish pseudonym the students selected for her now creates dissonance. In an instant, they physically transform—Ms. Esperanza into the “authoritative teacher;” JanCarlos the stereotypical “delinquent student.”

JanCarlos says, “I don't really care. I need to go. I don't feel good.” Now yelling, “Just let me go to the bathroom!!”

“You do not talk to me like that, JanCarlos. You are showing nothing but disrespect,” she says.

“I don't care. I'm going to the bathroom.” In a repeat performance, he storms out of the room.

This time, Ms. Esperanza does not look at me. She does not go to the door to call JanCarlos back. Instead, she walks to her desk. She jerks the desk drawer open and pulls out referral forms used to report behavior incidents to the office. She slams them down on the desktop. I know by the way she holds her jaw that she is angry. Her steely stare dares anyone to cross her. As her friend, I wonder if I should go over to her; try to calm her down. As a researcher and guest in her classroom, I worry that doing so would be intrusive and judgmental. My uncertainty and her palpable anger keep me seated and spellbound. At this point, I see her as Ms. Esperanza, not my friend Rebecca.

The students have gone completely quiet, which is a stark contrast to their usual laughter and conversation. Some openly watch her while others stare down at their books and cast peripheral glances in her direction. Perhaps they are as shocked as I am to see her pull out the referral forms that invite a higher institutional power into the room. Her choice to invoke administrative authority shatters the familial, “we-are-all-in-this-together” atmosphere, which normally characterizes the ESL classroom. Ms. Esperanza holds high expectations for students and she corrects and disciplines them when

necessary. Yet their teacher-student relationship is a caring and positive one. When students do backtalk, refuse to work, or sleep in class, all of which are rare, she typically deals with the issue by talking with students one-on-one. This is the first time that I have seen her rely on referral forms. Like hazard lights announcing pending danger, the papers signal an escalating struggle for JanCarlos that will include the principal.

My thoughts fly as I as I watch her furiously fill out the form: *The success of English language learners depends on teacher advocates* (Salinas & Reyes, 2004). *Who's going to advocate for him now that the advocate is the referrer? What has happened to the "confianza"—mutual trust created through supportive teacher-student interactions—that I have observed during my time in this classroom* (Salazar & Fránquiz, 2008; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004)? *Both Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez have developed with the students relationships that are based in care, confianza, and consejos [verbal advice and teachings]—all so important to the academic and social success of immigrant students in schools, especially Spanish-speaking ones* (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett, 2007; Salazar & Fránquiz, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). *But, this caring relationship seems strained today. Normally, students trust Ms. Esperanza and tell her when something difficult is going on in their lives. JanCarlos usually does not act so defiant. In the past he has shared his struggles, but he isn't doing so now. Ms. Esperanza usually trusts that larger issues are at work when students act out and she problem-solves with them to address the problem. Has the confianza been shattered?*

One brave student, Ilyn, interrupts my thoughts. She crosses the silent classroom to Ms. Esperanza's desk. *Good. Maybe Ilyn can explain what is going on. After all, she is one of JanCarlos' best friends at school. They eat lunch together everyday and hang out before and after school. She and her mother live with JanCarlos' older brother, so there is a family-like connection too. What will she tell Ms. Esperanza?* Ms. Rodriguez scurries over from where she has been sitting among the students and joins them.

"Um, Ms. Esperanza?... JanCarlos took... like... a lot of pills." Ilyn speaks in a nervous whisper. She picks at the corner of the desk and rocks her leg, wrapped in tight denim, as she speaks.

Ms. Esperanza stops writing. She looks up. Her angry expression slightly gives way to worry and controlled panic. "What kind of pills?"

“No sé [I don’t know]. Something from the hospital.”

*My hands go cold; my mouth goes dry. I know what Ilyn is talking about! Earlier that day, I was alone in the room with Ilyn, Genesis, and JanCarlos. They were eating lunch in the ESL classroom like they usually do, and Ms. Esperanza had stepped out to make copies. While we all ate lunch, JanCarlos asked me to feel his head because he felt “mareado” [dizzy]. I didn’t feel any fever, but asked him if he wanted to go see the school nurse. He said no because he had already been to the doctor. His mom had taken him to the hospital the night before because he couldn’t breathe well. I had asked him if he was asthmatic, but he said no. The doctor had prescribed pills and JanCarlos thought that they were making him dizzy. I never thought to ask him WHEN he had taken the pills. Or how MANY. I didn’t ask him what type of pills they were either. Since he had talked about it as occurring the night before at home, I didn’t think to say anything about it. Should I have told Ms. Esperanza about this earlier? Will I say anything now?*

“Ilyn, when did he take these pills? Where? How many?” Shrugging, Ilyn, says, “*esta mañana* [this morning].”

“Thanks for telling me, Ilyn.” Ms. Esperanza and Ms. Rodriguez share a concerned look. Ilyn hurries back to her seat. She and Genesis huddle together and speak in hushed tones.

Seconds... pass... in...an...eternity.

JanCarlos returns from the bathroom and sits back down on the couch. He shuts his eyes. Ms. Esperanza calls him over to her desk where she remains seated. He reluctantly walks over.

Calmly, yet authoritatively, Ms. Esperanza asks, “JanCarlos, what’s going on? What’s the problem here?”

“I told you. I don’t feel good.” He crosses his arms, looking past her and out the window behind her.

She exhales loudly: “JanCarlos, what pills did you take? I want to see them. Now.” She holds out her hand, indicating that he should give her the bottle.

I wait for him to deny having pills or ask how she knows about them. But, he doesn’t. He reaches into his jeans pocket and pulls out a prescription bottle. He hands it

to her. She looks at the label. Ms. Rodriguez peers over her shoulder as she tries to make out the writing on the bottle.

“JanCarlos, how many of these did you take?”

“I don’t know.” Turning his back on Ms. Esperanza, he makes his way back over to the couch.

“JanCarlos, come back here.” She stands up from her desk chair.

Still with his back to her, he firmly says, “No.” Louder he says, “I don’t want to talk to you.” He continues walking to the couch.

*The couch must be some sort of escape or security for him today. But, doesn’t he know that walking away from her is only going to make things worse? Doesn’t he care about being sent to the office? Now I want to intervene; tell him that we can leave and do the interview, even though I know that interviewing is totally unfeasible now. I want to separate them, before someone says or does something he or she will regret. I am surprised that Ms. Esperanza continues to have this exchange in front of the other students. I have NEVER seen her discipline publicly.*

Ms. Esperanza follows him, shaking the pill bottle as she walks. Her anger escalates with every sentence: “JanCarlos, these have codeine in ‘em. You can’t just take them without knowing how many. I can’t believe you. That was really stupid!”

JanCarlos whirls around. With tears and anger in his voice, he shouts, “Don’t call me stupid! I’m NOT stupid!!”

Matching his tone and volume, she says, “I didn’t call YOU stupid. I said what you DID was stupid—you shouldn’t have taken those pills!”

*A private-public boundary has just been crossed, and my friend and researcher positions collide. I feel an inexplicable urge to close my fieldnotes. Stop writing. My friendship with Ms. Esperanza obliges me to protect her from recording behavior that I know she will regret. I also feel protective of JanCarlos. Something serious is definitely going on here. Am I being exploitative by recording it on paper? At the same time, I am here to understand his school experiences, which means recording the good and the bad. But, will JanCarlos and Ms. Esperanza feel betrayed if I write about this moment? The researcher/pragmatist that governs my thoughts says, “This is rich stuff.” The*

*friend/moralist contradicts the researcher/pragmatist and says, “Protect by looking the other way” (Ellis, 2007).*

Each faces the other in a standoff. Ms. Esperanza’s face is red. I can almost feel and see the roaring beat of her escalated pulse from where I sit. JanCarlos stares her down with clenched fists held tight to his sides. Ms. Rodriguez rushes over and breaks the silence.

“Rebecca, Rebecca,” she says as she pats Ms. Esperanza’s shoulder. She uses a motherly tone, the kind that a mother would use to calm down a distraught child in public. *Ms. Rodriguez has used her first name, but she normally only calls her Rebecca when it is just the three of us. Rebecca is always Ms. Esperanza when students, faculty, or administrators are present. But she seems more like Ms. Esperanza to me than Rebecca right now. Her teacher position is more pronounced now than ever before.*

Rebecca/Ms. Esperanza glances at Ms. Rodriguez’s hand on her shoulder. By her irritated expression, she wants to shrug this intrusion off, but she doesn’t. Ms. Rodriguez removes her hand and steps in between them.

She puts her arm around JanCarlos: “*Cálmate*” [calm down].

Throwing up her hands in surrender, Ms. Esperanza walks back to her desk, muttering, “I’m done, I’m done.”

Ms. Rodriguez leads JanCarlos out in the hallway, but Ms. Esperanza stops them on their way out. Without a word, she hands Ms. Rodriguez the referral form and walks back to her desk.

The students begin to talk quietly among themselves and to shuffle through their belongings. Marcio, with whom I share a table, turns to me and quietly asks me if I can help him study for a social studies quiz: “It’s on *Roma* [Rome].” The quiz is a make-up from an absence, and he has to take it after school. I look over at Ms. Esperanza seated and staring at her computer screen. I don’t even know if it is on. I assume that she’s just trying to compose herself before she gets up to teach the math class. So, I tell him, “Sure.”

As I quiz him on Romulus and Remus, I strain to listen to JanCarlos and Ms. Rodriguez in the hall. I hear snippets of conversation: .... “*sólo quiere ayudarte*” [she

just wants to help you].... “*respeto*”[respect]... “*te queremos*” [we care about you]....*Dios*[God].....

*She is pulling out all the stops now, even referring to God. But, I’m not surprised. Her husband is the minister of a Baptist Spanish-speaking congregation in town, and she speaks very openly about her Christian faith....*

Their murmured conversation in Spanish continues in the hall. Then JanCarlos shouts, “*No me importa. La odio, la odio!*” [I don’t care. I hate her, I hate her!]

My head whips towards Ms. Esperanza. *The “her” has to be Ms. Esperanza. She must have heard him. Did he intend for “her” to hear? How will she react?*

Still staring at her computer screen, she silently mouths: “I hate you too.”

### **After School**

The dismissal bell rings—Finally something to break the somber mood of the past hour. No math class took place today. Ms. Esperanza remained at her desk and interacted very little with anyone. Students worked quietly on homework from other classes. After Ms. Rodriguez returned from the hall, she helped individual students on assignments. Marcio and I studied the Roman Empire. All period, I had glanced towards the door, expecting JanCarlos to come back from the office. But he never had. At the sound of the bell, students jump up and exchange goodbyes and after-school plans. Ms. Rodriguez tells us both goodbye and leaves with the students.

“See you tomorrow,” Ms. Esperanza says as they leave, but the usual enthusiasm is missing from her voice. We quietly begin tidying the room and pushing in desk chairs left askew by the students in their hurry to leave.

Suddenly, JanCarlos walks in. He has returned to pick up his backpack, left on the floor by the couch when he was sent to the office. He grabs it and turns to leave. He does not speak to us, but he glares at Ms. Esperanza as he leaves the room.

Ms. Esperanza sighs. She looks tired, weary, spent.

After a while, she says, “I got so mad today. I can’t remember the last time I was so mad. I know that I said and did things I shouldn’t have. I regret that. I know it was unprofessional.” With raised eyebrow and slightly jovial tone, she says, “Are you sure that you want this classroom to be the one you study?”

I laugh, “Too bad, you can’t get rid of me that fast. I’m here to stay,” I say. “But seriously, I knew that you would feel bad about the whole thing. I was willing you to stop. Mentally I was telling you—‘Rebecca, you’re going to regret this. Take a step back.’ I wish that I could have helped, but I didn’t know what to do. Then when I saw how you looked at Ester<sup>15</sup> when she tried to calm you down, I was glad that I didn’t!”

“Yeah, she does that. And that can really get on my nerves. Don’t get me wrong; I’m glad she’s here. Trust me, I couldn’t do what I do without her. But, she does baby them. I just deal with it, because that’s the way she is and they need that sometimes. But sometimes they have to deal with the consequences of what they do, you know? Anyway, I think what made me so mad was the way he talked to me. Actually, I think I was hurt as much as mad.” She pauses and considers. Then she says, “Yeah, I was hurt. I have had these kids for three, four, five years. I have known JanCarlos for about five. We are like a family. That means that sometimes we don’t like each other. We get mad at each other and we fight.”

We settle back to our task of straightening the room. As we work, I ponder her comments, especially the one about being like a family. *Family is an apt metaphor for what I have observed here. Both Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Esperanza are like parents that work to educate and support the children in their care. Ms. Rodriguez is always ready with a hug, as well as advice and moral teachings (consejos) about appropriate (i.e. moral) behavior in school and in life (Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Ms. Esperanza also provides consejos regarding romantic relationships, conflicts with friends and family, and school/academic struggles. Students seek them out for support and advice. So, the family metaphor fits. Yet, I am intrigued by Ms. Esperanza’s use of the term. This is not the first time that she has likened her classroom and teaching to family. She has shared before that being an ESL teacher is like being a mother. I find this language significant especially since, like me, she is in her mid-thirties and does not have children of her own. She clearly feels affection for and connection to students, even to the point of feeling hurt when one speaks to her in anger.*

*But, I worry that their “family” has been compromised today. If nothing else, this conflict has revealed the limitations of this metaphor. Like real parents, Ms. Rodriguez*

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<sup>15</sup> Ms. Rodriguez

and Ms. Esperanza do not always see eye to eye on how to handle conflict. Ms. Rodriguez “babies” them where Ms. Esperanza recognizes the importance of students dealing with the “consequences of what they do.”

Another limitation is that theirs is a “family” embedded in an institutional schooling structure. Evocations of family as metaphor imply an unconditional love and acceptance model even when real families fail to meet such an idealized notion. In schools, however, there is no guarantee or even an ideal of unconditional love and acceptance. Instead, disciplinary policies spell out procedures for expulsion when students fail to meet the conditions articulated by the institution. Youth, especially those of color, too often find themselves in a culture of surveillance and control in schools, rather than one of support and care (Giroux, 2011, Zweifler, 2009). Even in institutions and classrooms as supportive and relaxed as this one, students’ bodies are highly controlled and regulated. School policies control how students move through the school, dress their bodies, and address basic bodily functions. Students who do not abide by these policies face the consequences as JanCarlos did. All he wanted was to use the bathroom, to have some power over his own body. Today, his body may have been the only thing over which he could exert control. But, he did not play within the guidelines of the power structure.

What made this event a “disciplinary moment” (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 89)? As the classroom teacher, Ms. Esperanza has great latitude in the interpretation and enforcement of school disciplinary policies. Discipline occurs or does not occur through “constructed ‘moment-by-moment interactions’ among teachers and students in specific classroom contexts” (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 89). In this case, school administrators only know about JanCarlos’ backtalking, leaving the classroom without permission, and carrying prescription pills on his person—all punishable offenses—because of her decision to submit a referral form. What disruptive action(s) did she single out? Was it his refusal to acknowledge the institutional power structure by asking permission to leave the classroom? Was it when he blatantly refused to “talk about what just happened” with her? Was she worried about the prescription pills? Was it because his behavior was “visible, public, and contagious” (Hernández, 2002, p. 107)? I think back on my high school teaching days and remember the times that I lost my cool, said things I regretted,

*or sent students to the office when I could have solved the problem within the walls of my classroom. What leads us to make these decisions in the moment? How do we maintain the family metaphor within an institutional setting? How do we treat participants as family in our research? How do we—Suddenly I realize that I will have to reschedule the interview. How should I proceed? How will he proceed?*

## **Critical Event/Critical Incident 2: Graffiti on the Bathroom Walls**

### **The Next Day**

At 10:30 am the following day, I enter the ESL classroom. No one is here and the lights are off, but the bright sunshine sufficiently lights the room. It is Ms. Esperanza's planning period, so I assume that she is interpreting for a Spanish-speaking student in the office, making copies in the teacher workroom, or speaking with a teacher in another classroom.

I cross the large room and sit at the rectangular table placed adjacent to Ms. Esperanza's wooden desk. I open my fieldnotes from yesterday and reflect again on the argument between JanCarlos and Ms. Esperanza. *Is today too soon to interview him or should I wait? Again, I am conflicted by my desire to probe and question for my research and by my desire to treat JanCarlos with the same ethic of care I would demonstrate to friends and family (Ellis, 2007). The same goes for Rebecca/Ms. Esperanza. However, figuring out the ethics of that relationship is also complicated, especially since she goes back and forth between being my friend, Rebecca, and research participant, Ms. Esperanza. Sometimes it feels appropriate to think of her as Rebecca, at other times, Ms. Esperanza. I can't always articulate why or when. Maybe I should alternate her names when I write to illustrate this ambivalence....* Suddenly Rebecca enters the room and flips on the lights.

"Hey! When did you get here?" she asks enthusiastically.

"Not long ago. Maybe 30 minutes," I say, as I look at the large black and white clock so ubiquitous to classroom settings. The soothing tick of the clock accompanied the silence. At that moment, the bell rings to announce the beginning of lunch. The sound of students shuffling and shouting in the hallway replaces the silence. Rebecca walks behind me, opens the black mini-refrigerator located behind her desk, and pulls out a sandwich and a can of diet Mountain Dew, her caffeine of choice. I pull out my salad and large

water bottle and we begin to eat. Ilyn and Genesis enter with their cafeteria-issued lunches, greet us, and sit down to eat at their usual table. I immediately notice that JanCarlos is not with them as he usually is.

Lowering my voice so Ilyn and Genesis do not hear me, I ask Rebecca, “Is JanCarlos absent today?”

She looks over at the girls and shrugs. “He WAS here. I saw him this morning. He came in here with Ilyn. You know how they use this room like it’s their personal closet.” Pointing to the back corner, she says, “I think that’s his coat. But, he completely ignored me when he came in. I didn’t say anything to him either, because I figured that he was still mad about yesterday. I wanted to give him more time to cool off. I don’t know where he is now, though. Maybe he’s not eating lunch in here because he’s still mad at me.”

Addressing Ilyn and Genesis, she asks, “Where’s JanCarlos? Did he go home early?” Genesis shrugs, “I don’t know,” she says. She and Ilyn return to their private conversation. Rebecca raises her eyebrows skeptically. “Hmmm” is all she says.

When lunch is over, students file in for fifth period ESL II, an English class for intermediate to advanced English language learners. JanCarlos does not arrive even though he is enrolled in this class. Ms. Esperanza begins class. Minutes later, the school secretary interrupts on the intercom: “Ms. Esperanza, could you come down to the office, please?”

She rolls her eyes and hands me the vocabulary list she is going over. “Can you take over while I’m gone? I hope it won’t be long, but you never know.” She smiles knowingly and adds: “If I’m not back before you get done with this list, have them make flashcards of the vocabulary words. The index cards are back there on my desk. Tell them to write the word on one side and draw a picture that represents the word on the other side. They will use the cards for a Memory game later.” Before I can agree to her plan, she turns and walks out of the room.

I am accustomed to Rebecca/Ms. Esperanza being called from class, so I follow her instructions. When I’m not helping students with vocabulary, I think about how often she is called to the office. *What is the benefit of a spacious room with no teacher in it? Ms. Rodriguez is not here, because she has accompanied a beginner student to a math class. What would they be doing if I were not here to facilitate the activity? Monitor their*

*behavior? Chuy interrupts my thoughts: “Can I go to the bathroom?” I question if I have the authority to give permission. But, I grab a scrap piece of paper and create a makeshift hall pass: “Yes, but take this with you.” Should I sign Ms. Esperanza? I think better of it and sign, “J. McCloud.” In a last minute flourish, I add Ms. Esperanza’s room number, just in case. She rarely uses hall passes, but I feel it is necessary given my temporary teacher status. I think of the irony of this situation. How easily it could have mirrored yesterday’s conflict. He’s following school policy by asking me, the adult in the room. But how would he get permission if there were no adult here to ask? How would he have responded if I had said no? How would I? Isn’t an unaccompanied classroom fertile ground for future misunderstandings and “disciplinary moments” (Vavrus & Cole, 2002)?*

Rebecca returns, but only ten minutes of fifth period remain. Students finish up the last of their vocabulary Memory cards. Adriana and Diana are already into the first round of a game. The next two periods are busy with math lessons and individual homework help. There is no time to ask Rebecca about what happened in the office. I pitch in and help students on assignments as I usually do, but I cannot wait to hear the story.

### **After School**

“Ok, Rebecca. I’m dying to know why you were called down to the office. You were gone all period. It’s just you and me. Spill it.” We settle into our usual seats at the back table near her desk.

She shakes her head in dismay. “Wait ‘til you hear this. JanCarlos skipped class during fourth period today. He was with another student, Julio. You’ve met him. He has been in Alternative Ed for most of the year, because he has had so many disciplinary problems.” To clarify, she adds, “Alternative Ed is pretty much our version of long-term in-school suspension.”

I nod in recognition. Rebecca continues: “Anyway, they thought it would be fun or I don’t know what to sneak into the middle school and draw graffiti on a bathroom wall.”

“What?! Why in the world would they do something like that?” I ask.

“Beats me. And, that’s not all. The middle school principal found them in the bathroom. Pretty much caught them in the act. They had drawn gang symbols and slogans all over the wall. They tried to act all innocent by saying that the wall was like that when they got there, but JanCarlos was standing there with a marker in his pocket!

“Oh, JanCarlos,” I say in a tired tone of dismay.

“I know,” she says. “What gets me is that JanCarlos and Julio are never together. As far as I know, they’re not friends. Julio can be a bully. And I told JanCarlos that.”

“You told him what?” I ask confused.

“That Julio was not his friend. I said, ‘You know, you need to think about who is influencing you and you see where he got you.’”

“When did you say all of this? In front of Julio or later?” I ask.

“Later. Mr. Foster called me down there so that I could explain anything they didn’t understand, and so I could call their parents. He sent Julio home after that because this isn’t his first offense. He sent JanCarlos to in-school suspension for the rest of the day, so I talked to JanCarlos some then. These kids don’t always think of the consequences of what they do. This can mean court for both of them.”

“Really? Why is that?” I ask.

“First of all, they were trespassing since they were in the middle school. Then you have vandalism, which could be another charge. On top of all of that, they drew gang signs, which could fall under the homeland security act. Once they’re involved, it could mean deportation. You know that I’m not saying that’s what should happen, but I guess it could as a worse case scenario. It’s out of my hands at this point, and I told JanCarlos that too.”

“Wait. Back up. Homeland security?! Are you serious?” I say incredulously.

“Yes. I don’t know the ins-and-outs of it, but apparently gangs fall under terrorism. As the principal, Mr. Foster takes gang stuff seriously. We don’t have a problem with it anymore, but back when I first started ten years ago, there was a gang problem in River Town.”

“I didn’t know that. River Town is such a small town in such a rural area. I never would associate River Town with gangs,” I say.

“I know, but we did have a problem at one time. The dad of one of my former students was in a gang. The dad’s got the gang symbol tattooed on his face. He was involved in that kind of stuff before they moved here, but I don’t think that he’s still active. I still see him around and he’s real nice to me, but I can tell you that he’s not somebody that I would ever mess with. That’s another thing. Forget the courts. If word gets out that they wrote gang slogans without really being in the gang, then there could be some serious retaliation from real gang members. You just don’t play around with that.”

“Do you think that either one of them is in a gang?” I ask.

“No. I really don’t. Besides, I think that I would have heard about it if they were.”

“But, wouldn’t they have to prove gang affiliation before bringing in homeland security?” I ask, totally flabbergasted.

“I would think so. At least I HOPE so. I mean, they did a stupid thing, but it shouldn’t ruin their lives. That kind of punishment doesn’t fit the crime. What they did was wrong, but, good God, they’re not terrorists! They certainly don’t deserve to be deported. Like I said, I don’t know much about it. I really don’t think that the school would ever take it that far anyway. Some other schools might, but not here. But who knows?” she says.

“So, what do you think will happen next?”

“I don’t know. I think that it will be a different story for Julio, because he has already been in so much trouble. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that they throw the book at him. He’s just one step away from being kicked out for good, I think. I’ve tried with him, but it’s like I told JanCarlos, it gets to a point where it’s out of my hands and I can’t step in anymore. There also comes a point when they have to accept your help. It can’t just be one-sided. I know that sounds horrible, but how do I force a kid to accept my help?”

“I know exactly what you mean. You definitely can’t make a student accept your help. I know that you wish he would, but, no, you can’t force it.” I say. Then I ask, “How will it be different for JanCarlos?”

“Even if you count yesterday’s incident, JanCarlos hasn’t been in a lot of trouble with the office. He sleeps in class and can cop an attitude as you have seen, but he really isn’t what I’d call a troublemaker. He’s got a good heart. He hasn’t been in alternative

school. He'll probably get suspended for a couple of days. Mr. Foster told them they'd have to pay to clean up the graffiti. But, I think that will be it for JanCarlos."

"Goodness. I feel bad for JanCarlos. I mean, I really don't think that he wants all of this trouble. I'm still shocked to hear that he skipped with Julio," I say.

"The only reason I can see is that Julio knew that JanCarlos is vulnerable right now. That he needs someone to be his friend. And that's perfect bait, you know?" she says.

*Gang members? Terrorists? Vulnerable? Bait? Victim? So many conflicting identities and speculations. Rebecca and I continue our conversation, but we are seduced by "teacher lounge" talk (Evans & Lester, 2012) as we share stories and vent. In our own ways, both Rebecca and I have enacted this talk. I said, "I feel bad for JanCarlos." I speculated, "He does not want all of this trouble." But I imply that Julio does; that he deserves what he gets. Why didn't I say that I feel bad for him too? What has happened to my critical researcher stance—the stance that positions youth as active agents, rather than passive subjects (Thorne, 2004; Moinian, 2006), and seeks to uncover the deficit notions and inequities that disrupt their lives? (Kincheloe, 2008). Instead, we construct Julio as the predatory bully—JanCarlos as "vulnerable bait." But this dichotomy does not adequately capture the complexity of identity and experience. We individualize the problem and make bully and victim into character pathologies (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnel, 2009). Yet, what of the larger societal discourse that racializes their actions and likens them to terrorists? Would we have talked about homeland security if Julio and JanCarlos were white? What does it mean when a school could evoke homeland security as a way to "push out" (Noguera, 2009) problem kids and "bullies?" For now, JanCarlos' label of vulnerable victim protects him and gives him a second chance. For how long?*

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### **JanCarlos Talks**

#### **The Next Week**

I return the next week with hopes of interviewing JanCarlos at last. I have worried about him all week. *Has he been suspended? Has he had to pay to clean up the graffiti? Is he on speaking terms with Ms. Esperanza?* I go to Ms. Esperanza's classroom, and we

spend a few minutes catching up on personal and school news. I ask if JanCarlos is in school and whether I can interview him.

She says, “Yes, he’s here. You can interview him during 5<sup>th</sup> period.” She adds, “He’s still mad at me. He hasn’t been eating lunch in here, and he’s talking about transferring schools.”

“Transferring? To where?” I ask. *I wasn’t expecting this.*

“He says Green County, but I don’t see how he could get there everyday. The Green County bus won’t pick him up since he lives in River Town. He can’t drive, and his mom won’t be able to take him. She works nights and she babysits during the day. His sister might be able to do it, but she works too. I mean, he’s having a hard enough time making it here everyday and that’s with the bus. I don’t think it would be a good situation for him.”

“Goodness. Do you think that he will actually transfer? How do you know that he wants to transfer, anyway?” I ask, not giving her time to answer my first question.

“He’s talking about it openly. But I’ll be surprised if he goes through with it, although he did ask me for a transfer form yesterday. I got him one.”

“What did you say when you gave it to him?” I ask.

“I told him that he needed to think long and hard about this decision. I told him that he would need to get his mom, his teachers, and Mr. Foster to sign it. Then I told him that his mom would have to meet with the principal at Green County.” She adds, “Green County High School is a good school, but I just don’t think that he will like it there.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because the immigrant population is much smaller there than it is here. How can I say this? We have a lot of white students here, but there are more there...and don’t get me started on the rednecks. JanCarlos is used to being around students like him who speak Spanish and look like him. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I say.

“I don’t think he’s prepared for that. I also think that he believes that transferring will make all of his problems go away. But it won’t,” she says.

I nod in agreement. “Do they even have an ESL program?” I ask.

“Yes. They have an ESL teacher. She’s good. But, like I said, I’ll be surprised if his mom fills out the form. She’s got a lot on her. To tell you the truth, she doesn’t know how to deal with him. I told you about that time I called her last year, because I was worried about him. I thought he was depressed, maybe even suicidal, so I called to talk to her about it. I thought that she would thank me for calling her and that we would talk about how to help him. But instead she yelled at me for waking her up! She’s in my adult English class, and I have known her for a long time. She works herself to the bone. She has her own problems,” she says.

*I think about how what she’s saying about his mom reveals the ways in which class and economic limitations influence JanCarlos’ life (Kincheloe, 2005). Transferring schools will not make those issues go away. What other problems does he face? Is his strained relationship with Ms. Esperanza one of the problems? Despite the strained relationship, he asks her, not the office or another teacher, to get him a transfer form. Is this his way of telling her that he is angry and hurt? Is he testing her to see if she will tell him not to go? Why isn’t she telling him not to go? Is SHE testing HIM? I ponder her comment about what it would mean for him to be one of few ESL students (i.e. brown and Spanish-speaking) rather than one of many. How would that change his experience of school? Is he prepared for that? I doubt it. He only spends time with Spanish-speaking immigrant students. But, are we framing him in deficit ways by assuming that he will not be able to handle it?*

Ms. Esperanza interrupts my thoughts: “You should ask him about it today. I’m sure he would tell you about it.” I nod, but I’m not sure. *Should I ask him about it? He hasn’t told me about it personally.....*

My concerns are short-lived. As the students arrive at the start of fifth period, the gossip mill does all the work for me. From across the room, Adriana asks JanCarlos, “*Mudas a Green County?*” [Are you transferring to Green County?]. JanCarlos smiles sheepishly. Ilyn puts her arms around him and begs, “*Por favor no te vayas!*” [Please don’t go!]. Ms. Rodriguez tsks and adds her two cents: “*Ya te dije; no te pueden ayudar allí como nosotras lo hacemos acá*” [I told you; they can’t help you there like we do here.] Ms. Esperanza quiets everyone down and starts class. Shortly thereafter, JanCarlos and I go to the empty guidance office for the interview.

## **Interview with JanCarlos**

“So, JanCarlos, I heard you talking about transferring to Green County. Could you tell me about that? Why do you want to transfer?” I ask.

“Like I have problems at this school. I just can’t fix it here,” he responds.

“What can’t you fix?” I ask.

“Like I told you, I got in trouble right now and, you know, the problems with Ms. Esperanza that I don't like her. I can't, like, that makes me feel bad. And, yeah, that's why I want to move and start over because I can't do it here with hating her and people,” he says.

“Is that because of your fight last week?” I ask.

“It's a hard question. I don't really remember what happened, but yeah. Things started changing, yeah,” he responds. “She told Mr. Foster that I was drinking that medicine, and that’s why I started telling her how much I hated her.”

“So, you were angry because she told the school about the medicine?” I ask.

“Yeah, because she told them,” he says.

“Did you feel like that she betrayed you when she told them? Do you know that word ‘betray’?” I ask.

“Yeah. I feel like she hates me, too, so, yeah,” he says.

“Do you feel like she doesn't want to help you anymore?” I ask.

“Actually, I don't know, I just don't know.” He pauses. “I just can't stand her,” he says emphatically.

I pause. I’m not quite sure what to ask next. Then I ask, “Do you think you can fix it with her? You know, talk about what happened with her?”

He answers, “I don’t know. We had some problems last year, too. But, I don’t think I can fix this one. I’ve got problems, too, like with the principal and stuff. It’s not just her. It’s just not the problem, she’s a problem too and other stuff from the school and at home.” He continues, “I feel like I don't want to be here, and I talked to my mom about this and she's going to see if she can transfer me. Ms. Esperanza talked to her I think last night and told her what happened. I told her that I hate Ms. Esperanza and she didn't say nothing about that. I told her that I want to move. I want to change my life

and start over, and I told her that I can't start here because I have too much problems in this school," he says.

"You talk about having problems here. What about the other day when you got in trouble for being in the middle school bathroom? What happened?" I ask.

"We skipped class and walked around the school. When we were in the middle school, three principals followed us. I was like in the bathroom and Julio came in later. Julio was writing stuff, like bad stuff, on the walls. They checked me if I had markers, and I had one, but he was using it. I went to the office, but then the principal sent Julio home with Coach Smith," he says.

"Why didn't they send you home?" I ask.

"Because, like, he has been in trouble a lot and I haven't so....," he trails off.

"Do you normally hang out with Julio?" I ask.

"No. We just like, that was like the first time," he says.

"Have you and Julio talked since then?" I ask.

"No. I think he's going to move and go to another school," he says.

"Oh," I say. "Do you remember how you felt when you were in the bathroom?" I ask.

"I know that I was doing, I mean that it was not right. That I was skipping classes. Yeah, I was feeling nervous. Whenever I'm in trouble, I just start like not caring about myself. That's when I tend to get in more trouble," he says.

"Yeah. And then it makes things worse and worse, right?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says.

"Well, can you tell me what happened when you went to the office?" I ask.

"They took my marker and said I had to pay or whatever to clean the wall. Then Tanya checked my phone."

"Tanya?" I ask confused.

"The police cops at school." I nod in recognition. He continues, "She checked my phone and she saw some gangster signs. I was doing this," he says, making a hand gesture. "And that's bad. Well, it's not bad for me, but it's bad for them."

"Do you make that sign to be cool or funny? What does it mean to you?" I ask.

"Yeah, like to be cool. Well, for me like it was normal," he says.

“Oh,” I pause. Then I ask, “So, what do you think will happen now?”

“Well, I’m still here for right now, because like they’re going to see, like, they’re going to, I don’t know what they are going to do. I’m going to have to pay money so they can take that off the wall,” he says.

“Is that one of the reasons why you think it would be better to start over somewhere else? I mean, because of the graffiti in the bathroom?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says.

I ask, “Do you think you will do better in a new place?”

He says, “Well, I do want to move. But I don't know about that because like I still have not good grades, and it's kind of hard. I don't know if it will help, but yeah, I do want to move, yeah.”

When the school bell rings to indicate the end of fifth period, I thank JanCarlos for talking with me. He says, “You’re welcome,” and leaves for sixth period. I sit in the silence of the empty guidance office and reflect on all that he has shared with me. *I am impressed by his candor. I am a little surprised that he has been so open with me about his feelings towards Ms. Esperanza. He knows that she and I are friends, yet he did not hesitate to tell me that he could “not stand her” and “that he can’t do it here with hating her and people.” I had worried that my relationship with her would prevent him from talking about the event, but he was remarkably honest.*

*He wants to transfer because of “other problems at school and at home,” but his fight with Ms. Esperanza and his doubt in his ability to “fix it” are factors. Why doesn’t he feel that he can “fix this one?” What would it take for them to fix it? For now, his solution to his troubles is to “start over” at a new school. JanCarlos’ desire to transfer speaks volumes about his desire to stay in school, even though he struggles with “not good grades.” With this decision, JanCarlos subverts the 41% drop-out rate that plagues so many young Latino students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). Yet, the “concentric circles of context” (Ayers, 2004, p. 138) that influence his daily life—class, ethnicity, and immigrant status—contribute to the “problems” he has at school. These larger social, cultural, and political factors shape and influence his way of being (Kincheloe, 2005). Will he be able to overcome the influences that oppress and control? Can he name them for what they are (Freire, 1970)? I think back on my earlier conversation with Rebecca*

*when she told me about his mom working herself to the bone. Class limitations due to work schedules and reliance on school provided transportation may very well prohibit him from transferring, even if that does provide a solution to deal with his troubles. However, I suspect that Ms. Esperanza is right about how transferring will not make his problems go away.*

*In the interview, JanCarlos shared his perspectives on the argument and the graffiti event that, in part, contribute to his desire to transfer schools. As he talked, one comment in particular haunted me: “Whenever I’m in trouble, I just start like not caring about myself. That’s when I tend to get in more trouble.” His comment portrays a sad resignation that trouble is all he will ever have and be for other people. With this statement, I fear that he has given into the larger “institutional workings that reduce or erase” his abilities and worth (Ayers, 2004, p. 138). How this resigned comment contrasts with the one that he shouted at Ms. Esperanza last week: “I’m NOT stupid!” With that declaration, he showed ganas [strong will] to fight for the value of his intelligence and contributions. As I pack up my things to return to Ms. Esperanza’s room, I say a little prayer that he will hold onto that ganas and that he and Ms. Esperanza will find a way to “fix it.”*

### **Several Weeks Later in Mid-February**

After school one Friday, I ask Rebecca about JanCarlos and the transfer. I have not seen him much since the interview because of his personal absences and several school cancelations due to snow. He is absent today.

“So, what is the latest news about JanCarlos and the transfer to Green County? Is he or isn’t he going to transfer?” I ask.

“Well, he got the transfer form signed and turned into the office. It blew me away. I really didn’t think that his mom would go through with it. But, I will believe it when I see it. For one thing, Green County has been out of school for almost two solid weeks because of snow. So, he hasn’t been coming here or going there either. I don’t even know if they have accepted him. Transferring isn’t a given, you know. They have to accept you.”

“Yeah, I know that it isn’t as simple as turning in a signed form. My sister enrolled my nieces in a different school system. They were accepted, but then at the last

minute, the school called to tell her that they couldn't come because of overcrowding. When that happens, the students that live outside of the district are cut, so that's always a concern. And my sister didn't have an issue with transportation—her family has two cars and she works a part-time job that she schedules around her kids' needs. As we have said before, JanCarlos does not have that privilege. Transferring isn't that easy," I say.

Rebecca nods in agreement. She says, "Well, hopefully he'll be back on Monday. For my part, I'm just going to baby him. I mean not baby him, but love on him. And say, you know, 'Come eat lunch with me,' and stuff like that. I need to try to make his life a little less stressful. I'm sure I was not helping the situation, because, not every day, but there are times when I'm pissed at him and he's pissed at me. But for the most part, I've got to be the safe zone for him."

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### **Epilogue**

JanCarlos did not return to school that next Monday in February as Ms. Esperanza had hoped. He did, indeed, transfer to Green County. Before transferring, he paid a fine to clean up the graffiti in the bathroom and received in-school suspension as punishment. The school did not press trespassing or vandalism charges, so he never went to court. The school did not report the gang signs to homeland security. His relationship with Ms. Esperanza remained tenuous until his transfer. However, one morning in mid-March, she greeted me by saying,

"Guess who was here after school yesterday?" Before I could hazard a guess, she said, "JanCarlos! He texted and asked me if I would help him on some history and science assignments. So, I said, 'Sure, come on over after school'. We worked for about four hours."

JanCarlos and Ms. Esperanza worked together on Green County assignments several more times before the school year ended. Later that spring, I held a pizza party for the ESL students to thank them for participating in my study. Ms. Esperanza got permission for JanCarlos to return for the party. When I greeted him, I told him how happy I was to see him again. I also pointed out that it had been awhile since we had last spoken.

He said, “Yeah. That was back when I hated Ms. Esperanza.”

“So, you don’t anymore?” I asked.

He replied, “No. I don’t even remember how we started talking again. But we do now.” I smiled.

JanCarlos and Ms. Esperanza “fixed” their relationship, even if in a small way. JanCarlos continues his educational journey at Green County where he undoubtedly experiences both positive and negative events. I hold on to the hope that he will be all right, but there are still so many unknowns and uncertainties. Will JanCarlos make it to graduation? Will he be able to establish positive relationships with peers and faculty at Green County? Will he be able to name and address the larger sociocultural issues that influence his life? Will the adults in his life—family, teachers, me as researcher—treat him and his unfolding story with dignity and respect?

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