

# “Learn English on your Own Time”: The Experience of Low-Income English Learners in a Catholic High School

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the experiences of low-income Latinx English language learners (ELL) in one Midwestern Catholic school in order to see how the school creates/supports students' language experiences. With the research collected, I hoped to gather a holistic picture, one that would answer whether or not this choice school, that was created to provide better opportunities to economically disadvantaged students, was providing English Language Learners with high quality language opportunities. CRT and LatCrit were used as a theoretical framework and data collection mechanism to identify and analyze the instances of subordination based on race, language, immigration status, accent and phenotype experienced by students (Johnson, 1998). This method empowered participants to tell the story from their perspective - to name their own problems (Freire, 1970) and to tell counterstories. Further, a CRT and LatCrit lens allowed me to view the persistence of inequality in education (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) as well as a way to understand the experiences of people of color in our current education system (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

**Keywords:** Latinx, English Language Learners, LatCrit, Critical Race Theory (CRT)

## Introduction

The literature on Latinx achievement in public schools demonstrates the many ways in which our public educational system fails them, as well as the causes of the educational inequalities Latinx experience. Researchers have concluded that the causes are the lack of middle class preferred forms of capital (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), lack of authentic relationships (Hof, López, Dinsmore, Baker, McCarty, & Tracy, 2007; Katz, 1999; Popkewitz, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999), an assimilative curriculum (Valenzuela, 1999), tracking (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Meier & Stewart, 2010), minimal school participation (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; McNeal, 1995), minimal parent involvement (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999), and language issues and identity (Baez, 2002; Barse & De Jong, 2008; Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, & Cota, 1990; Cummins, 2000; Gibson, 1998; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004).

In many cities, negative experiences with the public school system drove many families, especially low-income families, to demand other, more affordable schooling opportunities for their children. In one Midwestern city, for example, the public outcry for “choice” came not only from the public, but also from government and higher education figures. All parties agreed that education was not equitable for all citizens. They believed that, as the system was set up, only affluent parents had the opportunity to pull their children from underachieving schools, leaving poor families behind. As a result, the Choice Program (CP) was established. For low-income families, CP was an opportunity for them to get away from schools that struggled with dropouts, absenteeism and low achievement in hopes of attending a school that would provide their students with more academic opportunities (Curran Neil, 2005).

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin CP is the longest and largest voucher program in the United States (McShane & Wolf, 2011). Under this program, state funds (in the form of a voucher) are allocated to families whose incomes are less than 300% of the federal poverty level, and who reside in the city. At no charge students can attend private schools located in that city. Although it is debatable whether or not religious schools in general are successful at providing better

academic opportunities for marginalized students, the program is very popular (Wolf, 2011). What is known is that the adoption of PC has created a shift in student enrollment from majority middle class Caucasian to low income Latinx and African American students. This change poses particular challenges to urban Catholic schools which now serve a higher number of children in poverty, children of color, and children who are English language learners (Scanlan, 2008). In addition, the research on Catholic Schools is dated, based on numerical data collected from tests and surveys and fails to examine the overall experience of economically disadvantaged students in Catholic high schools. In an effort to update the body of research, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the experiences of low income Latinx English language learners (ELL) in one Midwestern Catholic school in order to study how the school creates/supports students' language experiences. With the research collected, I hope to gather a holistic picture, one that would answer whether or not this choice school, that was created to provide better opportunities to economically disadvantaged students, was providing English language learners with high quality language opportunities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit are the theoretical frameworks used to analyze the findings in this study. CRT aims to “reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in America” (Crenshaw, Gotonda, Peller & Thomas, 1995, p. xiv). CRT rejects the traditions of colorblindness and meritocracy. Finally, CRT attempts to expose racial stereotypes, racial inequalities, sexism, classism and xenophobic practices (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004), homophobia, economic exploitations and other forms of oppression or injustice (Valdes, McCristal Culp & Harris, 2002) by taking into consideration the multiple layers, or the “intersectionalities,” that help build social and legal positions that aims to elimination all forms of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Creshaw, 1993). In addition to CRT, I will also use LatCrit.

LatCrit explains how CRT can be expanded beyond the black/white paradigm. LatCrit is concerned with “addressing issues often ignored by Critical Race theorists, such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 311) as well as colonization. A CRT and LatCrit lens allowed me to view the persistence of inequality in education (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005) as well as a way to understand the experiences of people of color in our current education system (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This theoretical framework is very important for this study as the current research on Catholic Education and Latinx does not include key aspects such as race, language, culture, identity or immigration to describe the experiences of students of color.

### **Research Study: Context**

**Cream City High School (CCHS)** is a parochial school located in the heart of a Midwestern Latinx community. With a student population of 283 who were predominantly Latinx and Spanish Speaking, the school was staffed by 23 teachers and support staff. Out of the 23 teachers, administrators, and staff, 3 were Latinx, and the remaining 20 were Caucasian; 5 staff members were fluent Spanish speakers. A percentage of the students were categorized as English Language Learners (ELL) and ninety-nine percent of the students attended CCHS with a voucher from the Parental Choice Program.

CCHS advertised itself as an “English Immersion” school. In other words, students were expected to use English the majority of the school day. Teachers were expected to reinforce the idea of English Immersion by redirecting students to speak in English only whether this was in the classroom or outside of the classroom. For the students who were in the process of learning English, content could be explained to them in Spanish; however, the majority of the teaching was conducted in English to, according to the administrator, ensure that “all students become proficient in English.” The curriculum highlighted the teachings of a traditional classical curriculum. Subjects such as literature, Latin, history and theology focused on ancient Western

culture, more specifically the Greco-Roman traditions and literature. The school also offered a level I and Level II ESL class.

### **The ESL Population**

CCHS can be described as a “revolving door” institution. The revolving door refers to the continuous influx of English Language Learners enrolling and attending the school. As a result, the school has a significant population of students (most of them no longer labeled as ELL) ranging from recently arrived students to those in their 3+ year of residing in the United States. The majority of students come from Latin American countries, ranging from Mexico, Central American and the Caribbean. Academically, these students are described as “lagging behind.” The school doesn’t measure initial English proficiency during enrollment or yearly progress in English Proficiency; therefore, student’s English proficiency is unknown.

### **The ESL Curriculum**

According to Administrator 1, students are placed in the ESL courses “based on just speaking with them [the student] and their parents” and asking questions, such as, “Did you take ESL at your prior school?” However, according to the students interviewed, placement is a matter of observation. The school’s administrator confirmed this. According to her, “we sort of look and see the first week of school, like, oh, they’re really struggling, let’s send them to ESL.” Based on this information collected from talking to the family and observing the child, the administrator decides if a student needs ESL and at what level. Because the program is aimed at new arrivals (within their first year of arrival), students who have lived in the United States for over a year may not have the opportunity to enroll in the ESL program. According to Administrator 1, “They’ve already been here for two years and should know enough English,” and therefore shouldn’t need ESL support. Some school administrators are under the impression that students will be ready for an inclusive, English-only classroom after their first year in ESL.

The school offers a level I course which is a face-to-face course taught by a certified ESL teacher. This course is a pull out-course where the teacher works with students during their first year of arrival, focusing on developing oral skills and acquiring vocabulary. Level II is an online course and is monitored by the music teacher, who is not licensed to teach ESL. The course is offered to students who have displayed trouble with the English language and is meant to help students review English. Despite having two ESL sessions, teacher Participant I described the curriculum used for the ESL class as not very helpful. According to her, the curriculum is scripted and not appropriate for teaching ESL students. The curriculum is mandated by administration and includes a set of pre-scripted lessons. The ESL teacher’s job is to read through the teacher manual and not deviate from the lesson. These lessons are repetitive in nature and require very little language development and practice. Although the ESL teacher is certified (and highly qualified to teach), she is rarely consulted about matters pertaining to her classes or students. Choices about ESL curriculum and student placement comes from the administration. The teacher is not encouraged to challenge these placements; as a result, she often feels that students are not being offered the appropriate support to learn English.

### **English Immersion Environment**

Although the school policy is firm on the usage of English, many of the teachers were more lenient and allowed students to use Spanish in their classrooms. These teacher participants spoke about the importance of bilingualism and the opportunities they presented to ESL students to strengthen their linguistic abilities in Spanish (regardless of the “English Only” mandate). In their classrooms, students were able to use Spanish for communicating with one another, to clarify information and instruction, to brainstorm, to work in small groups, and to socialize.

When I asked the teacher participants why they allowed the usage of Spanish in an English Only environment, many of them spoke about the opportunity for connections. These teachers are

aware that allowing students to make connections in their home language assists them in learning the material better. Although these teachers are unfamiliar with language acquisition methodology, they understand that not allowing students to use Spanish in the classroom has negative consequences; hence, they allow students to use Spanish.

However, the majority of teachers were not accommodating. Many of the teachers were very strict about following the English Only rule. Many of these teachers displayed posters in the classrooms reminding students to use English and disciplined students who were speaking in Spanish both in the classroom and in the hallway. When interviewed, these teachers reported feeling uncomfortable with allowing students to speak Spanish in their classrooms and therefore ask students to stop or limit their usage of Spanish. Although the teachers did not speak Spanish, they claimed to “know” when a student was on/off task, or were worried that the students might be mistreating one another or talking negatively about them or another fellow teacher. In order to avoid those scenarios, they ask students not to use Spanish in the classroom.

### **Method: Sample Population and Recruitment**

**Students:** Using purposeful sampling, I used the following criteria to identify 15 CP students: (a) students who identified themselves as Latinx, (b) students who were participants in the CP Program, and (c) students who were English Language Learners. I asked the principal to invite a group of students who met the criteria to attend a “meet and greet.” This meeting took place three weeks into the semester, after school in the school cafeteria. During this meeting, I provided a short presentation about the study, which reviewed the purpose and goals. After the presentation, the students had an opportunity to ask questions, and all of them agreed to take a packet of information home to review with their parents.

The package home was followed by a phone call to parents three days later to verify that they had received the package of information and that they had had an opportunity to review the material. Although the material was in both Spanish and English, I wanted to go over the study with the families and answer any questions or concerns, especially if I needed to provide further explanations in Spanish. The majority of the parents had very good questions, many pertaining to the safety and confidentiality of the study. However, some parents did not like the idea of their children participating; they worried about the time commitment and the lack of transportation for their children after school. Other parents, although very interested in having their children participate, declined because the children were not thriving academically, and he or she needed all the time possible to be at grade level. Of the 32 initial students, 15 submitted paperwork and agreed to participate.

The 15 student participants consisted of 3 freshmen, 6 sophomores, and 6 juniors. The 30 student participants consisted of 8 freshmen, 11 sophomores, and 11 juniors. Purposeful sampling was used to select these participants. The rationale for purposeful sampling was to select information rich cases. According to Patton (2002), information rich cases are those from which the researcher can learn a great deal about the issue at hand. In other words, since the purpose of my study was to document the experiences of low income Latinx English language learners (ELL) in order to see how the school creates/supports their language experiences, I needed to focus on the lived experiences of Latinx. The information I collected from the students was crucial for this research as it described the challenges and successes experienced by the students.

**Teachers:** Using snowball sampling, six teachers were recruited to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview. I began the recruitment of these six teachers by speaking to the administrator and asking him/her for a key informant, a person who had important understanding of the case (Bloor & Wood, 2006) because of their relationship with CP families or their seniority status. After the first participant was identified, I asked the participant for other key participants to interview. These six teacher participants brought a very important perspective to the study. They provided information and descriptions of the overall environment of the school as well as the quality of education provided to students. The teachers also provided

the researcher with information in regards to how they perceived the school created/supported linguistic experiences for Latinx students. Finally, more specific questions were asked to discuss how teachers incorporated linguistic opportunities in their pedagogy. I recruited teachers from all departments, all grades and from different levels of teaching experience (novice, experienced and veterans).

**Administrators:** Two administrators were recruited to participate in the study. The two administrators brought an overall, general perspective of the environment as well as the mission of the school. Administrators also had an opportunity to discuss the ways in which the school is inclusive for marginalized students. Specific questions were asked in regards to theoretical frameworks adopted/recommended by the school to incorporate culture, the home language, and the community. Finally, the administrators discussed the opportunities available for ELL Latinx students receiving CP to succeed at the school.

### **Data Collection**

Multiple data collection methods were used to document the ways in which this school created/supported language experiences for ELLs.

**Focus Groups:** I formed seven focus groups with the student participants. Each focus group had two to three students each and was made up of students from different grades. I met three times with each group for a total of 60 minutes per session. The majority of the meetings took place after school in a classroom. Three meetings took place before school to give students who had commitments after school the opportunity to participate.

During Focus group meetings, the participants were asked to discuss a number of questions:

- What type of classes are you taking?
- Do you have an ESL class? How do you feel about these classes?
- Are you being academically supported in these classes?
- Do you feel like your culture and language is portrayed in your classes?
- How is your culture and language supported in your school?

**Interviews:** Six teachers were recruited to participate in one semi-structured interview. According to the literature, a semi-structured interview is one in which all the questions are flexibly worded, and/or are a mixture of more or less structured questions (Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995; Patton, 2002). The most important aspect of this type of interview guide is the fact that the pattern questions for the interview are not all predetermined; instead, I used a list of questions or issues to be explored as a guide (Merriam, 1998). The purpose behind semi-structured interviews was to allow the participants to share his or her own insights about different topics and themes. This allowed for discussions to occur around themes and issues that were most relevant to the interviewees. Although all participants were presented with the same questions, certain aspects were explored more in depth depending on the individual's experience and level of interest on the theme or topic. Each participant was interviewed once for 30-45 minutes during the school day (in their room).

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, all interviews were transcribed; the transcriptions allowed the researcher to view the information in its entirety. To analyze the data, the researcher began by reading the data over and over to code it. The questions: "What is the data saying?" allowed for the researcher to classify the data and to put it into themes and categories. Using inductive analysis allowed for the researcher to interpret and structure these themes and categories. After developing patterns, themes and categories, the researcher switched to deductive analysis which assisted in testing the categories and themes developed using pre-existing theories and literature.

**Validity:** To verify the quality of the research, several validation strategies were set into place. First, in order to build trust with the participants, to get to know the culture/environment of the school, and to check for misrepresentation of information, the researcher conducted research at the site for a total of seven months. In addition, the researcher established a peer review group that assisted in providing external checks of the research process. This team helped the researcher to view her biases in the research and how these may be affecting the analysis and meaning. For further validation purposes, the researcher kept written accounts of meetings in a personal log. Third, the researcher assembled a group of three participants from the study for the purpose of sharing preliminary analyses, descriptions and themes. These participants helped validate themes and meaning, find missing information from the analysis, and view how the researcher own biases may have affected the analysis and meaning.

### **Findings**

**Student Experience:** ESL students reported feeling defeated and unprepared. They understood that the opportunities available weren't assisting them in learning English. The reality was that many of the ESL students had taken at least one of the two courses offered. Although they took the course(s), the students shared that they struggled with understanding and speaking in English. For example, student Participant A shared her struggles with English:

A mi me cuesta trabajo hablarlo y simplemente la escuela te da una oportunidad. A mi me dieron una oportunidad; el primer año tuve una clase de ingles en esta escuela. Lo que aprendí, para ellos bueno; lo que no aprendí, bueno, cuando tengas tiempo, lo tienes que aprender. Estoy estancada. [It is hard for me to speak it and the school only gave me one chance. This school gave me one chance; the first year I had an ESL class. What I learn, great for them, what I did not learn, learn it on your own time. I am stuck].

Student Participant B shared similar thoughts.

Yo ni siquiera he terminado de aprender el ingles, cuando comenzaron a meterme todo en ingles. Y, ya estoy en el 10, luego el 11, luego el 12 y no hubo tiempo para estudiar bien el ingles. [I had not even finished learning English when I was already given everything in English. And now I am in 10th, then 11th and then 12th and there was never time to learn English.]

These students know that they have not had the opportunity to develop English; therefore, students do not have the English skills necessary to navigate social or academic settings.

Many of these students self-reported strong academic backgrounds and experiences while attending schools in their home countries. In their new school, these students were low performing and behind in their academic work. Many of them were several grades behind in content, but were promoted to the next grade because according to the school administrator, the school “didn't hold students behind.” Academic failure drove many students to feel depressed and ultimately to give up. This was the case with Student Participant A:

Solo vengo a esta escuela para que a mi mamá no le cobren. Yo no entiendo ingles. No entiendo la materia. ¿Porque usted cree que los maestros se quejan que yo duermo en la clase? Me aburro, no entiendo mucho. No hago la tarea porque me toma horas traduciéndola. Nadie habla español para preguntarles si estoy entendiendo bien. ¿Que mas voy a hacer? [I only come to this school so they don't charge my mom. I don't speak English. I don't understand the material. Why do you think the teachers complain that I fall asleep in class? I am bored. I don't understand much. I don't do my homework because it takes me hours to translate. No one speaks Spanish, so I can't ask if I am understanding correctly.]

Like Student Participant A, Student Participant F also felt like a failure. He described developing mechanisms to cope with his feelings and to make school more fun. He describes a conversation with his mother in which he talks about the coping mechanisms he developed:

Mi mamá siempre me dice, tu eras tan inteligente. Yo le digo, Pues jefecita, así es como son las cosas. Yo fui inteligente, pero, aquí, es que aquí uno nomás se rinde. Bueno, yo no me rendí, yo sé que soy inteligente, pero como no puedo enfocarme en la escuela porque no se hablar inglés, me enfoco en cosas diferentes, más como, más, usar más la astucia. Tuve que cambiar la inteligencia por la astucia. Intentar hacer cosas astutas, como dicen en México, ponerme bien abusado. [My mom always tells me, 'You used to be so smart.' I tell her, 'Well mom, this is how it is. I was intelligent, but here, here you just give up.' Well I didn't give up. I know I am smart but because I cannot focus on school because I can't speak English, I focus on different things now, more like, how to use my cleverness. To survive, I had to switch my intelligence for cleverness. Try to do clever things, like they say in Mexico to become very clever.]

Students knew that limited opportunities were hindering their growth and potential. When asked what more the school could do to help them become successful, the students agreed that they needed teachers and administrators that understood their struggles; but most importantly, they needed teachers and administrators who understood that they required different instructional methods and materials in their home language and in English. According to Student Participant C:

Ellos (administradores y maestros) no quieren entender que necesitamos diferentes cosas, como alguien que hable español, más gente que quiera entendernos, ¿porqué no entienden eso? [They (administrators and teachers) don't want to understand that we need different things, like someone who speaks Spanish, more people who can understand us. Why can't they understand that?]

In addition, students suggested that they be offered content in Spanish. Student Participant D feels that if they were given the curriculum in Spanish and more assistance from the teachers and administrators, they would not fall behind and would even have time to learn more English:

Yo estoy segura de que en este caso, si nosotros tuviéramos la oportunidad de aprender el inglés y nos dieran en español todo lo que mis compañeros hacen mientras que nosotros aprendemos inglés, sería fácil. Realmente los maestros se darían cuenta de que somos capaces. Que realmente sabemos hasta un poco más de lo que ellos pensaban que nosotros sabíamos, simplemente que no nos dan la oportunidad que nosotros necesitamos [I am sure that if we had the opportunity to learn English and if they gave us in Spanish the same work my classmates are doing while we learn English, things would be much easier. The teachers would know for sure that we are capable. That in reality, we might know].

### **Developing the First Language**

As part of the academic load, all students were required to take a Spanish class. Administrator A shared that although students were required to use English throughout the day, offering a Spanish class allowed students to maintain and boost their Spanish skills. The goal, she explained, was to encourage bilingualism. The Administrator excitedly described the Spanish course available as an environment welcoming of a "second" language. The ESL students had other thoughts. Student A described Spanish class as "teaching Spanish in English-with Spanish words." According to the students, the content covered in the class was impractical. Students were to learn typical grammar points, such as subjunctive, imperfect or preterite, without connections to other writing, literature or culture. According to Student Participant E, "Our Spanish class only emphasizes grammar. Somebody can ask me questions of my culture and I'm not going to know. All I really know is the grammar." Student Participant G agreed. She was looking for more from her Spanish class: "I want to learn more about history in Spanish

class, because right now it’s mostly about grammar, and nothing really about history.” Many students expected Spanish class to be more culturally based with an emphasis in their skills as native speakers. What they got was a Spanish class aimed at monolingual students focusing on things like vocabulary and grammar drills. I asked students how this lack of language opportunity affected their identity and linguistic opportunities. According to Student Participants (B, J, K) they experienced a loss in their ability to speak Spanish because they rarely used it in class and were not permitted to use it outside of Spanish class.

Student Participant B: Yeah, like, our parents are telling us, like you can’t translate like you used to. Like you used to know so much, like you had such a diverse vocabulary in Spanish and now you know the basics, just the basics. You can’t get past that because in Spanish class you can’t learn more Spanish words.

Student Participant J: I just know that when I was in Mexico, I spoke a lot of Spanish and ever since I came here, to CCHS, I’m forgetting everything.

Students concluded that based on their observations, teachers and administrators at CCHS did not understand the importance of bilingualism, and hence, prescribed to the idea that the English Only approach is best and that a minimal curriculum in Spanish would address students’ language needs.

### **Cultural Representation**

Besides the lack of linguistic opportunities to maintain and develop their first and second language, students concluded that both their school wall space, school culture and curriculum had little representation of their Latinx culture. Because of the school’s focus on a classical education, the majority of culture found around them consisted of Greco-Roman or European culturally relevant materials. I asked them to discuss how this lack of representation affected them. During this discussion Student Participant L shared how she felt about the lack of representation

What is that saying? (Lack of representation). That is saying that you don’t care about me. You want me to go to college and do well, but it’s not true. They don’t care. They don’t care about my culture or where I came from or how that affects me....they don’t care, not even enough to put up a damn poster.

Like Student Participant L, other students shared the same sentiment. Student Participant D, shared his opinion about the lack of representation.

It is difficult to go here because we don’t have a lot of cultural things to show from our own countries or whatever, and we don’t really learn about them, as we would like to learn. It is difficult trying to find something that showed a piece of who you are. That is wrong because you can find a piece of who they are [teachers and administrators]; they don’t have to worry about not fitting in. This school is for them, not us. They don’t want to show our culture on purpose.

Students reported that other cultures (especially Greco-Roman) were a priority in their classroom and on their walls. Moreover, this lack of diverse representation made students feel as though their culture and language were not seen as important. This theme led students to discuss other places where culturally relevant Latinx items were not apparent, such as the curriculum.

### **Curriculum**

During the discussion of the lack of cultural representation, students included their experiences with their school curriculum, aside from their ESL classes, which like their school culture, was



made up of mostly European cultural representation and very little Latinx cultural representation. Student Participant F described the content of their curriculum: "They just talk a lot about people (Caucasian) that we don't really know instead of people we actually know and we don't talk about our roots and stuff like that." As a result of the emphasis on European cultures, the students agreed that the curriculum did not maintain or support them in celebrating their cultural identity. Instead, students like Student Participant B felt forced into the European culture. "You're not really given a right to choose whether you can really stay true to your Mexican roots or just blend into the American culture because it is what's available." Like Student Participant B, Student Participant L shared his concern with the over representation of European culture:

Over here [at CCHS] we don't really talk about our culture and at home our parents don't really take time to teach us none of that either. So basically when people ask us about our culture, we don't know anything about it. So I guess it is kind of stripping us of our heritage.

Student participants felt that the Eurocentric curriculum along with English Only policies that forced them to not use their primary language, encouraged them to substitute their cultural knowledge and identity for European culture, or as one participant put it, the curriculum was pressuring them to give up their roots and become "white." As a result, some students reported losing their cultural knowledge and language.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the experiences of low- income Latinx English language learners (ELL) in oneMidwestern Catholic school in order to see how the school creates/supports students' language experiences. Based on student discussions discussions, several themes developed.

#### **Lack of Linguistic Opportunities**

CCHS advertises itself as an English (only) Immersion school. Although the school was English Immersion, ESL classes were offered to recently arrived students, and Spanish was also offered and mandatory for all to take. Outside of the ESL and Spanish courses, students were expected to use predominantly English in the classroom. According to the students, they were only permitted to use Spanish during free time (before or after school, during homeroom, during lunch, and in between classes) and during Spanish class only. The use of Spanish outside of those domains was a punishable offence. The reality, and out of necessity, many students used Spanish in the classroom for communicating with one another, to clarify information and instructions, to brainstorm, to work in small groups, and to socialize. By not allowing students to use Spanish, the learning of academic concepts may not happen in either language and therefore students will be more likely to experience academic failure because they do not have content knowledge in either language. In addition, not allowing students to use their primary language in school "can cause emotional and psychological impairment in students' educational futures" (García-Nevarez, Stafford & Arias, 2005, p. 296) and can result in behavioral problems, low self-esteem, conduct disorder, a higher percentage of parent-child conflict and alienation and depression (Lau, McCabe, Yeh, Garland, Hough & Landsverk, 2005).

When teachers accept Spanish in the classroom, they allow students to learn content and demonstrate their knowledge of the content. This gives students, ESL or not, an opportunity to be academically successful because they are not falling behind in acquiring content. In addition, allowing students to use Spanish in the classroom allows students to be more open to learning by reducing the degree of language and culture shock (Auerbach, 1993). Allowing Spanish in the classroom is beneficial, not detrimental to the success of students.

Despite the fact that a plethora of research exists to challenge English only curricula, the teachers and administrators see the English Only policy as natural and commonsense. They see

this policy as a way to "better prepare" students for college. This coded talk about issues of language plays well into the master mainstream narrative that "American equals white, and white equals superiority" (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011, p. 60). Therefore, adopting the English Immersion program at CCHS and offering minimal ESL services are purposefully adopted to address the student deficits and bring them closer to the norms of whiteness (Zamudio et al., 2011). The reality is that because race and racism are endemic in American society, CCHS students will never be able to "claim" their "whiteness" because of their non-white heritage (DeCuir-Gundy, 2006). The result of these policies (students becoming more fluent in English) is purposefully and skillfully slow and, of course, at the will and design of those in power (Milner, 2008). In return, the teachers and administrators on the other hand "do not have to alter their own ways and systems, statuses, and privileges of experiencing life" (Milner, 2008, p. 335). These teachers and administrators do not have to worry about speaking Spanish, or about becoming culturally competent because students will "become white."

### **Cultural Representation**

Although not an original focus in this study, cultural representation became an important topic in our conversations. Student Participants observed the lack of culturally relevant Latinx materials as a problem and major theme. Student participants agreed that the curriculum and school environment did not maintain, and/or support them in celebrating their cultural identity. Instead, their schooling experience was "subtractive" (Valenzuela, 1999) in nature. Like the experience of Mexican-American youth in Valenzuela's (1999) *Subtractive Schooling*, the students at CCHS concluded that their school functioned in a subtractive manner. For both, students at CCHS and at Seguin High school (school site from book *Subtracting Schooling*), the school took away and devalued the knowledge and capital students brought into the school. Students were then encouraged to exchange their cultural knowledge and identity for European culture.

Students at CCHS desired a multicultural curriculum. They were interested in reading and learning about the heroes, the stories and the histories of their own people and the people who lived in their communities. They wanted to become knowledgeable and active citizens in their pluralistic communities and they agreed that they were not receiving this kind of training at CCHS. The students' reality was that administrators and staff purposefully chose the curriculum and school environment; it was the culture they knew and felt comfortable with after all.

### **The Need for Bilingual Education**

The importance of being bilingual was expressed by many of the teachers and staff; however, the English only policy and the actions of the teachers demonstrate otherwise. CCHS demonstrated a "fixation on teaching English as quickly as possible" (Stanford Working Group, 1993, p. 8) without understanding what the repercussions of doing so were. These students understood very clearly that the teachers and administrators were very biased about language acquisition methodologies and the need to receive content and instruction in their primary language because they believed English immersion was the key to acquiring English.

Students longed for the opportunity to learn academic content and many spoke to the need for bilingual education opportunities in their school. The opportunity for bilingual programming at CCHS was not possible because the talk about the benefits of English immersion are strongly rooted in the foundation and mission of the school. This faulty narrative plays well into the master mainstream narrative that English is the superior language and that speaking English only is the American thing to do (Zamudio, et al., 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In other words, there is value in white identity (DeCuir-Gundy, 2006) and in establishing and maintaining this reputation.

Although CP schools like this one places a strong emphasis on achievement and overall better academic opportunities for marginalized students, the reality is that ESL students at CCHS are

not achieving academically. While talking with teachers and administrators, they often described students as able to achieve based on the work they put in, the effort they make, and the obstacles they clear (Ullucci & Battey, 2011). This “pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps” mentality does not take into consideration how the school’s policies have failed to provide equal opportunity and racial equity. In other words, the teachers and administrators do not take into consideration the school’s subtractive language policies. The disempowering curricula are impeding the ability of ESL students to become academically successful.

The choice program offered an opportunity for low income families to attend urban Catholic schools. This shift in student enrollment brought new challenges to urban Catholic schools who are now serving higher numbers of children in poverty, children of color, and children who are English language learners (Scanlan, 2008). Unlike the studies done in the mid 1980’s and early 1990’s that address the effectiveness of Catholic schools for poor children of color, the narratives collected in this research paint a different picture, at least for English Language Learners. Their reality is that their school is not providing ELLs with opportunities to achieve academically; these students are not provided the tools to learn English or learn content in their primary language. The school doesn’t have a working ESL program, mandates an English Only environment and offers a curriculum that is Eurocentric in nature. In addition, the Spanish class students take is not conducive to Spanish Heritage speakers. As a result, students struggle to develop fluency in English, to maintain/develop their Spanish, and are failing academically in almost every subject. The administration and the majority of the teachers at the school rarely equate poor academic performance experienced by ELLs with the lack of language opportunities and instead blame the students for not caring enough for their education. The Notre Dame Task Force on the Participation of Latina/o Children and Families in Catholic Schools (2009) calls for the recruitment of more Latina/o students in Catholic schools; however, if schools like CCHS continue to offer subtractive language policies, they will only prepare ELLs for failure (also see Joseph, 2012).

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### Biography

Tatiana Joseph is an assistant professor in Teaching and Learning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she teaches courses in second language acquisition. Her research interests center on the idea of quality educational opportunities for urban students, especially English Language Learners. Specifically, her research focuses on First Language Maintenance, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Critical Race Theory and curriculum development. Prior to her professorship, she worked as a Spanish teacher and a mentor to students in her community. She also served as a School Board Director for Milwaukee Public Schools representing the community she grew up in. Because of her work and commitment to public education, Dr. Joseph was awarded the 2014 Marquette University College of Education Young Alumna of the Year. Dr. Joseph received a B.A in Secondary Education and Spanish from Marquette University, and a Ph.D in Urban Education from the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin.