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### Shifting Education From Theoretical to Practical

Juan Ledesma Mendoza

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Shifting Education From Theoretical to Practical

Juan Ledesma Mendoza

Claremont Graduate University

Teacher Education Program

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to Marisela and Humberto, I will not waste the opportunity you have given me. To Araliz, Christopher, and the rest of our family, may I serve as an example and only the beginning. To Diana, thank you for inspiring me and showing me what truly matters.

### **Abstract**

My parents always emphasized the value of education and the opportunity it could breed. With this in mind, I set out within my community and hometown, teaching at the very same high school I graduated from. My background directly shapes the educator I am, the values I hold, and the biases that may impact me. Through student research, I was able to look at three case studies and glean insight as to how to better serve my specific kids. I reflected on my community, school, and classroom allowing me to inspect the different layers impacting my students and how to navigate them. Reflecting on my research as a whole I was able to further develop my commitment as a social justice educator. Ultimately what I hope to describe in this ethnography is the benefits, reasoning, and tangible approaches to shifting education from theoretical to practical.

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## **Part A: Guidelines and Background**

### **Introduction**

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela 2003). This message was instilled in me at a very young age by my parents, both of whom immigrated to the United States in hopes of providing me with an opportunity to pursue the “American Dream.” It is through this lens that I view my world as I begin my journey to teach, even though I must recognize that this dream is not as simple or straightforward as I and my parents may have originally believed. Rather, this goal is much more complicated, and it is only by first inspecting one's own positionality and perspectives that we as educators can begin to expand our scope and use education as a tool to provide agency.

My upbringing in Southern California shapes the person I am and serves as my motivation for wanting to teach. It is through the support and backing of my family that a desire to help my people has been founded. My culture, one tied deeply to community and a sense of togetherness, informs my decision, as I have always seen that helping others is a core value for those around me. Through my own educational experiences, I have witnessed the influence that education can have. I have the struggle of someone's voice being taken away, as well as the power in someone who did not previously have a voice gaining one. Realizing this is what has driven me to teach and help strengthen the power of those in my community. I want to work directly with students who look similar to myself- students who have been historically underserved and do not feel themselves reflected in their teachers. This, as a result, directly mirrors my assets and areas of growth. My strengths stem from the relationships I hope to form with my students, and the strong basis of respect and accountability I wish to establish. My needs

come from my necessity to continue to question my preconceived notions around expectations and backgrounds, knowing that only through continuously facing these obstacles I can help mitigate my biases and ensure efficacy in the classroom. My goal and objective is to provide my students with relevant and quality education that can in turn help them find their voice. In doing so, I can help instill agency and provide guidance so that they know how to use it.

## **Journey to Teaching**

### ***My Positionality***

In order to be an effective teacher to a diverse group of students with differing strengths, needs, and goals, I must first unpack my own positionality and analyze how it has informed my pursuit of teaching. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) define positionality as, “the concept that our perspectives are based on our place in society” (pg. 15). This means that familial, cultural, economic, and social experiences shape the positions people are in, resulting in their perspectives being skewed accordingly. This matters within a classroom because becoming aware of our biases and preconceived ideas allows us to more effectively mitigate negative impacts and ensure efficacy for all students. Within my own positionality, two factors most directly speak to the person I am and my goals in teaching: my family and my culture.

Most directly, I am shaped by my familial experiences. Proudly, having been born and raised in Pomona, CA, my family has played an extremely large role in the formation of my desire to teach. It was my parents who first made the move from Guadalajara, Jalisco to migrate to the United States, in search of new opportunities, not only for themselves but for the family they wanted to create. It was through the promise of a good education that they believed they could offer their children a better life. From as early as I can remember, my parents drilled

within me the idea that, through education, I could get a good job, earn a lot of money, and have a nice life. I took this idea with me throughout my public schooling, but as I got older, my perspective began to evolve. I realized that education was much more complicated than I had originally believed, and although it was a tool that could do much good, not everyone was in the same position or had the same opportunities to obtain it.

My culture is the other largest influence on my upbringing and experiences. Growing up in a Mexican-American household, respect and community were core values that guided the way I conducted myself at home and in school. Those around me valued being honest, upfront, and having high character, reflecting the way I was meant to behave in the classroom. Furthermore, family and community were supposed to become uplifted in conjunction with one's success. It is not only enough to help yourself, but you must help those in your home, in your larger family, and in the great community. Everyone rises together. However, these two ideas could sometimes conflict, as respect (specifically within the classroom) could be a particularly confusing topic, and the value of family and community could sometimes disagree with dominant norms in school. All in all, it is these experiences that most directly shape who I am and describe my positionality.

### ***My Decision to Be a Teacher***

One summer during my lower class years in high school, I worked construction with my father. For the entirety of the break, I saw first hand what he had to go through in order to provide my family with the life we had. It was then that I was reminded of my parents' desire for me to study, uplifting not only myself but those around me. It is with this background in mind that I formed the decision to become an educator. My formative days working construction with



my dad cemented the idea that I wanted to better myself and give back to my community. I saw first hand how difficult work could be, and I wanted to help provide more options for myself and those that looked to me. As I entered college, I honed my desire to work for my people, specifying my dream to teach.

As I began my undergraduate career, I realized the power of education. I entered classrooms where historic achievements had been made, professors were leaders in their fields, and my classmates were some of the most brilliant people ever. I was sharing the same spaces as these folks, and I began to become self aware. My classmates had private teachers their entire lives, studied abroad, and attended schools with amazing resources and great funding- simply put, they had many experiences and privileges I did not.

My background was very different, but education was the venue that allowed me to have the opportunity to study at the same university. Schooling had gotten me to this point, and it could continue to push me to be successful. This feeling is what focused my desires and cemented the idea that, through education, I could serve my community and provide them with possible roadmaps to accessing other options and resources. I had experienced some of the many challenges related to school, such as the Standards-Based Education and zero tolerance policies (Marzano et al., 2013, p. 2), but I had gained perspective that could be used by those after me to more effectively traverse the path. Becoming a teacher would allow me to focus on education, the specific tool that provided me with a voice within the classroom. Through this agency, I felt empowered and could help empower other students to learn and feel self efficacy.

***What and Who Do I Want to Teach?***

When brainstorming what I wanted to teach, I thought back to my experiences within K-12 education, specifically the aspects I most enjoyed and those I did not. I very quickly found the trend that I most gravitated to those classes where I was able to communicate myself. English became the subject where I was most clearly and effectively able to express what I wanted to say. Language provided me the ability to articulate my thoughts and feelings, directly feeding into my agency and feeling of empowerment. When I walked away from those English classes I enjoyed, I walked away with a feeling of self efficacy: I could stand up for myself and effectively articulate what I wanted to say. This feeling of assurance and self belief is what confirms my desire to teach and share the tools for students to feel this as well.

Answering the question of who I want to teach is very straightforward for me- this is to say, I want to serve those students that have been historically underserved. Typically, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, most often students of color- those students that look and grew up similarly to myself- fit in this category. For much too long, students from these upbringings have been educated from a deficit mindset, that of a culture of poverty, where many view them to not care about education, not value school, and sometimes be deemed not capable of learning or being successful (Hammond, 2015, p. 14). This approach is what drives me to become an educator within the very same classrooms that these students attend. By providing them with teachers that are reflective of who they are, we help demonstrate that they too can envision themselves within these roles. They can be successful and in positions of power. Hearing voices in the classroom that encourage, believe in them, and come from similar backgrounds helps establish trust and relatability. This then serves as the foundation for a classroom that empowers and inspires agency.

### ***The Role of Critical Social Justice***

Critical social justice is a driving force and a principal tenant to the very foundation of my desires and beliefs as an educator. As detailed by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), critical social justice is the theoretical framework that recognizes that society is stratified and unequal- social powers, resources, and capital is constantly being used to benefit dominant norms (p. xx). This serves as the very foundation for my vision of myself as a teacher. Sometimes folks think about social justice and the equity of our students as an afterthought that can be added on top of curriculum or rules. This approach is flawed in my view, and I believe this framework should be the bedrock for the classroom environment.

It is my firm belief that by first establishing a strong classroom ethos in which students feel respected, validated, and cared for, we can then more effectively differentiate and serve the needs of those we educate. Research backs this view, as evidence points to the benefits of establishing a classroom environment where social justice is a principal tenant by letting the students know the space is safe, encouraging, and maintains high expectations (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015, p. 2). Providing the students with a say in these classroom norms and customs allows their opinions to be highlighted and facilitates ownership, as the students feel a sense of pride in it being their classroom. This foundation is what all else is built upon and serves the instruction and curriculum. Rather than being something that is added on top, critical social justice is the very focal point that facilitates learning, action, and advocacy within the classroom.

### **Assets and Needs**

#### ***Strengths and Areas of Growth***

When assessing myself so that I may find ways to be more self aware and in turn more empathetic and effective as a teacher, I must make sure to inspect my strengths and areas of growth. It is by acknowledging and building from one's assets, and scaffolding and supporting one's needs, that we can be most effective in growing as educators and bettering ourselves as individuals. Rather than not taking advantage of the skills we have, it is more constructive to leverage our areas of expertise or excellence. As such, it is more productive to shine a light on the areas in which we need to improve, so that we can better our teaching methods and more effectively connect with students.

The largest strengths I believe I hold are those relating to my ability to connect and form strong relationships with my students. My background lays the foundation for my socioemotional and communication skills, which I believe are vital in allowing me to form connections that result in higher levels of student interest and engagement. The passion that the students feel comes as a result of the relatability I believe I hold as their educator. I have faced a similar K-12 upbringing as many of these students, and as such, I know it is refreshing and more applicable if a person that comes from a similar culture to them teaches. With this as my backing, I then use my academic knowledge and socio-cultural capital to establish a classroom ethos of respect and accountability that will be conducive to a high standard of student learning and growth. The assets I carry will directly lead to an effective classroom environment.

In regards to my areas of growth, I most directly point to my preconceived notions and ideas around expectations and backgrounds. Having been raised in a very supportive and encouraging family, I have always found myself to be held to high expectations, and as a result hold high expectations of others. The issue lies in being able to take my positionality into

account and inspect why my point of view may affect my ideas around expectations. This is a difficult need to address, but by taking context into account and looking to empathize with others' perspectives, I can appropriately adjust my ideas and maintain a high level of accountability that is informed.

Building from this is another area of growth centering on preconceived notions relating to backgrounds. Most succinctly, I know I have not experienced all backgrounds or upbringings, and as such, I am directly informed and shaped by the background and upbringing I do have. I only hold my own experiences and prior knowledge. This lets me know I have to be open minded and receptive to the experiences and points of views of others. I may feel that I know what is best, but I must become aware and acknowledge that my perspective is limited, and only by making a conscious effort to expand it can I become a better educator.

### ***Implicit and Explicit Biases***

Continuing to inspect my own viewpoints and perspectives leads me to acknowledge and analyze my implicit and explicit biases. When thinking of the educator I hope to be, I reflect back on my core beliefs of respect and accountability, and I know that by holding onto biases rather than adjusting my own perspectives, I cannot effectively support my students.

To begin, I can analyze my implicit biases relating to background and supposed effort level. I acknowledge that I come from a place that values respect and work ethic, and as such, I have a particular focus on said values. However, this emphasis can be detrimental, as I can anticipate over focusing on this factor and as a result, jumping to assumptions about student effort and care. I may feel that if a student seems interested in my class and is committed to the work, then they value education, but I must check my biases and make a conscious and direct

effort to be aware that students have many backgrounds that can affect their relationship to school. Not everyone shares the same experiences that I did, and as a result, it would be best for all of my students that I be open minded and empathetic of their perspectives.

Next, I can begin to inspect my explicit biases. I can directly point to my preconceived notions around manners of dress and ways of presenting oneself. Having been raised to value a certain kind of style of dressing and interacting with others, I can anticipate having explicit biases relating to student attire. I must recognize that, although I value traditional attire, such as a more preppy way of dressing, this does not make my preference inherently better than my students', and as such, should not play a role in my classroom. In recognizing this, I can more effectively teach all my students, not just those that I believe to dress well, or in a manner that I find agreeable.

### ***Efficacy as a Critical Social Justice Educator***

My ability to form strong and meaningful relationships with my students is the skill I will use to help mitigate the negative impacts of my biases, ensuring efficacy as a critical social justice educator. To most effectively address the preconceived notions and ideas I may have, I believe implementing an effective classroom ecology can help strengthen student-teacher dynamics while promoting equity.

By ensuring that the classroom holds an environment where students have a voice and provide input, I can better acknowledge when my biases come to play. Being transparent and upfront with the students regarding my needs and areas of growth will provide context for my actions, and help clarify and communicate my intentions. Constructing norms that encourage student communication where they feel welcomed to approach and talk to me, can help ensure

biases are addressed. As a result, this will force me to adjust my perspectives and teaching methods to best serve my specific students. Furthermore, this creation of strong norms and customs sets routines that students will follow and respect. Establishing this consistency from the beginning of the year will further reflect my commitment to the students while also demonstrating unwavering and high expectations. Through this framework, I believe I can effectively create a foundation of respect and accountability where my students communicate with me in order to help check my biases, ensuring efficacy in the classroom.

## **Goals**

### ***Goals and Objectives***

My goal for my first year of teaching is direct: practice establishing a productive and constructive classroom ecology that helps mediate biases and preconceived notions. It is my belief that, if in this first year of teaching, I can focus on establishing a solid foundation of trust and respect, I will be better set for the year and more likely to succeed. Through creating clear and concise classroom norms that are agreed upon by the entire class, I can feed an environment of accountability where students feel a sense of ownership over their classroom. I believe this directly plays into the students' voice within the classroom and results in more effective teaching that promotes agency.

In order to reach this objective, I believe it is crucial that I place the utmost focus and importance on the introduction to the classroom and the start of the year. If I can establish this classroom environment from the onset of the academic calendar, then the students will become accustomed to the norms and regulations, and be more responsive to the curriculum I will provide them. Starting with this foundation as a key principle to the way I teach, as opposed to

being an afterthought, and incorporating it into units or lessons, leads to a more genuine impact that the students will feel. This classroom ecology will serve the students and also benefit me, as it will keep me accountable and mediate biases I have, as students are encouraged to communicate, and the classroom environment as a whole is conducive to transparency and honesty.

### ***Challenges***

When I reflect on the challenges I suspect I will face I think back to biases around my upbringing and expectations. I know that I am directly informed by my own background, and that this background is only one of many that students may have. I believe that, in order for me to be an effective educator, I must challenge myself to look at the points of view of others, so I may best learn to adjust myself and my curriculum to meet the needs of the specific students I am educating. I can directly point to the challenges I believe I may face in differentiating instruction for those students with special education needs, having not had this experience or background. Nonetheless, I know that this group of students in specific has been historically underserved and many times ignored (Torres & Barber, 2017, p. 4), so it is my job to help address their needs and check my biases to do so.

I hope to achieve this goal of differentiating high quality education for all my students by reaching out to my peers and practicing transparency with my students. I recognize that I do not have all the answers and that my peers can offer valuable insight. It is through these peers who I hope to learn from and glean insight from their perspective in order to better serve my students. If those around me have had experiences working with students within special education or other groups I may not feel I have had as much experience with, my peers can offer support and



possible strategies to ensure that the needs of all my students are being met. Building from this, I can practice transparency with my students so that they know about my actions and motives. By being transparent, I can directly communicate to my students that I have areas that I would like to grow in, and that I will make a conscious effort to listen to their opinions and validate their experiences. In working together, backed by an environment of respect and trust, I believe I can effectively address the challenges that may arise in my goal of serving my students.

### ***Assessing Progress***

I will use metrics revolving around student attitude, engagement, and performance in order to assess my progress in meeting my goal of establishing an effective and conducive classroom ecology. I believe a positive student attitude will be reflective of a growth oriented classroom, and in order to gauge this, I will implement classroom surveys at the beginning of the term, intermediately, and at the end of the year, measuring student feedback on satisfaction. I will collect and analyze the information in order to adjust my actions and curriculum accordingly. Student engagement will be measured as I check for student understanding relating to real world applicability. Throughout lessons, I will incorporate questions relating to the students' everyday life. This will help me see if the material is relevant and if the students are able to connect what is being taught to the outside world. This will help me understand their engagement level and how to adjust my teaching in order to better connect with the students. Students will also be assessed on their performance relating to tests and narrative essays. Through different forms of writing and reading comprehension, I will provide students with multiple venues to access material and, in turn, demonstrate knowledge and comprehension of the subject.

## **Part B: Student Research**

### **Introduction**

After taking the time to look at my own biases and recognize how my experiences have shaped me, I believed it appropriate to take a look at my students and analyze how they have been shaped themselves. To better get to know my pupils, I would conduct interviews with 3 focus students. Each respective student would qualify under the category of English Learner, IEP/504/Gate Status, or student with significant life experience. I would select students all within my 10th Grade English classes, and look to discuss their experiences, challenges, areas of strength, areas of growth, and familial/cultural connections. I would conduct a student interview held after school, in addition to a home interview held with the parents/guardians of each focus student. Having gotten the opportunity to glean valuable insight from the families, I would then provide my adjustments and recommendations in regards to how to best serve the specific needs and goals of each student. I believe this experience has helped open my eyes to the personal lives of those who I serve and demonstrated that we are multifaceted individuals. Only through intentional, deliberate, and purposeful teamwork can we provide the best education for our kids.

### **Case Study: Linda**

#### ***Demographic Information***

We may start to discuss the interview analysis for the first focus student selected. Beginning by setting some background information, said student will be referred to by the pseudonym *Linda*. Linda is aged 15, of Hispanic/Latino descent, her gender identity is female, and was born in the United States. The student's language classification is that of Long-Term English Learner; her primary language listed when entering school was Spanish, and she spent

more than six years classified as an English Learner without progressing towards reclassification.

This is the very reason Linda was selected as the first focus student for the interview analysis.

Linda has strong social and speaking skills with relation to the English Language, but could grow in terms of her writing and reading skills. Spending time with Linda, I came to find her to be an incredibly kind, empathetic, and bright individual. She is a prime example of a student classified as an English Learner who has unique learning needs and skills that impact her education.

### ***Assets & Needs: Academic Standing***

In terms of strengths and needs, both inside and outside the classroom, Linda maintains many assets and areas of growth that should be taken into consideration. Relating to her areas of strength, Linda is a very focused student who is most generally on task, and very helpful throughout the class. Our focus student has taken pride and investment within the classroom and enjoys helping myself as well as her peers. She constantly volunteers to pass out papers or help change the date or update the calendar. Linda likes being in the classroom and wants to maintain it in its best shape. As Tomlinson has argued, when students take ownership of the classroom and hold pride in their roles, they are more invested and likely to learn (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 86).

Linda is also very comfortable sharing aloud and works very well in groups. She has great social and speaking skills. Relating to her areas of growth, Linda can look to improve her writing skills, refining grammar conventions, subject noun-agreement, and predicates. Linda has also expressed a desire for help with developing a larger or more complex vocabulary. Linda has been an amazing asset to have within the class and has been scoring well on both formative and summative assessments. Her engagement and willingness to participate have translated directly

to her success, though there is still room for improvement in the development of familiarity with more complex grammatical structures, expanded vocabulary, and English conventions.

Linda's great contributions to the class highlight the opportunity for the student to learn in more purposeful ways, ultimately leading to a more effective learning experience as a whole. Linda is a very polite and helpful student; she is a model for the class, demonstrating how to engage and participate with classroom routines, daily activities, and assessments. Linda is not only on task, but also facilitates and helps her peers learn. She has been such an obvious help that one student who was struggling within the class asked to be moved specifically next to her. The change proved to be effective. Linda is very friendly and can sometimes be talkative, but whenever the time comes to maintain quiet, she does so effectively. In regards to her academic progress, Linda is on pace in terms of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, the latter being areas in which she has the most room to grow. Data collected, such as entries within our composition notebook, writing activities, and presentations used as summative assessments, describe to us that Linda is succeeding in her academic tasks with room for improvement relating to reading and writing. More frequent practice, repetition, and learning routines would aid in the growth of our English Learner focus student.

### ***Assets & Needs: Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

Now that I have set some foundational information with context, demographic data, and background details, we can begin to analyze the student interview itself and the insights gained from discussing with Linda. The interview was conducted by asking a series of 10 guiding questions, each having possible follow-ups and probes. Linda and I first began by playing an icebreaker relating to a fact about ourselves, and we then got into the main questions.

We began the interview by discussing what Linda liked to do, asking what her interests were relating to hobbies, sports, and clubs. Linda began to discuss a bit about herself, letting me know that this year she tried out for Cross Country and made the team, and that she was planning on trying out for the basketball team as well. She was making a conscious effort to meet new people; Linda wanted to make more friends and socialize. She told me her goal was to be a bit more active, both socially and physically, and for that reason, she was focusing on playing team sports.

Transitioning, we began to discuss the languages that Linda spoke both at home and in school. Linda revealed that she knew a total of three languages: Spanish, English, and Mandarin. She discussed that her primary language is Spanish, as that was the first language she was taught by her parents. Linda's family migrated from Mexico, and as such, Spanish was both their home and primary language. This then led us to discuss English, as Linda talked about her journey with the language. Linda said, "I learned English going to school, 'cause my parents didn't know how to speak English that much, so I guess I had to learn it by myself." Although our first focus student was born in the United States, her home language was one other than English, and this directly impacted her educational trajectory. Research tells us that students who hold a home language other than that of English, experience a vastly different educational journey specifically relating to resources in home language, access to materials, and individualized support (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 18). It was through formal schooling itself that Linda was forced to learn and grasp the language: she did not have the option or choice. She went on to recount, "I guess I learned it because the teachers mostly speak English. At school, they mostly speak English." She ended by detailing the last language she was familiar with, Mandarin. Linda explained this was

her second year taking Chinese as a foreign language in school, and she was beginning to become more proficient.

Having entered the topic of language, we then more specifically began to discuss the challenges in the classroom that Linda had faced relating to the subject. Here, Linda very poignantly brought up her want to develop her vocabulary. She stated, “Well, sometimes people say big words or words that I don’t know the meaning.” Linda expressed that this was an area of her English in which she felt some challenges; these more developed or complicated words often lead to confusion. In the same breath that she brought up the challenge, Linda also mentioned a clear technique she could implement to improve this skill. She said she knew that by practicing reading, and spelling more and more words, she would improve. I agreed with her assessment, and told her that it could definitely be a component that is implemented within the class. Having spent some time in the classroom, spelling is definitely going to be an area of emphasis for my students.

Talking first about the challenges Linda had with language, we then shifted to talking about the tools and resources that could aid her in her academic success. When I began to ask questions relating to resources that could help, Linda kept mentioning actions she could take. It was evident that she wanted to take responsibility for her own learning, but I had to specify that it was not necessarily about things she could do, rather, about the aid that teachers could provide her. Now having more context, our focus student did share one strategy she believed could help her, and this tactic revealed aspects of her character as well. In terms of her instructors, Linda shared, “If they’re a good writer then I guess it’ll stick to me too, and I’ll be a good writer.” Linda expressed the desire to have high-quality teachers. She shared that, when she felt she had a

strong teacher in the classroom, she was more likely to learn. As discussed by Ayers and Alexander-Tanner, students are aware of the quality of their teachers and know they are better set to learn with instructors that are well qualified (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 98). This was emblematic of the strength of the teacher, our focus student had held previously. Something as simple as having an individual who was prepared and qualified for their job seemed like a luxury. To best serve Linda, it was evident that I had to show her that not only I genuinely cared, but that I had also put in the effort to be qualified. I would come prepared, and with a genuine purpose to class.

From here, the conversation topic changed, and we began to discuss goals that Linda held. I asked our focus student to talk about a short-term goal, medium-term goal, and long-term goal. Linda first addressed her most immediate goal, letting me know that she wanted to get her grades up for all of her classes. She told me that she wanted to pick up her grades and end this year with higher grades than she did the year prior. Then, Linda explained her medium-term goal: she wanted to show others that she is a good person and wanted to work on being more secure. She told me that she believed she was a good person and wanted to show others, and for that reason, she was playing sports and looking to be more social. Lastly, and most emphatically, Linda told me her long term goal, “I want to go to college just to, like, prove people wrong and make my parents happy, ‘cause I think I’m going to be the first one to go to college.” Linda expressed to me that not everyone has believed in her or supported her goals. She described to me her aunts who tell her and her family that she is not going to make it to college, rather, she is going to be just like them and not pursue school. It is Linda’s goal to prove them wrong and show her parents that she is going to be the first. She plans to go to college and therefore be the

model for her siblings. As Tomlinson has described, many students hold the responsibility of being the first in their family to go to college, they must venture this journey alone, all the while providing a model for those that follow (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 97). It is evident that Linda is aware of her role and is determined to succeed for herself, as well as her family.

With this concept of family in mind, we moved on to the next set of questions: who is important to you and who are you important too? Linda had mentioned her family several times throughout the interview and had expressed a clear love for them. It was for this reason that I wanted to delve a bit deeper. Regarding who and what mattered to her, she immediately mentioned her family. Although the second question seemed to take her back a bit, she believed she mattered to her family as well, specifically because of the role she played with her siblings. Linda stated, “My parents see me as, like, a role model for them, and I think they are grateful for me, ‘cause I can teach them too.” Linda was aware that, as the oldest in the family, she had the responsibility of helping lead the way for her siblings. Research tells us that for many students born eldest, specifically within families with strong cultural traditions, they must provide a role model and take on the job of a teacher (El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, 2017, p. 24). Linda holds the responsibility of going about the journey first, and as such, showing her siblings the way. She had to do so by teaching them language, as she was the first to learn to speak English, and she was therefore a role model for her brothers and sisters to look up to. Linda was very aware that her actions were much larger than just her own and had an impact on her family. She wanted to do her best, not only for herself, but for her parents and siblings.

Wrapping up this same thread dealing with family, Linda and I discussed directly what her family looked like, and what their traditions were. We had touched on the subject of family



throughout the entirety of the interview, but more particularly, I asked Linda to describe the different members and their respective roles. It was then that our focus student detailed what her family unit looked like, that being her mother, father, younger sister, younger brother, baby brother, and herself. Again, when discussing her family, Linda clearly demonstrated the care and genuine love she holds for them. She emphasized her role as the oldest sibling, meaning that she must serve as a defacto teacher and help show her siblings the English language in order for them to succeed. Hammond echoes this same theme of responsibility, describing how the eldest child of the family often must take up the mantle of teacher to support their parents, and help guide the way for their siblings (Hammond, 2015, p. 91). Linda detailed to me that, although she had to learn the English language herself, she was happy that now she could help her siblings so they did not have to. From here, Linda described to me a tradition her family holds, that being giving each other gifts on Christmas. Linda described to me that although they do not have much to give, they put in thought and effort, and what they receive means a lot. She shared about her family: “We get something and we are grateful for it, because at least they tried to give it to us, you know?” It became more and more clear as the interview progressed that Linda was a family-oriented individual who cared about doing right by her parents and siblings.

Lastly, we come to the conclusion of our interview for our first focus student. The final question I asked Linda was what she would do if she had 1,000,000 dollars. This question was meant to end on a bit of a fun note to see what interesting response our student would come up with given the parameters. It was here that Linda told me what she would do if she were given the opportunity. Unsurprisingly, Linda continued with the theme of family coming first, and she expressed that she would give the money to her mom. She disclosed that her mom had an

accident when she was younger, and as such did not have full adult teeth. Linda told me that if given the opportunity, she would use the money to help buy her mom new teeth. She had done research into the procedure and it was expensive, but Linda told me it was a real-life goal she wanted to achieve.

Looking at the interview for my focus student 1, it is clear that several insights can be drawn relating to the discussion with Linda. Most prominently is Linda's clear love of her family and a sense of responsibility in helping her siblings. It is evident that Linda takes her role within her family seriously, and wants to be a role model for those that look up to her. With this said, Linda is aware that she has had to do much on her own in terms of learning English to succeed, and she hopes to teach others so they do not have to go through the same. Linda is a prime example of an English Learner student who holds many assets and areas of growth in terms of their education. Linda has been a huge asset to the class, helping her peers, volunteering to answer questions, and truly buying into taking responsibility for the class calendar/date. Through these insights, it is evident to me that, in order to best support Linda in the classroom, I must adjust my teaching practices. To best support the learning of my students I must provide scaffolding and aids in order to differentiate for their specific needs and assets. (Torres & Barber, 2017, p. 10). I must be purposeful and thoughtful in incorporating group work, sentence frames/starters, and daily vocabulary exercises to promote language acquisition. These considerations would greatly serve Linda.

### ***Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge***

To begin discussing the home interview of my focus student, I must first lay framework by describing background information relating to Linda's home. Linda lives in a 2 bedroom

apartment located within a larger fenced apartment complex. As I arrived for the interview, Linda and her younger sister waited for me outside, greeting me while they opened up the gate door. They explained that the complex does not let just anyone in, and the neighbors keep an eye out for strangers or folks they do not recognize. As she explained why she greeted me outside and we began to walk towards her house, Linda's father arrived home. He parked his work truck and then walked up towards his front door, his daughters giving him a hug and a kiss as he came up. I introduced myself in Spanish, as Linda had explained both her parents only speak the language, and detailed that I was there for an interview. Linda's father welcomed me into their home.

Once inside the house, I heard Linda's mother call out to say hello as she was cooking in the kitchen. Linda's mother asked Linda and her sister to escort their younger siblings, who had been playing in the kitchen, to the living room, and gave them a tablet to keep them entertained. Linda's mother then walked over and introduced herself, asking me to take a seat at the dining room table and get comfortable. Once settled in, at the table were Linda, Linda's mother, Linda's father, periodically Linda's younger sister who would come and go, and I.

I began by explaining my background and who I was to the family. I shared that I was born at the local city hospital, attended a local elementary school, and then graduated from the same high school at which I currently work. In addition, I shared that I graduated from a university well known in the area, and had now come back to my community to work where I grew up. Providing this connection really impressed Linda's parents in particular and greatly helped to establish the trust I shared with them. Williams describes the importance of establishing a connection with parents, and by telling the family about my background, I was

able to relate to their experiences and communicate my character (Williams, 2019). This is a big reason I believe Linda and her loved ones opened up to me in the way they did. Specifically, Linda's father was very happy to hear that someone from the community was now working in the same schools and hoping to provide a role model for students. I was then very intentional in making it clear that the purpose of the interview was to gain insight into how to become a better educator, and I believe that, overall, this initial introduction went well, and subsequently set up the opportunity for us to have an honest and candid conversation.

Having talked a bit about my background and the purpose of me being there, the family shortly shared a brief introduction of themselves. Linda's family was a bit more reserved at first, but they did share that Linda's father was a taco cook and Linda's mother was a stay at home mom. They expressed that they were a family unit and clearly cared about each other very much. Once the family had gotten a chance to talk about themselves and the foundational information was set, we more formally began the interview process.

I sat with the family and explained that I would be asking a set of open-ended questions, each having possible probes and follow-up questions. The purpose was to gain insight and perspective based on the family's personal experiences, and as such, I asked them to be as honest and share as much as they were willing. At this point, I began recording on my phone and laptop, and we jumped right into it.

To begin, I asked Linda's parents to share about their interests: what were things they enjoyed doing personally? What did they enjoy as a family? Overall, what were their hobbies? Linda's mother was the first to speak up and shared that they greatly enjoy spending time together as a family. They enjoy going out to eat, shopping, or even hanging out at home and

watching a movie. Regardless of the activity, the key aspect is spending time together and enjoying each other's company. They elaborated on this point as Linda's father added that they have many aunts and uncles and enjoy spending time with them as well. Although they may still prefer their time as an immediate family unit, they still reach out to their extended family and value their relationship too.

Having learned a bit about Linda's family's interests, I transitioned to the following topic and asked the family to talk about the languages they speak and the experiences they have gone through in relation to language. As Linda is my focus student under the category of English Learner, I felt that this topic would be especially poignant and impactful. Linda's mother began, and she shared that the family speaks Spanish, and the kids are the only individuals that know and are fluent in English; Linda's mother and father have only a basic understanding. At the house, everyone speaks Spanish, but at school and outside their home the kids speak English. Linda's mother detailed how she only knows a basic level of English that is required in order to be able to survive within the country. She described how at doctors' visits or formal government offices, you need to know the language, because if you do not, it may lead to serious challenges and miscommunications. This point Linda's mother made was a great transition statement and flowed nicely into the subject of the challenges our focus student and her family have faced.

I asked the family to speak on any challenges or obstacles they have faced regarding language. This question seemed to stir up emotions, and brought a couple of direct memories to the forefront. Linda's mother spoke up again regarding a specific situation she had been confronted with. She shared with me a negative experience that she had faced when going to the doctor's office. She described how, when she walked in and asked for help in Spanish, she was

greeted with this response: “Here you’re not supposed to speak Spanish, you must speak English.” The person working at the front desk asked Linda’s mother to stop speaking Spanish, as this was supposedly not correct. The individual told my focus student’s mother, “It is because we are here in the United States, not in Mexico.” This was an obvious and blatant sign of disrespect and brought a direct example of close mindedness to the forefront. As Sensoy and DiAngelo have detailed, families are often times confronted with prejudice and discrimination, and are forced to face these obstacles because of the language they speak (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 68). This is just one example that directly came to the mind of Linda’s parent in regards to the challenges our English Learners and their families face.

As we discussed some of the obstacles Linda and her family have been challenged with, I wanted to transition to some of the possible resources and aids that could help with dealing with education and language. I was particularly interested in their feelings regarding what they believed could help empower them and give them control over their specific situation. Linda’s father chimed in and shared that a big help for them has been their kids. He told me how they rely on their kids for help a lot, and that they are a great asset. Linda’s mother added that also asking for materials in Spanish and being stern in asking for help is an effective strategy. You must push and go out of your way in order to be taken seriously. However, there was one resource Linda’s mother mentioned in specific that she believed to be truly impactful. Linda’s mother shared she wished to go back to school so she could become better educated and informed. She said, “To be able to study, so that it doesn't happen. I have to change because they are not going to.” Linda’s mother wanted to take control, and knew she would have to do this to be able to impact her own situation. This highlights a sentiment shared by Sensoy and DiAngelo;

many families are forced to go out of their way to advocate for themselves as they know others may not help, and this is the best way to better their lives (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 69).

***Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations***

The feeling of empowerment and influencing one's own circumstances directly brought to mind the goals and accomplishments one wishes to reach. I asked Linda's family to share about goals they have and wish to accomplish. For this question, Linda's father added that he wants his kids to do well in school, and he wants his family to be healthy. The family as a whole echoed this sentiment, and it was clear they all had this same drive in mind. Digging a bit deeper, I asked the individual members if they had any personal goals, and this is when Linda's mother jumped in. She told me, "I want to fix my teeth." Due to poor dental resources as a child, Linda's mother was missing several teeth and wished to save up money to get implants. At this point, Linda herself chimed in and said that her goal was to be able to buy her mother new teeth to help improve her self-image and self-esteem. To me, it was clear that Linda greatly cared for her mother, and a direct and tangible goal is to give back and provide for her. Linda embodies a principle discussed by Hammond's research; she is not looking to treat herself, but rather, to care for her loved ones (Hammond, 2015, p. 53).

At this point, I wanted to transition to speaking about Linda's family unit as a whole. I asked a couple of questions that would help reveal the structure to the family unit and how it works. To begin, I posed the question: who is important to you and why? I asked this question to Linda's mother and she had a clear response in mind. She shared, "My children. First and foremost is them, I feel for them." Linda's mother described how her biggest joy in life is being a mother, and she could not be more thankful or appreciative of the position she is in. She detailed

to me that when she became a mother, she then shared a physical part of who she was with other humans. From that moment forward, she felt her children's pain, and wanted to give them everything they could ever need. As her mother said this, I looked at Linda's father, and although he was a bit more stoic, it was evident that he shared similar feelings and internally echoed his wife's words. The clear love this family has for each other was evident and truly highlighted to me the importance that this relationship has within the household and the significance it carries culturally.

Having asked who is important to you, I then wanted to flip the question, and I asked the family: Who are you important to? This seemed to throw off Linda's family a bit, but after taking a second to think about the question, Linda's mother shared out. She described that, although she could not be sure, she hoped she was important to her family. She specifically described that she believed she carried some impact over her immediate family, as well as her own parents and siblings. This response again highlighted the importance of family within the home, and both the cultural and personal significance it carries. As El Yaafouri described, for many people, family is the glue that helps keep them together and gives them a reason to live. (El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, 2017, p. 23).

To wrap up with this topic, I asked Linda's family to describe the different members and their specific roles within the family. Linda's mother took the lead and began with the breakdown. She described how she was the mother and stayed at home to look after the kids, and that Linda's father worked and was the breadwinner for the home. After them came Linda as the eldest, then Linda's younger sister, followed by her younger brother, and lastly, Linda's baby



brother. The role of the children was to go to school and receive an education. Each member of Linda's family was accounted for and played a specific role in allowing the unit to function.

To conclude the interview, I had a final topic I wished to discuss. I asked Linda's family to describe their culture and how they celebrate who they are. This question also brought some confusion, but after providing the probes of possible foods, traditions, and customs, they shared out. Linda's mother detailed how they eat a specific dish that is traditional to the part of Mexico from which they originate. "Morisqueta", or a Mexican plate of rice and beans, is a meal they all love, and is directly tied to their culture and how they represent it. As Olsen has detailed, families hold many different ways of celebrating their culture, but a particularly popular way of doing so is through food (Olsen, 2014, p. 4). As Linda's mother described this dish, I looked around and could see the different members of the family's reactions: they were getting hungry just thinking about it. I was beginning to get hungry myself, and noticed the clock said it was around time for supper.

This wrapped up the formal questionnaire aspect of the interview, I put away my notes and writing instruments, and then Linda's mother began to clear the dining table. I thanked them for sharing their perspectives again and assured them their insights were extremely helpful. Linda's mother then asked if I would like to join them for dinner and I gladly said yes. Linda gathered her siblings up and told them to get ready to eat. Linda then returned to the kitchen to help her mother prepare the meal and helped set the table. They kindly served me a bowl of chicken soup with vegetables. Linda's father continued to talk to me and told me more stories about his work and his family.

### ***Action Plan FS1***

The student and home interviews for Linda were extremely impactful and can provide us great insight into how to best support my student and her needs. Linda serves as our focus student under the category of English Learner, and as such, it is crucial for me to take this into consideration, plan accordingly, and be purposeful in my actions. As Linda revealed through our discussion, she is shaped and driven by her family. She requires specific support regarding vocabulary development and has shown ability to work well with others. Taking these points into account I can implement intentional scaffolds to aid my student. Examples of help could be providing Linda with a vocabulary box on worksheets, frontloading terminology independently before beginning units, and incorporating group work to facilitate collaboration and social conversation.

Furthermore, I believe it is extremely important to reflect on the experiences and challenges Linda's family has had with language. As I described earlier, Linda's mother was faced with clear discrimination due to the language she spoke, and as such, this informs her perspective. Linda's mother has a clear understanding that her daughter wishes to become educated in order to become more informed because this is what is going to allow her to succeed. It is then that Linda comes in and serves to help her parents and her family. Her unit relies on her for help with the English language, and she sets the example for her younger siblings. Research describes to us the responsibility levied to the eldest child, and the requirement to be a defacto teacher for their siblings (El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, 2017, p. 24). This puts pressure on Linda, but also highlights her importance and the role she has within her family. The unit as a whole only functions when the different members are doing their part. It is evident that, although it may be challenging for Linda, her job is to learn the language to better support her parents and

demonstrate the way for her younger sisters. As such, I should take these lived experiences Linda has into account and build from her funds of knowledge. Building on her sense of family and responsibility, I can incorporate material dealing with themes of sacrifice, perseverance, and high responsibility. In specific, I can incorporate stories of minorities or other marginalized groups, and how their struggle to overcome, mirrors those experiences of Linda and her family.

I believe that it is crucial to create tangible and concrete learning goals for Linda. The objective for my student's improvement is to hone in on more fine and complex grammar conventions. I will work with Linda and her implementation of her specific learning goal, practicing noun-subject agreement on complex and compound sentences. Expanding past Linda's understanding of simple sentences, usually 5-6 words in length, we will shift to use more complex sentence structures, helping develop our familiarity with grammar rules. Linda will be tasked with writing complex and compound sentences, expressing more developed thoughts, specifically focusing on the correct use of noun-verb tense and agreement. This is only one example, but provides a solid goal to keep in mind and look to achieve.

### **Case Study: Jimmy**

#### ***Demographic Information***

We may now discuss the interview analysis for our second focus student. The student that we will follow will be addressed by the pseudonym *Jimmy*. Jimmy is aged 15, of Hispanic/Latino descent, his gender identity is male, and his birthplace is outside of the United States. Jimmy migrated with his parents from Mexico at an early age and has since taken part in traditional public schooling. This student will serve to represent the category of IEP/405/GATE classification as Jimmy is considered Reclassified Fluent English Proficient, but requires

significant support and differentiation in more formal or standard English acquisition. Jimmy's home language is Spanish, and after placing out of English Learner classes, the student made progress in being considered proficient in the English Language. Jimmy holds unique learning assets and needs centering around being considered RFEP, as he holds strong social and communication skills, but uses an informal registrar that then translates to his reading and writing. The student is extremely respectful, well mannered, and shows clear leadership abilities. Jimmy has specific assets and areas of growth that should be explored, pertaining to his educational journey, helping to further develop his language skills.

***Assets & Needs: Academic Standing***

Relating to strengths and areas of growth both in and outside the classroom, Jimmy holds many distinct factors. The most evident that come to mind are his leadership abilities and qualities. Jimmy has demonstrated a willingness to take charge and help guide his peers. When holding classroom discussions or posing questions, our focus student frequently volunteers to share or contribute in order to help move the conversation forward. Though he may not be sure if he is correct, the student takes chances and demonstrates a team-oriented mindset. This has been evidenced through group work, class discussions, and presentations where the student's assets shine. In terms of room for development, Jimmy can sometimes become distracted, and although he may participate verbally, he can sometimes forget to complete written work. Jimmy's writing specifically could improve with regards to improving sentence structure, developing vocabulary, and creating cohesive short-form writing. Up until this point, Jimmy has been a great help in the class, but also has clear areas to develop in relation to English.

Providing a purposeful and deliberate experience with Jimmy's education would aid greatly in the development of the student, and play to the strengths and areas of improvement for him. Jimmy is a very confident young man who is sociable and well-liked. He seems to make friends easily, and as a result, does well with group or team-oriented activities. Jimmy has a clear emphasis on respect, as it is evidently a character trait and moral his family instilled within him. This focus on respect directly translates into the classroom, as I can count on Jimmy to help me center the class and refocus their attention. Tomlinson describes how when students have bought into a class environment, they enjoy holding responsibility and want to be a leader facilitating the teacher (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 87). Our focus student, however, can sometimes get off topic himself, and has the most room for improvement in relation to his writing. Jimmy is progressing on pace academically with relation to speaking, listening, reading, and writing, however, it is clear more practice is needed regarding more fine-tuned English norms. Work done within the class, such as our daily journals, short response reflections, and assessments, reveal that areas such as grammatical conventions, tense-agreement, and writing structure can be further developed to aid in the student's academic success.

### ***Assets & Needs: Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

Having discussed some foundational information relating to our focus student's demographic data and contextual details, we can now begin to look at the interview itself and the discussion I held with Jimmy. The interview was conducted using a total of 10 questions, each having possible follow-ups and probes. Jimmy provided great details in his responses and the conversation served to glean great insight. After first discussing for a minute and then playing an icebreaker, we got into the meat of the interview questions.

Starting the interview, we discussed Jimmy's areas of interest, specifically probing for details relating to hobbies, sports, and clubs. We began by discussing the focus student's love of music, particularly playing an instrument. When asked about what he liked to do, Jimmy immediately responded by mentioning playing the guitar. He told me that, although he had recently picked it up, it was a newfound passion of his and something he thoroughly enjoyed. Jimmy said he began to play the guitar through the suggestion of a friend, but after noticing that girls seemed to like it when he sang, he really got into the subject. He actually mentioned that he met his current girlfriend through playing the guitar. It just so happened that he played her a song to ask her on a date and she said yes. This love of music and passion for song brought to mind Jimmy's heritage and traditions, specifically as he mentioned he sang and had a preference for music in Spanish. As detailed by Hammond, students express their culture and roots in a variety of ways, and music is oftentimes outlet chosen (Hammond, 2015, p. 90). All in all, this introduction to our interview showed me that Jimmy had clear interests outside of his academics, and that these interests had strong cultural connections, whether Jimmy mentioned them by name or not.

Having talked about some general information about Jimmy, we transitioned to discussing language and the journey our focus student has had. Jimmy had a strong reaction to this subject, and it was evident that he had much to say. He started by sharing that the transition to schooling in the United States was not an easy one. When Jimmy and his family migrated to the United States, the student did not have any familiarity with the English language. Jimmy started school with little to no fluency in the language of his peers; everyone could speak to each other and he felt left out. However, it is at this point that the focus student shared a great insight

into the assistance that allowed him to be successful. Jimmy stated, “What helped me out the most was my teacher, she was bilingual.” Our focus student’s first-grade teacher spoke both English and Spanish, and as a result, Ms. Tapia was one of the greatest areas of support for Jimmy. Gonzalez argues for making a connection with your students, and using Jimmy’s home language is a prime example of Ms. Tapia doing just this (Gonzalez, 2019). My focus student shared that his teacher would provide him individual attention and would specifically differentiate in terms of language acquisition. Ms. Tapia would give Jimmy “Easy Reader” books to help build his vocabulary and language familiarity, and would assign other reading/writing activities for the student to complete at home. Jimmy shared that doing this extra practice in reading, individual attention meeting him at his skill level, and overall personal care taken with him, he began to acquire English very quickly. He actually became a top 3 reader in the class.

Continuing, we began to discuss some of the challenges or obstacles Jimmy has faced within the classroom. When posed with this topic, my student had an immediate response come to mind; “I feel spelling, some words, they give me a long word and I have no idea how to spell that.” Jimmy shared that this area is one in specific where he tends to struggle and sees room for improvement. Through our conversation, I was able to glean that, as Jimmy went through school, the lexicon introduced at each grade level would become more advanced and more complex. As a result, each year, vocabulary continued to be an area of improvement, specifically relating to spelling and word recognition. Olsen speaks to this phenomena, where students looking to pick up English as a second language struggle with the increased rigor and expansion of word choice (Olsen, 2014, p. 21). This struggle with certain words then showed effects in other areas as well.

Jimmy shared that he would be afraid to ask how to spell words out of fear of being seen as dumb, and as such, would struggle with vocabulary. When it came time to do presentations and speak to the class aloud, these challenges were highlighted. Jimmy stated, “Back then I would hate presentations because of my accent, I would stutter, a lot.” Anxiety caused by not knowing the word coupled with the challenge of speaking a new language would result in stressful situations within the classroom for our focus student.

Having discussed some of the challenges that Jimmy has encountered in school, we shifted to talking about the possible resources that would aid in his educational experience. When posed with this topic, Jimmy shared his experience moving from the 1st grade to 2nd grade. He stated that, although he had a very helpful bilingual teacher in the 1st grade, the next year of his schooling he had a teacher who did not speak any Spanish at all, and it greatly inhibited his ability to communicate. Although his then current teacher was not providing the help he required, Jimmy went back to his former teacher Ms. Tapia for assistance. It was this extra help in specific that he believed to be a great asset to him in the classroom. Individual help that is more focused seems to be what Jimmy reacted well to. Jimmy shared that ever since he reached out for more personal, help he found this strategy to be a successful one, even now. He currently stays after school for tutoring and finds this time to be very effective in getting work done and being able to comfortably ask questions.

Moving forward with our interview, we began to discuss some of Jimmy’s goals. I asked Jimmy to speak on his short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals. This subject was particularly interesting, as it clearly showed the character and true interests of our focus student. Jimmy began by describing his most immediate goals, within 5 weeks. He detailed how he



wished to bring his grades up, specifically in time for progress reports. Continuing, Jimmy described his medium-term goals, accomplishments he wishes to achieve within 5 months. Here, he detailed his wish to improve his grades, as he hopes to have a good record for his sophomore year, leading to his dream of going to college. It is here that Jimmy described his 5-year goals. Jimmy shared that he wished to go to college, and after receiving his degree, wished to become a firefighter. He told me that he wanted to help people and have a good career to provide for his family. This is a direct example of a circumstance detailed by El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, the author describes the responsibility students often feel towards their family; it is not enough for them to succeed for they must lift their family as well (El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, 2017, p. 23). Jimmy wanted to move his parents to a different location, somewhere he felt was safe. This to me was a clear example of how much he cared about his familial unit, and his evident want to succeed in school in order to provide for them.

During the following topic we discussed, I asked my student who was important to him, as well as who he believed he was important to. This subject in specific provided great insight into the relationship Jimmy has with his family, and how important this is to his identity and sense of self. Jimmy first talked about those folks important to him. He fondly mentioned his family and the different members within it. First and foremost, he mentioned his mother: “The trust between me and her is unbreakable.” Jimmy described that his mother has always been there for him, and that she is his motivation. He continued by then describing his father. He said that, although his father was the strict parent, he helps guide him, and truly demonstrates to him what is wrong and what is right. It was clear that, for Jimmy, his parents were his foundation and truly important to the life of our focus student.

Jimmy then described to me the people that he believed he was important to. This question required a bit more thought from our focus student, but he ultimately responded: “I feel I’m very important for my family, like I’m their future.” Jimmy shared that his family unit is strong and that it is a key part of the identity that he holds. His parents have stressed to him that they want him to be successful, not only for him, but for his whole family. This experience highlights a phenomenon described in literature, students who migrate in search of a better life often represent hope and salvation for their families (Hammond, 2015, p. 17). Jimmy holds a common cultural responsibility that he wants to overcome, but also wants to do so while facilitating the success of his loved ones. Additionally, Jimmy serves as the oldest sibling in his family. He expressed his role as a model for his siblings, and his desire to do right by them. Jimmy holds not only his hopes, but also those of his family, and as such is very important to that unit.

The theme of family surfaced several times within the interview, and because of this, we dove a bit more into detail relating to this topic. In particular, I asked Jimmy to describe his family unit, the members, and their roles. Jimmy broke down his family as follows: his mother and father serve as the lead, Jimmy’s role is to facilitate whatever he can for his parents, and then lastly, the family has two younger siblings who raise the most trouble. Jimmy detailed how his father can be a bit strict, but does so in order to set a good example. Jimmy disclosed that his father used to drink heavily, but has now been sober for 16 years, and as such, holds his kids to high standards. Our focus student's mother is the more communicative parent, and is usually the person to turn to when you need someone to talk to. Lastly, Jimmy has two younger siblings who are a bit more rambunctious and high energy. Jimmy really takes it upon himself to set a good

example and help show his siblings the way to be successful. He sees himself as the glue that holds his family unit in place, the one who helps keep the different pieces together.

To conclude our interview, we discussed a high-interest question that was supposed to be a bit more fun. Jimmy was asked what he would do if he had 1,000,000 dollars. He found the question to be interesting, and had an immediate answer in mind. He shared that the first thing he would do if given the opportunity, was to move his parents to a different home. Although he would enjoy going out with friends, traveling, or shopping, he detailed: “The most important part is getting us out of there.” For Jimmy, his main concern is the wellbeing and success of his family. Even in this response, it is clear that Jimmy truly cares about his family unit, and in reality, they are the driving force behind what he does. After this final question, I provided the space for our focus student to ask any questions of their own, and then we concluded our interview.

Through this interview of my student, several things have become evident. It is clear that, although Jimmy holds many strengths, he still has clear areas of improvement relating to fine grammar conventions, vocabulary development, and standard English acquisition. The family unit is something that is not only central to Jimmy’s life, but a factor that is evident in almost all aspects of his identity. Sensoy and DiAngelo speak to this experience, as they describe the multifaceted identities students carry, often times directly shaped by their familial background, customs, and practices (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 30). Jimmy has a clear love for his family and is aware of his role in supporting his loved ones. He knows he must facilitate his family while proving to be a role model for his siblings. Jimmy has taken it upon himself to succeed in school in order to provide more resources for his family. Even though our focus

student can communicate strongly in an informal register, support is needed in order to further develop Jimmy's language acquisition. Specifically, he needs support to heighten his familiarity and use of formal or more standard English. Practice and purposeful scaffolding relating to vocabulary and language conventions will greatly serve to help Jimmy. It is clear that in order to best serve Jimmy, I must tap into his familial capital and help develop a more formal and academically poignant lexicon which will translate to improved writing and reading skills.

***Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge***

To jump into the home interview analysis of our second focus, I must first lay some foundational information providing us context as to the situation of the student's home. Jimmy was at first a bit hesitant when asked if I could visit his house to host an interview, but after getting more familiar with me, he agreed. My student lives in an open-air apartment complex, where his home is located on the second floor of a unit. On the day of the interview, the student waited for me on the corner of the street in which he lives, as he did not want me to get lost. When I asked Jimmy where it would be alright for me to park, he was first unsure. He told me that when his neighbors arrive home from work, they usually take all of the parking spots, however, we would be finishing up prior to that time so I was allowed to park. I walked out of my car, and Jimmy greeted me as we both walked up a small flight of stairs towards his apartment.

At the door, Jimmy's mother greeted me and welcomed me into their home. Our focus student had previously told me that his parents prefer to speak Spanish, and as such, that was the language I spoke during my time there. Jimmy's father was sitting down on the couch watching television, and Jimmy's younger brother and sister played with toys on the living room floor. I

introduced myself to the different members of the family and thanked them all for allowing me into their space. Jimmy's mother asked me to take a seat at the couch and make myself comfortable. As I began to take out my notebook and materials, Jimmy's mother started to clear the coffee table and prepare the space for us to eat. Before I even had the option to say something, a plate of food was placed before me. I, along with Jimmy's family, ate a typical Mexican dish called a "Sincronisada", and we began to get to know each other.

I introduced myself to the family and began to tell them a bit about my background. Jimmy had already shared with them some facts about who I was, but I felt it necessary to speak to the purpose of me being there in order to be as clear and transparent as possible. I shared with them that I am a member of the community, having been born in the city. I also attended local public schools, and live within the area. I specifically detailed how I am an alum of the school at which I now work, and have returned to my community to serve my people. Providing this breakdown greatly added to the buy-in Jimmy's parents had, and helped establish a foundation of trust, as I too was a member of their community. Literature describes the importance of establishing a connection with parents; Williams details how sharing common community or cultural background helps form said trust (Williams, 2019). After discussing a bit about myself, I provided the opportunity for the family to share out about themselves and tell me anything they felt I may need to know. The different members shared their names, and Jimmy's mother and father in specific shared that they were thankful to be interviewed, and were eager for the opportunity to become involved in their student's education. At this point, I thanked the family for sharing a bit about themselves, and I began recording on my laptop to start the formal questionnaire aspect of the interview.

I explained to Jimmy's family that I would be asking a set of open-ended questions with possible follow-ups and probes. The purpose of the interview was to gain insight into the perspectives of our students and their families, in order to better serve them and provide higher quality education. To start the interview, I asked the family to talk about their interests and the things that they like to do. Jimmy's mother began, and she shared that her family enjoys spending time together. She specifically detailed how they like to go to the mall together and shop. Jimmy's father chimed in that during this time is when they have their most honest and upfront conversations. They can be browsing the shelves at a store and then a random thought will come up and they will get the opportunity to discuss. Rather than feeling pressured to talk about one's challenges or difficulties, in this relaxed and safe setting, the family feels more confidence in being able to share their thoughts and feelings. This is an example of a phenomena described by Hammond; families often use a variety of ways to communicate, but do so through cultural practices that are familiar to them (Hammond, 2015, p. 72). In this situation the practice of going to the mall was comfortable for the family and provided them the outlet to have a conversation. I looked at Jimmy as his parents made this point, and I could see that he agreed. It was evident that Jimmy appreciated having this time in family to enjoy each other's company and have the space to open up. This is relevant in the classroom, as it highlights the importance of the environment and setting I create. By being intentional I can create a space that is safe and welcoming to my students, as such they are more likely to buy in and open up about themselves, allowing me to better get to know them and provide a better experience overall.

Having first started off by discussing some background information relating to their interests, I honed in on a more specific topic and asked the family to share about the languages

that they speak. Here, Jimmy's mother spoke up again and shared that the primary language for the household is Spanish. Jimmy's parents migrated from Mexico, and as such, they carry their home country's language with them. Jimmy's father added that they know some English, but are not fluent in the language. They try their best to learn and communicate, but they do face challenges. It is with this reasoning that Jimmy's parents ask their kids to speak more Spanish around the house. They want their children to be able to communicate with them. Not only that, but they also want their kids to hold onto the cultural part of who they are through their language. This is a common occurrence, as described by Tomlinson, parents frequently express the desire to teach their kids their home language in order to carry on this aspect of their cultural tradition (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 18). Jimmy's parents shared that when their kids leave the house, all they hear and speak is English. Therefore, they believe it is their job to ask their kids to speak Spanish at home so they may develop this language as well and not lose that facet to who they are.

As the topic of language had been introduced, I now focused on a more specific area and asked the family to speak to any challenges or difficulties they have faced relating to language. Jimmy is the focus student under the category of IEP/504/GATE status, as previously described. He fulfills this requirement, as, although he has been reclassified RFEP and is no longer considered an EL, Jimmy requires significant support and differentiation in standard English acquisition. With this in mind, I felt that this particular topic would be extremely helpful in gaining perspective on the obstacles Jimmy and his family have faced. To begin, Jimmy's father shared that learning the English language is challenging. In relation to this, he described a desire that his family had regarding Jimmy. He shared, "We were always hoping that when he grew up,

he was going to help us." Jimmy's parents held the hope that, as Jimmy attended school, he would then be able to translate and facilitate for his parents. Although this was the original drive, they shared that they soon discovered it would still not be easy. They disclosed that, when they arrived to this country, they knew close to zero English, Jimmy could barely speak a word in the language. To facilitate the growth of Jimmy, they shared that they would go to the dollar store and buy children's books to read. This was helpful, but did not alleviate the challenge of learning an entirely new language, and could only go so far. They shared that this was the case until they received the help of a caring and high-quality teacher.

Our conversation transitioned us nicely to the following topic, that being the possible resources and tools that could aid in English success. Jimmy's mother had a very poignant thought that came to mind and shared that the greatest help she received was that of Jimmy's first teacher here in the United States. As Jimmy began school, he did not know much English, and his elementary teacher noticed. Jimmy's teacher realized that he required individualized and differentiated support in order to best serve him. Jimmy's teacher implemented specific support to aid him, and in doing so provided an exemplar for an experience described in literature. Zwiers, O'Hara, and Pritchard describe the importance and impact of providing differentiated instruction for English Learners in order to support with language acquisition (Zwiers, O'Hara, Pritchard, 2014, p. 11). My student's mother shared, "The teacher told me, 'I put other students to work and I pull him with me and I teach him the language.'" Jimmy's teacher would provide him with individual time to work with her and focus specifically on English development. Jimmy's father added that, with the help of the teacher, Jimmy soon began to pick up the language, and not only this, but he began to score higher in English marks than many of his



peers. Jimmy's family was clearly proud of their son's accomplishments, and they also showed a deep gratitude for the help the teacher had provided. To me this was a clear reflection of something that I could incorporate in my classroom. It was evident that more specific and targeted practice relating to English could be helpful, not only for my English Learners but for all my students within my classes. By incorporating individual support my students are more likely to focus on the material, ask questions they are unsure about, and be provided the extra practice required for mastery.

***Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations***

At this point, I wanted to shift gears and changed over to the topic of goals. As we had discussed a bit about the family's educational journey thus far, I wanted to learn about where they see themselves headed moving forward. I asked the family to speak to any goals they have, short-term, medium-term, or long-term. Jimmy's mother started, and she said that her most immediate goal is for her family to be safe and sound. Jimmy's father added a more medium-length goal, and stated that he wants to go to all of his kid's parent-teacher conferences, and see that they all get good grades. As he said this, he looked around at Jimmy and the other kids playing in the area and they all laughed. Lastly, they shared that a hope of theirs is that Jimmy can be a role model for his other siblings. Highlighting a common cultural practice, Jimmy is the eldest sibling and as such his family holds the desire for him to serve as a leader and help guide his siblings (Hammond, 2015, p. 91). Jimmy's parents shared that their youngest daughter is very applied at school and enjoys education, while their middle son is having a more challenging time being invested. They hoped that when both their kids get to Jimmy's age, they will have taken after his example, and valued their schooling.

It was clear that family was a central driving force for everyone I spoke with, so I wanted to dive a bit deeper into the subject. I posed the question of who is important to the different members of Jimmy's family. When asked who they cared about, Jimmy's mother immediately spoke up and shared, "First and foremost the children, the children." Jimmy's mother elaborated by saying that her motivation and driving force in life are her kids. "Children are the engine that helps us as parents go out and get the daily bread," she said. Jimmy's father added at this time that when he has to go to work and the day is cold or he is tired, he thinks of his kids. With their kids in mind, Jimmy's parents are willing to sacrifice and do what they must in order to provide what their family needs. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner speak to this experience, as they describe how for many parents, specifically migrant parents, their kids are the motivation that keeps them moving forward (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 99). This was a very clear representation of the immigrant dream, as folks come to a new country in search of opportunities and resources. Parents are willing to do what they must in order to provide a better life for their kids.

As the family talked to me about who is important to them, I then flipped the question and asked them who they believe they are important too. When asked this, the family took some time to think and collect their thoughts, and then they had a story they wanted to share. Jimmy's mother began, "Truth be told, we suffered a lot when we got here." The journey to arrive to the United States was not an easy one, but when they finally made it, the journey only became more difficult. Jimmy's mother briefly mentioned the fear they faced being undocumented, the helplessness they felt because they did not know anyone and did not speak their language, and the anxiety they had through not knowing what tomorrow could bring. She continued, "You arrive in a country that is not yours, that uses a language you don't speak, you don't understand."

It is for all of these reasons that Jimmy's family believes they are important to one another.

Jimmy's father echoed the thought adding, that it is one another that they rely on, count on for support, and truly appreciate. When asked who they believe they are important too, the answer for them is each other. This theme of family can be used within the classroom to better support Jimmy. If I am intentional and purposeful, I believe I can incorporate material that relates to our students. Using literature and text that incorporate migrant stories, themes of family, or lessons about sacrifice would allow our students to see themselves reflected in their schooling, and as a result be more invested because the stories relate to them.

Jimmy's family shared a great amount and felt very natural in the conversation we had, and because of this, I felt that this was an appropriate time to provide the space for them to share any closing thoughts as we prepared to conclude the interview. When provided the platform, Jimmy's mother did want to share one closing sentiment. She wanted to describe to me the family motto they try to live by and uphold. Jimmy's mother stated that their family creed is as follows: "Instead of making fun of the fallen, lend your hand and help them get up." It is a simple sentiment, but one they truly hope to reinforce within their family. Jimmy's father elaborated on the thought. He disclosed that at one point, he himself had been homeless and forced to sleep on the street. He said he did not have many options, and was going down a very dark path. It was at this time, in his moment of need that he met another young boy while out working on the street. The young boy showed him kindness, and his family took him in. Jimmy's father shared that it was this kindness that allowed him to lift himself out of the hole that he was in, and begin to build a life for himself. He holds these people still now as family, and they serve as a reminder to give to others. As Jimmy's family had said, they wanted to instill the want to

help others in need, as one never knows when they may be in a situation where they need support.

### *Action Plan FS2*

All in all, the conjunction of the student and home interview for our second focus student was extremely insightful and productive. Through getting to know Jimmy and his family a bit better, I now have a more in-depth understanding of the character and morals Jimmy attempts to live by. In specific, as Jimmy qualifies under our second focus category, I was able to see how his reclassification as both RFEP, yet still having a continued need for support impacts his drive and motivation to help his siblings. By first getting to know Jimmy I feel I am now better suited to create lesson plans and establish an environment conducive to his learning. Finding out about his learning preferences and deep connection to his family informs my planning. An effective action I can implement within my classroom to aid Jimmy is to implement independent work time, as he has expressed a desire to further develop his vocabulary and has stated individualized help is a learning strategy he enjoys. Additionally, I can implement migrant stories, or material dealing with themes of family and responsibility, as I know Jimmy would relate to this.

Moreover, I could see how Jimmy hopes to serve as a role model for his brother and sister, and is attempting to lead the way by putting in effort in school. Jimmy holds strong social skills with the English language, but still requires support, and it is this need to keep growing that motivates Jimmy. Jimmy is the eldest, and as such, sets the example; if he demonstrates that he is trying and learning, even if he still needs help, that means his siblings will do better learning from his experiences. It is clear that Jimmy's family supports him, but also relies on his translation, facilitation, and teaching. Jimmy's family unit as a whole is very connected, and a

clear love for one another is evident. This translates into the effort Jimmy shows in attempting to learn English, so that his family may learn and grow too. Learning from this, I must demonstrate to my student I am respectful of his family and story. This will allow for further student investment, and will then provide me the opportunity to incorporate purposeful material that is most impactful.

I also have a tangible learning goal that I would like for Jimmy to implement. As Jimmy holds a more informal registrar when speaking that then translates over to his writing, the focus is to produce longer form writing that follows more formal grammar conventions. Until this moment Jimmy has provided simple sentences and 2-3 sentence paragraphs, now the objective for Jimmy is to produce coherent writing, with little to now spelling errors, using a minimum of 5-6 sentences to form a paragraph. With this more targeted goal in mind, Jimmy will focus on finer grammar conventions and develop his language acquisition by providing practice with longer form structured writing.

### **Case Study: Rosa**

#### ***Demographic Information***

I will begin to discuss the background information of the third focus student selected for the interview analysis. The student will be referred to by the pseudonym *Rosa*. Rosa is aged 15, of Hispanic/Latino descent, she identifies as female, and was born in the United States. The student's language classification is that of English Only, as English is listed as both her primary and home language. Rosa is a student that can be considered to have significant life experience, based on the fact that she comes from a single-parent household. Rosa has high engagement within the class, she supports her classmates, and holds a deep commitment to respect. After

getting to know Rosa from the beginning of the school year, it was clear she had a compelling life journey with experience focused on family and supporting her peers, that translated into her engagement within the classroom.

***Assets & Needs: Academic Standing***

Rosa holds multiple strengths inside and outside the classroom. Most notable is her comfort level within the setting, oftentimes volunteering or helping guide the classroom conversation as a whole. In addition, Rosa has mentioned a strong familial support system outside of the classroom that motivates her to do her best in her studies. With this said, the student also exhibits areas for growth, such as in refinement of grammar skills and specific English norms. Thus far, Rosa has been scoring well on both summative and formative assessments. Of the work we have done this year, Rosa has provided an example for the rest of the class in both collective tasks and daily writing activities. Fine-tuning of smaller areas such as sentence structure, subject-noun agreement, and other grammatical areas can still be had, and would aid in promoting growth for the student.

Providing opportunities for the student to learn in specific and targeted ways would be crucial in providing a more effective schooling experience. Having seen Rosa participate in the work and be a willing helper, I have seen her eagerness to learn. She is excited to be a part of the class and is eager to make others feel welcomed as well. Rosa takes it upon herself to assist her classmates and create an environment in which people are supported. She holds the nature of a caregiver, deriving from her strong familial connections and relationship with her mother and grandmother. Hammond describes how cultural traditions, in this case having a strong motherly figure with assistive characteristics, can shape a student's identity and directly influence their

character (Hammond, 2015, p. 18). Overall, the student is on pace with her academic standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, although there is still room to grow. The data suggests that Rosa is succeeding in her academic tasks, however, she could benefit from further opportunities to practice and participate. Providing additional problems or challenge questions at the end of lessons would be a practical way to challenge and engage the student. The strategy of providing increased rigor or additional practice is described by Olsen, and highlights an effective technique to support high achieving students (Olsen, 2014, p. 22). This support would allow Rosa to continue to refine her skills and improve those smaller grammatical discrepancies.

***Assets & Needs: Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

Having laid a foundation with context, demographic information, and background details, we can now discuss the student interview and the key information gleaned from the conversation. The interview was conducted with the use of 10 guiding questions, and then the use of follow-up or probing questions. The interview began with us playing a quick icebreaker in which we discussed two facts about ourselves, and then jumped directly into the questionnaire.

To begin, I asked her to tell me one thing she enjoyed doing. Providing the probes of hobbies, sports, and clubs, Rosa then gave her response. She most directly pointed to three things: her love of baking, reading, and playing sports. Rosa discussed that they all helped her with relaxing and giving her something positive to focus on. She stated, “It’s more of, like, a stress reliever, as well with sports. It like takes your mind away from either everything you’re going through or put aside.” This demonstrated a clear self-understanding in that Rosa needed an outlet to let go of that anxiety, or a way to put her energy into something productive. Popular literature speaks to this experience, as Williams describes the importance of self care and using a

medium to express ourselves (Williams, 2019). At her age, Rosa is already aware that she must do things that she enjoys in order to have balance in her life. These outlets help take the mind away from the challenges and difficulties one may be facing. In addition, this shows that Rosa has had to deal with challenging obstacles of her own, as she seems to speak from experience. These outlets help her focus on something positive.

The next question then leads us more into the academic aspect of Rosa's educational experience. I asked her to tell me about the languages she spoke and the journey she has had with said languages. Rosa detailed how her primary language was English, however, she sometimes spoke Spanish at home, and she spoke the language with her Grandma and Grandpa. She discussed how schooling had benefited her in the sense that, after taking Spanish classes, her fluency improved, and she was better able to communicate with her grandparents. Rosa discussed how, for her, it was almost a sign of respect to be able to communicate with her family in their native language. Hammond details how many students believe language to be a crucial aspect to their family identity, and as such when speaking with elders they must engage using their traditional tongue (Hammond, 2015, p. 56). In being able to speak using their home language, students show respect to their culture, as well as the leaders of their family. This particular insight struck me, as it highlighted Rosa's deep cultural connection and how this background can influence her attitude toward school and the future. Fortunately, the student has had a positive experience, and this has motivated her to continue learning and better her skills. Additionally, this emphasis on respect demonstrates a clear area in which I can strengthen my classroom ecology. By emphasizing the support of language, both English and other, I can show Rosa that the class will respect her and her ability to communicate.



This then leads us nicely to the following question: What challenges have you had with language in the classroom? After providing more specificity in asking about speaking, writing, and communicating, Rosa shared her thoughts. Rosa discussed how her largest challenge came in communication, as it depended on who it was she had to communicate with. She stressed how there was a difference in the way she spoke with people, depending on the person. Again, Rosa credited her upbringing, as she was taught to be very respectful. The challenge seemed to come in attempting to hold a high level of respect even in the face of difficulties or challenges. Rosa shared, “See that’s the thing about me, I don’t care how mad I get, I won’t ever like cuss or disrespect an adult, as much as, like, I get mad at them or they do something wrong, I will always try to hold as much respect for them as I can.” This is direct evidence of the values and morals instilled in Rosa and how they can sometimes be difficult to maintain within the classroom. Not everyone can or should be addressed in the same way, and when attempting to hold respect as an essential characteristic, it can be challenging to hold high character.

For the next topic, I then asked, What are the tools and resources that would aid you in your academic success? For this question, I gave Rosa the follow up that examples could include language, technology, and individual help. However, when I mentioned technology, I saw Rosa wince. I asked her if she thought technology could be something that helped her, but she said that in her opinion it did not help, but rather, it could actually hinder. Rosa began, “Like me personally, I’d rather work in the book than work online, especially since, like, for me, I have vision problems. Staring at a screen hurts; I get headaches.” This was an enormous insight for me and really demonstrated the purpose of these focus student interviews. It had never dawned on me that students with visual challenges could suffer when using technology, and instead of being

helpful, technology can end up hurting their education. Authors in research speak to this occurrence, for some students the use of technological aids can be unhelpful due to visual, auditory, or physical impairments (MacLeod, Causton, Nunes, 2017, p. 6). In order for technology to actually be helpful, it is not enough to simply implement it, but it's use must be purposeful and with the needs of students in mind. Learning this gave me a direct method of making Rosa more comfortable within the class by providing her material that is written on paper in order to aid her sight. Although basic and common sensical, this perspective directly helped change my actions within the classroom.

I then asked Rosa about our next topic: What goals would you like to achieve? (i.e. short term, medium term, long term.) I gave the student the parameters of sharing a 5-week goal, 5-month goal, and 5-year goal. Through this discussion, Rosa shared that her most immediate goal was to improve her grade in math class. She said she was beginning to fall behind and wanted to pick up her scores as soon as possible. Her medium-term goal was then to maintain her grades high, as she wanted to have the best transcripts possible. This then lead into her long term goal; she wants to attend a four-year university. Rosa described how she wanted to get good grades in order to have the best shot at getting into a college. She specified that, although community college was an option, and a good route for many people, she wanted to go directly into a four-year institution. This gave a clear example of Rosa's motivation to pursue higher education, and not only that, but also to have a specific plan with a specific goal in mind. This reinforces Rosa's maturity level, her clear self-awareness, and experience stemming from her life experiences.

The next question brought about a great discussion and gave an interesting insight into the kind of person that Rosa is. I asked Rosa, Who is important to you? This question produced a bit of a confused look from Rosa because I do not think she had been asked something like that before. After pausing for a second to think, Rosa shared that it was her grandmother. Her grandmother held a very special place in her heart and meant a lot to the person she was. As Rosa began to share, she discussed how she did not grow up with a father and how her grandmother stepped in to fill that role. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner discuss this phenomenon in their research, a family member, in this case a grandmother, coming to fulfil the role of primary caregiver when a student is in need (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 99). During many challenging times when the situation was difficult, Rosa's grandmother was there. Rosa told me, "She's, like, helped my mom and me and my sister, like, so much, and it's like the fact that she was willing to put us first most of the time was just, like, a good feeling." It was clear that Rosa had a strong and deep admiration for this woman that put her family's needs ahead of her own. This is very representative of the life experience that Rosa has, and the challenges she has had to overcome with the aid of her grandmother.

Following this question, I asked Rosa, Who are you important too? This question also elicited an interesting response, as she chuckled and said her mom. She shared that, although her mother loves her sister, Rosa and she have a different relationship. "I'm pretty sure like my Mom likes my sister, but she, like, needs me because I was, like, there for a lot of her tough times," Rosa stated. Her mother loves her family, but Rosa and she share a special bond because of the support that Rosa has given her mother. Reflective of her life experience and the journey that she has gone through, it is clear that Rosa was not only her mother's daughter but also a support

system. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner describe this occurrence in their literate, common with families that have significant life experience, parents often have a deep reliance on their kids in order to persevere (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 95). Rosa was there during the difficult times, as a rock for her parent and as such now share a different bond. This insight is extremely helpful to me within the classroom because it provides more context to what Rosa does. Rosa holds a very helpful and assistive personality where she wants to be there for others. Now knowing her familial situation, I have a better understanding of why she thrives in group work and excels in leadership abilities.

We then continued by discussing what Rosa's family unit looks like. This question had been touched on previously, but we now addressed it more specifically. The discussion centered around one thing: Rosa's grandmother. We went into a discussion of what a matriarchy is and Rosa then detailed to me that her grandmother perfectly fit the description; she was the head of the family. Tomlinson describes this experience, a strong female figure taking lead of the family and representing strength and perseverance to those who look up to her (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 29). Rosa discussed how her grandmother could, at points, be very strict and even considered mean, but that this was a necessity and helped keep Rosa on a straight path. She discussed how the opinion that truly matters to her most is that of her grandmother. For Rosa, what her grandmother thought of her was a true reflection of who she was, and as such, she deeply valued her opinion. This then directly tied into Rosa's feelings about school. She held pride in school and wanted to do well, not only for her, but for her grandma. Rosa's grandma believed education to be important, and as a result, Rosa invested in this aspect of her life.

Having discussed Rosa's grandmother heavily in the previous question, this then transitioned us well into the next part of our interview. I asked Rosa how she expressed her culture. Rosa gave many examples of her culture and what that looked like within her family. At first, she was not sure what the question asked was, but after following up by asking for the types of food, traditions, and customs, Rosa had a few thoughts that came to mind. She shared that her family eats a lot of seafood, so often, in fact, that it is a staple to her family. She also described her house on Sundays: full of football, family, and food. It was clear that Rosa had strong familial and cultural traditions that she practiced and clearly impacted her life. With this in mind, I can incorporate readings with heavier family themes, or provide the space for group work and collaboration.

Lastly, we come to the final question I asked Rosa during our interview. To conclude our conversation, I asked her what she would do if she had 1,000,000 dollars. This was meant to be a bit of a light-hearted question, and it really served to reveal a lot about Rosa, and further emphasized the values she carried. Her immediate response to the question was that she would provide her grandmother with whatever she wanted. Rosa said that her grandmother works hard, and she deserves more than she has ever been able to give her. This response served as a great exemplar of Rosa's feelings as a whole; it demonstrates her clear value of respect, love of her family, and deep appreciation for helping others. Rosa further added that she would donate some of her money to charity, sharing that this is a dream she has always had and something she has always wanted to do. This response again highlights Rosa's emphasis on helping others and shows a clear want to do good in the world

When we look at the interview for Rosa, it is clear a few insights can be gained. Most directly, it is evident to me that Rosa's significant life experiences have led her to want to support others, and adopt a personality of someone who facilitates and helps. Rosa's culture, deeply embedded with values of respect and accountability, lead Rosa to want to succeed. Not only that, but she wanted to help others succeed as well. As described in popular research by Pollack, Rosa's experience is emblematic of students that hold familial responsibilities to help their families prosper (Pollack, 2017, p. 24). Through the insight that I managed to gain as to what kind of person Rosa is, I learned that I can adjust my own teaching to better serve her needs. The deliberate and purposeful incorporation of group work would feed her teamwork abilities, and providing her increased responsibilities within the class, such as agenda stamper, would foster her leadership abilities.

***Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge***

Now we can discuss the home interview analysis for Rosa. I must start by laying some background and contextual information relating to our focus student's home. Rosa lives in a house at the end of a culdesac, located within a more suburban area of the city. I arrived at the interview and phoned Rosa's mother to let her know I was there. Rosa had previously asked me to check in when I arrived to let her know I had made it. I parked my car on the street by the curb and Rosa came out and walked over. She greeted me and then showed me over to her house.

At the door, Rosa's mother welcomed me in and asked me to take a seat at their dining table. When entering the home, I was immediately struck by how festive and decorated everything was. The interview was conducted during the winter holiday season, and as Rosa's family celebrated Christmas, ornaments, family pictures, and presents could be seen all around.

Rosa's younger sister was watching a movie on the television and greeted me as I walked by. As I was making my way to take a seat, Rosa's grandmother just so happened to be coming through the door. Rosa was clearly excited that I would get a chance to meet her grandma, and I walked over and introduced myself. Rosa's grandmother greeted me and then continued inside the house. I sat at the table and took my materials out as Rosa's mother proceeded to join me.

Rosa's mother thanked me for being there, but was a bit unsure of the purpose behind the interview. To clarify my intentions and reasoning, I talked a bit about my background and schooling. I explained that I was a member of the community who had actually graduated from the same school at which I am now a teacher. As a teacher, I want to improve my practice, and for this reason, I selected a few students and families whose insight and perspective would greatly aid in learning how to best serve them. With this clarification, Rosa's mother was then clear and ready to begin the interview. I explained I would be asking a set of open-ended questions with probes and recording via laptop, and we began.

To better get to know Rosa's mother, I opened the interview by asking about her interests and those of her family. She had an immediate response when posed with the topic and said that what she thoroughly enjoys doing is spending time with her family. She shared that she loves her family's company, but not only her immediate family, rather, her extended family as well. "We do a good home cooked meal, and we all just gather up and hang out to drink and eat, and laugh and talk", Rosa's mother told me. It was evident that the family unit was central to Rosa's household, and was a key part of the family's cultural identity. Literature details how family can be a core component to a person's identity, based on how people hold their roles and responsibilities as pillars to how they are (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 97). Rosa's mother elaborated

that they are so heavily family-focused because her mother, whom I had met earlier, is the person the whole family looks to, “My mom is kind of like the strong lead of the family.” This point was particularly interesting, as I wanted to see how it had an impact on Rosa. She is the student within the focus category of significant life experience, due to her coming from a single-parent household. I probed this point further in upcoming questions.

Having briefly discussed some more introductory information, I shifted the conversation to the languages Rosa’s family speaks. I found this to be particularly interesting, as Rosa’s family was the only family that I spoke English with. Rosa’s mother began by talking to me about the primary language of the household: English. She shared that she and her children primarily speak English, however, she was personally brought up speaking Spanish. She elaborated that when her mother migrated with their family to the United States, they did not speak any English. The family members only spoke Spanish and were forced to pick up English along the way. It was at this moment that she shared an interesting point about the way she raised her children. Rosa’s mother told me, “I wish we could have spoken to them in Spanish and kind of had them pick up English like we did.” Rather than having spoken to her kids primarily in English growing up, Rosa’s mother would have liked to have taught them Spanish so that they could have developed the language the way she did. This sentiment highlights an experience discussed by Tomlinson. The author details how parents who migrate oftentimes find their kids losing their language of origin (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 19). As the children are not required to use their home language, but rather the language of those around them, English is often what is only spoken. Rosa’s mother told me that, due to not actively practicing the language, her kids are not



fluent in Spanish. This to me was a clear representation of the family's culture, and demonstrated Rosa's mother's desire to pass these traditions and practices to the next generation.

Changing gears, I wanted to discuss the community in which Rosa lives. I asked what some things were that she enjoys about their neighborhood, as well as things she may like to see change. At first, Rosa's mother was a bit hesitant to answer the question, but then she shared out. She told me that she knows there may be bad influences on the streets, and she does worry because she wants the best for her kids. She shared that she believed the area is not bad, but rather, that its influence is decided by the individual person. If you look for trouble, you will find it. "We're good people, and decent people, and therefore our kids are going to carry the same morals." Rosa's mother made it clear that she wanted the best for her kids, and wanted to ensure that they got this by instilling strong core principles. A similar sentiment can be drawn from Rios, that is to say in order to best serve students we must look more holistically at who they are and establish strong morals to help guide our actions (Rios, 2015, TED Talk). She believed that if she demonstrated to her daughters the correct way to carry themselves, they would take by her example. Through commitment to principal beliefs, regardless of the situation, one can maintain their integrity. Rosa's mother then mentioned a positive aspect of where she lives. She told me that she was thankful for the events the city held, such as parades and holiday celebrations, because her family enjoyed going out to them. Reiterating this theme of family, she elaborated that her extended family could get together at these large events and that it is a fun time. It helped keep their family occupied and with something to do together.

At this moment, I wanted to hone the conversation in more specifically on the schooling of Rosa. I asked Rosa's mother to speak to Rosa's general feelings and attitudes relating to

school. She shared that she believed Rosa greatly enjoyed school. She spoke about how her daughter seemed to be there all day. This is when our focus student's mother shared a particularly interesting point. "Having a kid that you feel like is smarter than you, could be a challenge.", she shared. I looked over to Rosa at this time, who was within earshot and was sitting on the couch, and I saw that she smirked. Rosa's mother continued, telling me that she feels Rosa is incredibly intelligent and very bright, so much so that she is sometimes worried. This experience is representative of a phenomena discussed by Ayers & Alexander-Tanner; parents can often find it challenging to relate to their students, specifically feeling distant in terms of their education (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 100). Although Rosa is very capable, she has matured at a very quick rate and sometimes concerns herself with things she does not have to. In specific, Rosa's mother disclosed a time when they were struggling with rent and Rosa became overly concerned, to the point she would constantly be looking for side jobs or other forms of income. "There are a lot of times I have to tell her to kind of slow her role and to just be a normal kid, like rather than be worried about things (rent)." Rosa was clearly trying to take a proactive role in her life and be an aid to her mother. It was evident that Rosa cared deeply for her mom and wanted to help her succeed. Rosa's mother loves her as well, but wants her to focus on her schooling and her life, not concerning herself with adult problems. This is relevant within my teaching because it is demonstrative of the experiences my students carry with them into the classroom. Intentionally providing the space for my students to build on their preexisting knowledge, such as by providing them the opportunity to lead class lessons, would empower them and provide them a voice. Although many students may feel forced to concern themselves

with more adult challenges, often times what students are looking for is the ability and opportunity to impact their own situation and life.

***Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations***

A common theme throughout the conversation that Rosa's mother and I held was that of family, and the importance of this unit. As such, I wanted to delve a bit deeper into the subject and learn a bit more about Rosa's family unit, family members, and the different roles of each. A very spot-on response was given to start the conversation: "My mom is the main foundation of this family." Rosa's mother told me how she has six siblings, as well as several cousins who look towards her mother for counsel and advice. For many of the family members, their own parents have died, and as a result, they are closer to the relatives who they still hold. It was evident to me that Rosa's grandmother was the matriarch of the family, and served to instill many values of helping others and leading the way. Torres and Barber speak to this experience in their research; a family figure, in this case a strong woman, taking the lead and helping guide the different members of the unit (Torres & Barber, 2017, p. 11). Rosa took many similar habits and practices, such as helping her peers in class, looking after those that need assistance, and overall being supportive towards others.

To conclude the interview, I wanted to hone in specifically on Rosa's immediate family, and it was at this moment that Rosa's mother opened up a bit more and shared about her experiences raising her daughters. She shared that she is a single mother and has been so for a while. "I'm a single parent, so sometimes it gets hard to be like the only one. I have to play both roles." It is for this reason that she so heavily relies on Rosa's grandmother and the support of her family. Thanks to the love and help of Rosa's grandmother, they are in a positive position.

She shared that, through teamwork, they were able to create a safe and supportive home for Rosa and her sister. They prove to be role models for these girls and demonstrate what a strong female character looks like. Rosa's mother ended by saying that, although it is extremely difficult, her proudest achievement is being a mother. I thanked Rosa and Rosa's mother for their time, and began to put my things away. Rosa offered me a bottle of water for the road and then walked me to my car. Again, I thanked them for their insights and I concluded my time there.

### *Action Plan FS3*

The student interview and home interview for Rosa truly did provide great insights to our focus student's character and morals, family unit, and cultural identity and traditions. Rosa qualifies under the focus category of student with significant life experience, as she comes from a single parent household and carries significant lived experiences. Through the discussion I held with Rosa I learned valuable insights, that although seem commonsensical, actually provide tangible strategies I can implement to better serve her. In particular Rosa shared with me that she does not actually like working via electronic devices, and that in reality her need to wear eyeglasses fatigues her and only makes the work more difficult. Moving forward in the class a simple differentiation I can implement to help Rosa would be providing her with a physical copy of the digital slides I use as well as any other electronic material. Adding to the insights I gleaned, Rosa made it very clear that she is deeply influenced by the strong women in her life and as such holds a personality of a caregiver and one who wants to facilitate. This theme was further developed and more deeply explored in the home interview.

Upon my arrival to Rosa's house, it was clear that the family was strongly connected to each other, and there was a strong female presence in the home. Rosa was surrounded by female

role models that served to shape her. Rosa's mother serves as a single parent and example of perseverance and love, and Rosa's grandmother serves as the head of the family whom all turn for support. These women embody the character and morals they wish to pass on to Rosa. As such, it has become more clear to me where Rosa develops her character traits from. I now see that her want to support her peers in the classroom and work in groups to collaborate with one another stems from her familial traditions and strong motherly models. With this being said, I was also able to gain some insight into Rosa's mother's concerns that Rosa is growing up too quickly. She is very intelligent and capable, but burdens herself with worries that should not be hers. In her attempts to want to help, she can sometimes add to the difficulty of the situation. To best serve Rosa, I can learn from the interview experience and implement certain adjustments in my classroom. I now have a better understanding as to why Rosa has a preference to group work, and I can use this to my advantage. With purposeful lesson planning, I can incorporate activities and exercises that use Rosa's leadership ability to help her peers. I can provide the opportunity for our focus student to facilitate and help explain to those students that need help. This role can become her classroom job and as such she will have higher investment in the classroom.

Having learned as much as I did, I have a specific learning objective in mind for Rosa. As Rosa has been successful with working with peers and helping take charge, I would like to continue to feed this strength while fostering her needs. I would like for Rosa to take a leadership position on campus, and develop her speaking and presentation skills. With specific attention being placed on tone, loudness, and clarity, I am sure Rosa can grow greatly in this area of strength. Although Rosa is already strong in the area of speaking and sharing aloud, by playing to her strong attributes, our students can see great growth within the class. Rosa can take charge

and help facilitate her peers. All in all, it was evident that I had a discussion with a very intelligent young woman who was shaped by strong female role models.

### **Conclusion**

Having the opportunity to interview and better get to know my three focus students and their families has been an invaluable experience. Through better getting to know the needs, strengths, goals, and drives of my students, I am better able to design lessons and activities to meet my students where they are. The first step in building an impactful and relatable lesson is getting to know the students, and I believe the interviews aided directly in this. Although I have not had the opportunity to interview all of the students in my classes, having the chance to learn from the students that I did has helped me grow and better develop an environment and ecology conducive to learning. Examples such as providing written access to materials and increased group work would benefit FS1. Being intentional with independent practice and providing material relevant to the immigrant story is conducive to FS2. Giving hardcopy versions of notes and slides, as well as providing the opportunity for collaboration would aid in the growth of FS3. Moving forward, I will take this experience to better set the foundation of my classes. I will make a conscious and deliberate effort to better get to know my students, as this is the key to making great lessons and having student buy-in, scaffolding my students' needs while building on their assets.

## **Part C: My Community, School, and Classroom**

### **Introduction**

In order to best understand the context in which my students live, learn, and grow I must look at the larger community, school, and classroom. By looking at the different spheres my

students navigate and how they navigate through these different spaces that I can come to better understand them and better teach them. I believe I am in a particularly interesting position as I was born in the same community I now teach.

## **Community Context**

### ***Demographics***

To begin I must look at the community context of my students and the different aspects at play here. I spent time researching the demographics of the community in which I teach. The city as a whole can be classified as being located in that of an urban area with a population of about 152,000 people (Datausa). The median household income is 53K dollars. The specific landscape and architecture are varied throughout the community however there are many smaller 2-3 bedroom houses and larger apartment complexes. Many families double up in the houses and small apartments in order to save on money and space. There is a recently built shopping complex that has brought business from surrounding business parks.

There are primarily 2 languages spoken in the community, English, and Spanish. English can be considered the primary language, however, many people speak Spanish as there is a strong Latinx and migrant population from Mexico and Central America. The large percentage of the community is working-class serving in manual labor professions. The majority of parents within the city work in the city or commute within an hour to their job. There are small pockets of the community that are comfortably lower-middle to middle class, however, the majority of the students from those neighborhoods attend a high school still part of the school district, however on the north side of the city. The school I serve is on the south side and the large percentage of the students live within a few miles of the school.

### ***Housing & Resources***

Having first described some of the demographics we can now more deeply delve into the housing opportunities available where the students live. As mentioned previously there is a variety of housing and options near the school, but the most immediate are smaller houses with 2-3 bedrooms, and larger apartment complexes with smaller housing units. Regardless of where the students live a good majority share housing with family members or other people in order to afford the space. I personally share the experience of having grown up in a small 2 bedroom house, where my parents and I lived in the garage. The family that owned the house had converted the unit and was providing it to us for a cheap price. Many students find themselves in similar situations within the community or living in a smaller apartment.

The resources and services available to the students are particularly interesting. The high school is located by a newly built shopping complex where business has been attracted, and generally speaking, this has been a bright spot for the people living here. There is a plentitude of restaurants, a superstore, and a new gym. Additionally, the school is located within 2 miles of the downtown area where there is a medical school in addition to the city hall and the police department. The downtown area of the city has bloomed particularly in recent years due to investment within that zone and can be seen as a direct community asset. There are many points for this reasoning but the largest commonality is that many businesses and shops within the downtown area are small business owned. There is a large push to support each other's business and shop locally.

This being said there areas of service and resources that are needed. The first that most prominently comes to mind is the park located directly across from the school. There is little to



no involvement from the school with very little community presence. The park used to be very badly lit, and although it has improved moderately over the years, families and students have not been encouraged to go. Additionally, the shopping center is only divided from the park by a wall recently built. Although space is there the students are spending their time elsewhere. An additional area of need is for healthy and sustainable food. There are grocery stores present in the area, one located within walking distance of the front gate of campus, however, the food available is not the most nutritiously sound or financially reasonable. There are very few options for families and students to shop for food that is naturally grown, present within the community, or without artificial preservatives.

### ***Problematize the Issue***

A challenge that has faced the community is its lower household income wage in comparison to neighboring cities and communities. As of data from 2017 the median household income of the city is 53K dollars, this is in contrast to the county median being 65K and the state median being 67K (Datausa). Although there has been annual growth of about 5.8% dating to income from 2016, a clear lag is evident behind other cities and communities within the area. Many factors can contribute to this but one of the largest in my eyes has to do with the level of investment in the community and resources. When families feel that they are not welcomed, supported, or encouraged where they live, they will look for help elsewhere. People leave our community and search for capital in other areas. As a result, our community lacks local investment and does not provide the same aid as other areas. People do not get the support they need and a lower wage comes as a result. As we continue, I will look to further describe the

challenges facing this community and hope to articulate possible reasons for why this is the cause and hopefully detail strategies to address these as well.

## **Community Events & Community Members**

### ***Events***

For this section of my research, I would like to turn my focus to community events and community members, beginning first with events. In order to best serve my students and learn about them as a whole, I knew I would have to learn about the events that take place in their community. Having myself been born and raised in the same community I believe I can provide an interesting insight into the matter. I would like to highlight two particular events that I know are impactful to my students; the Saturday Artwalk & Market and Bright Prospect College Decision Day. At the time at which I am conducting this research the world is facing a pandemic in the form of the COVID-19 virus, as such, I will describe the events and recount experiences from community members although the events themselves did not take place at this time. Most public gatherings were canceled on orders of the appropriate authorities. With this said we can still garner great insight from the events and their impacts on the students.

To start, I would like to provide a description of the events in the student's community. Our first event is that of the Saturday Artwalk & Market in the downtown area of the city. This is a time and place for people to come together to talk about art, music, film, and overall have a good time. Folks come to congregate in one of the most modern and heavily visited parts of the city. There is much investment on behalf of the city and the local business meaning the area is very beautiful and well taken care of. Vendors can create stands to sell their creations and people from all over come to check out what is happening. Additionally, those that come to the Artwalk

can then visit the restaurants, bars, clubs, and music venues present in this area. Although at the time of my inquiry I was not personally able to attend this event, it is here the perspective of our community member comes in.

I had the fortune of speaking with a resident of the downtown area, who was also an employee of the local school district. This individual was a veteran of the community working in the area, being heavily involved in organizing, and overall being active in the city. The individual was also an educator and loved the downtown area in particular as they were a big fan of the arts, restaurants, and bars. This person spoke to their experience living in this area and frequenting the Saturday Artwalk & Market. Our member said, “It’s a place where the community can come together.” He told me that events like these allow the residents of the city, students, visitors, and all different kinds of people to come together in a space and celebrate self-expression. “From all backgrounds and age groups, express themselves, dance, share food, laugh, enjoy art, and be the beautiful community we truly are.” described our interviewee. From first-hand experience having had the opportunity to attend a few Artwalk & Markets over previous years, these events are a crucial part of the identity of the city and the residents who live there.

The second event I would like to provide more detail for is that of Bright Prospect College Decision Day. This is an opportunity for graduating high school seniors who are members of the Bright Prospect organization, a nonprofit meant to aid students to attend higher education institutions, announce what universities they will be attending the coming fall. Students have got the chance to tell their classmates, teachers, families, and other invited guests what educational path they will be following. The kids can thank those that helped them along

the way and overall it's a great celebration for all of their hard work. Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus, in-person classes were suspended, and as such the campus was closed. This means students will not be able to have a traditional College Decision Day held at their school with friends and family in attendance.

In order to gain insight into the significance of this event I interviewed a recently graduated member of the program and who had participated in the event while they were in high school themselves. The individual talked about how much they enjoyed the event and how disappointed they would be that students would not have the opportunity to participate in person. "It was a great event, really cool to have family and friends. It's a memory I will have for the rest of my life." Although not all students on campus are members of this organization, many are and those that have the opportunity to celebrate their academic success love to be surrounded by their peers. Again, a sense of clear community is established. Students want to pursue higher education and celebrate their success.

Speaking with these community members about the significance of the events that they described, results in a very striking insight can be gained. In my point of view, the underlying theme of the conversations I had was community. It seemed that the people who comprise the city enjoy coming together and sharing space with their neighbors. People enjoy interacting and this is a central aspect to their society. For the Artwalk and Market, people occupied their social space interacting and enjoying themselves in the epicenter of the community. More directly impacting the school, students relished the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments with their loved ones present. It was the sense of community, being surrounded by classmates, family, friends, and teachers, that students appreciated above all else. Housing this celebration physically

on campus only added to the sense of community and being firmly rooted. What was important to this community was “community” itself.

### *Services*

Continuing with our breakdown of community events and community members we can shift gears to focusing on services offered. To start I will detail the relationships that exist between the school and businesses, non-profits, and civic organizations. Overall the school has a solid relationship with external players, in large part due to the school being the largest high school in the southern part of the city, Many programs are offered, ranging in services from helping students with high school graduation, pursuing higher education, and networking. One program I would like to highlight in specific is Bright Prospect. I have mentioned this program previously, as it is extremely impactful to our students. Bright Prospect is a non-profit organization that helps students in need attend and graduate from colleges and universities. This program serves to supplement a lot of support students in the community require. The program is open to all but usually attracts the most motivated students to receive support relating to essay writing, applications, and extracurriculars.

This being said, Bright Prospect and other similar programs in the community service our students that are already more open to support, more likely to reach out for assistance, and are academically invested to begin with. Bright Prospect offers social-emotional support for our students but our students that are most vulnerable, and this is a sizable percentage at my school, do not end up joining these programs and as such do not receive support. The students on our campus with the highest need for social-emotional support oftentimes go without any help. On our campus in specific, there are peer counseling programs that students more widely use

however, a more professional system of support outside of the direct structure of the school is lacking.

In my eyes what is highlighted is a severe need for hope and strength-based processes to aid our youth. Ginwright argues for the importance of transforming our trauma into hope (2016). If our students are in pain they will not be able to learn, and if all we focus on is their pain then they will know nothing greater than negativity. Only by supporting our students and shifting our mindset to that of growth and hope can our kids blossom. The reality is that in my time working at my school site, my students have been challenged and faced with incredible adversity. There is a severe need for more resources and aids in social and emotional well being in order for our students to heal, recognize their potential, and move forward.

### ***Problematize the Issue***

The inquiry conducted thus far has highlighted the community events and resources not currently in place. Above all else, I would say there is a need for support in social-emotional well being. Many students are confronted with difficult challenges and obstacles outside of the classroom, in the streets, and in their homes. I found that many of my students are checked out of school and divested from their education due to external forces. I know the youth I work with carry significant life experiences that shape who they are. Although certain measures are in place to provide some level of help to the students, such as peer counseling, there is a dire need for further aids. A partial reason for this can lie in that many teachers on campus still hold a more deficit mindset of schooling. Some, where I work hold a stagnant view towards teaching and students, resulting in conflict with those they are meant to help. The community we work for requires particular patience, understanding, and collaboration; without these systems and other

measures to support our students, it is very challenging to convince them. A possible method to help address this issue is to get a campus-wide buy-in of more growth mindset and restorative justice practices. This is a venue I am looking to pursue for the following school year.

In view of this, I can also detail the events and resources students and families did take advantage of. As detailed previously those students who are academically invested or highly interested in pursuing higher education take advantage of the resources available. Additionally, the school is in the beginning stages of being a community school, with a larger community presence on campus, more direct resources, and support available in a centralized office. As the community is predominantly Latino and Spanish speaking the ability to have a location on campus where they can touch base and ask for assistance has been extremely helpful and highly used. Parents can visit, pose questions, and be provided support in their home language. The school is only in the beginning stages, but it is clear this is a resource that has been helpful and can aid the students and their families.

### ***RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS***

At the time of my research, the world was faced with an unprecedented challenge in the form of the COVID-19 crisis. Since around January of 2020, there was information beginning to come in regarding the virus. The country as a whole did not have the most timely response and as a result, many systems were functioning day by day until they were forced to shut down. Unfortunately, this was the case with the education system, and students, teachers, and schools had a very abrupt shutdown. Specifically, at the school I teach, information had begun to circulate midway in March about how the state may mandate closures. Halfway through Friday at the end of that same week, there was an announcement made via the district website, letting us

know in-person classes had been canceled. Updates and announcements were happening so quickly, teachers were not given an adequate heads-up and we were let known at the same time as many students. At the end of that academic day, the school held an emergency meeting and our Principal formally let us know we were closing in order to comply with state and federal mandates.

Due again to the speed at which information was being released and new updates were coming in, schools did not have adequate warning to advise teachers, and teachers did not have enough time to address the crisis with their students. As the COVID crisis was developing I attempted to provide my students with basic updates. I knew they heard information on the news about how schools could be shutting down, as well as most businesses. At the time we did not know what the federal and state governments were going to ask exactly, again this is an example of the tardiness and lack of timely response, and as such, I believed it best to dialogue regarding the issue. When schools were officially closed and students were sent home is when the opportunity presented itself to provide more information and details. Via Google Classroom I was able to communicate with my class and let them know of our learning goals moving forward. The school district and much of the country shifted gears to distance learning.

Not only did this virus impact the school, but it too made an impression on the community as a whole. As the virus was highly contagious and could be transmitted from person to person, gatherings of 10 or more people were canceled. This meant that restaurants, stores, and places of entertainment were closed. This was a challenge almost no one was adequately prepared for or could even imagine. On that premise, the city and community members stepped up to respond to the crisis. The most easily seen of those helping the community and its members



was the mayor. Local government had to step up in a big way to help spread accurate information while offering services to those in need. The mayor created an email list, as well as social media updates that would be sent out every few days. These videos contained information coming from the state, ordinances to follow, and updates specific to the city and community. One action that comes to mind as exemplary of the work done, was community members coming together to partner with local grocery stores to offer senior hours for the elderly to come early into the store and buy their groceries. Some folks were beginning to panic buy and hoard during this time, so those requiring the most need were oftentimes the most vulnerable. This service that was created helped address the community's needs.

As the world is shifting to a new normal, the school has taken deliberate measures to help those students who may find it challenging to participate in distance learning. Some students and families within our community have trouble accessing, internet, food services, healthcare, and as a result, our school has had to take action. Our campus is supposed to be a 1-to-1 technology site, however, many students had trouble with their Chromebooks and accessing the internet. To help address this challenge the school set up a drop-off/pick-up zone for families to quickly and in a safe manner get materials. Laptops, chargers, and hotspots were available for the kids.

Additionally, the school set a specific time for food and health services, offering bagged lunch for students as well as other necessities. Families could have the resource of feeding their kids as well as picking up toiletries and other goods. The need was higher than the aid provided, but it was a solid place to start.

The shift in mindset, resources, and community norms brought about by the COVID virus has changed me professionally as an educator. Not having the ability to meet in person,

being forced to socially distance, and overall remaining indoors has highlighted the deficiencies of our education system. Above all else, the point that stands out to me is that our students are faced with so many social-emotional challenges and hold significant life experiences. Having the opportunity to come to school was a saving grace for many kids. Students' home lives may not be easy, and not being able to attend class only further adds to the burden. In order to best serve the community I work, I need to take a more holistic approach and recognize the many barriers students are forced to overcome in order to inform my teaching.

## **School Site Research**

### ***The School Site***

Having set the stage with the larger community context and the community members, we can now transition to the school site research beginning specifically with the school site itself. I work in a traditional public high school serving grades 9th-12th with a population of 1,867 students (Public School Review, 2020). The campus itself is relatively large housing a recently renovated football stadium, as well as a brand new baseball field and dugout. There is a mixture of classroom buildings as well as portable classrooms. The school is located on the south side of the city and has a reputation for being a “bad school.”

Many consider the school I work at to be the school you go to if you are not able to get into the newer and nicer high school in the area. The reason I know this is because, as I have mentioned previously, I graduated from this same high school within a 5-year time period. Within the community many speak negatively of the school and its students, those feelings coming more specifically from the wealthiest part of the southern side of the city, the community where the new high school is located. The reason I know this is due to my experience having

grown up in the area and frequenting different neighborhoods. Oftentimes these nicer neighborhoods would also have nicer restaurants, stores, and parks nearby. When one would frequent these areas you could hear some held the opinion the southern part of the city and its corresponding high school were not nice.

This being said the moral of the school among the students, teachers, and staff does not share the same sentiment. Beginning with the students it seems that there is an investment in the school campus and culture, students enjoy class competitions, rallies, and games. Although not everyone is invested in the school, as certain students show they have outside challenges they may be dealing with. The population is particularly at risk of drug and alcohol abuse, statistics show the locality where students live to hold the highest syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia rates in the larger valley area (LACHNA, 2017). Certain populations of the school show this challenge coming up, however, students overall seem to enjoy being on campus with their peers. The teachers overall have a very positive inclination towards their students. Although there are certain teachers who may hold a more negative view of the students and their circumstances the good majority of the teachers show a very genuine interest in working with this specific population and its particular requirements. Likewise, the staff seems to very thoroughly enjoy working on campus. The custodial, clerical, and security members of the school community show a very positive relationship with students and others at large. They speak very highly of the school, and although they may feel overworked and tired they say they love the kids and their jobs.

### ***Personnel***

Now holding this school-site specific information we can more appropriately delve into the personnel aspect of our inquiry. To start I will discuss my teacher colleague and the insights I gained from my conversation with him. The teacher, who we will refer to as Mr. W, is a veteran of the profession and community having worked at the school for over 25 years and in education for 30 plus. In my discussion for my colleague, one thing stood clear above all else, and that was his love for the students and school. Mr. W told me, "I love it here, the kids, the school. They have so much potential." He told me that he loved his job and that was the reason he continued to do the same thing for so long. In order to want to stay in teaching, you must have a passion for the job. As we were having this conversation a theme from research came to mind, that being Delpit and her concept of a "warm demander." Delpit argues that the top quality educators are those that push their students to their fullest potential while supporting them along the way (Delpit, 2012, p. 77). I firmly believe Mr. W encapsulates this notion with his commitment and love for teaching while knowing him personally and recognizing his stern nature in teaching.

Next, I can transition to the conversation I had with my site administrator. My administrator provided an interesting perspective as it was actually her first year at the administrative level, additionally, it was her first year within the school district. Ms. G talked to me about her experience at the school thus far and where she sees things headed in the future. She told me she previously worked in an affluent community where the school had a very different set of circumstances and challenges. She told me that transitioning to working with the urban youth she realized the students required a different kind of attention. She spoke to me about the importance of establishing relationships and how respecting and treating students like people then leads to better learning. Ms. G specified a hope of her's is to incorporate more

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports to better serve the students. By using more growth mindset and community-based techniques the school will improve for the future.

To conclude this aspect of my research I will describe the conversation between myself and a non-teacher staff member. I had a talk with a member of the front office staff, a clerical assistant who welcomes the kids into school each day. Ms. L works at the entry point of the school and as such is the welcome personnel for all those coming in. This provides her what I believe to be an interesting perspective to glean insight from. When I brought up the topic of her opinion of the school her response was direct, “The students, most definitely. I love working here with the atmosphere and for the kids.” Although Ms. L was not in the classroom, she knew many kids by name and it was clear the students had a strong relationship with her. Additionally, Ms. L did have students who she worked with directly as office aids. When bringing up the kids she directly shared space with she again smiled and it was clear she held genuine care for the students on campus. The relationships she held demonstrate a clear and direct effect on the trust and openness the students held for her.

### ***Problematize the Issue***

To wrap up the school site research portion of this work I would like to transition to problematizing the issue. The campus is under its first year of new leadership and as such, there is a shifting of campus culture and climate. I believe students enjoy being on campus and spending time with their peers, however, there has been a decline in positive school climate and the lower class students are coming into a school in need of strong student leadership to help cement strong culture. Overall students seemed to not be as invested in school events such as dances, rallies, and campus events. A few students greatly look forward to these events and

campus unity, however many of those coming in do not seem to care and would rather seem disinterested. A practice I see being levied to help address this is the weekly news video. The video is usually a ten-minute clip regarding school events, games, and happenings. Students enjoy seeing themselves and their friends in the videos, however, the clip could be used more purposefully. By intentionally reinforcing a positive climate, the videos can be used as a weekly tool to help communicate with our students while reminding them of the school norms and responsibilities.

With this concept of technology in mind, I can also identify areas in which tools and resources can be leveraged to aid in access to educational equity. What directly comes to mind in the campus and school districts 1 to 1 initiative, meaning every student has a Chromebook they take home. This allows for many opportunities previously not possible if all students did not have access to laptops. However, here there are challenges. Although students may have access to technology that does not mean the technology is being used to its fullest potential. Many students argue their teachers do not really use the tech or only use it at a surface level justifying why they do not need to bring it daily. As a result, teachers that do require technological assistance in order to differentiate instruction now find students unprepared or who do not take the tools seriously. The school must make a systematic effort to incorporate more meaningful technology and encourage students to come prepared while holding them better accountable.

There is a myriad of identities and groups at play at the school site. There is a very large population of English Learner students, as the community holds a high migrant population with many folks coming from Mexico and Central America (Datausa, 2020). I had the opportunity to work directly with many of these students, and taught some of them directly at the beginning of

the school year, prior to changing placement on campus. What I learned in my time with them, is that many students feel isolated or as if they do not belong on campus. Many of the students within EL classes find themselves with the exact classmates as they share similar class schedules. This means they are pushed to the outskirts of the campus culture and meant to feel like outsiders. Some of these students are also students within special education classes, and they share similar sentiments for the educational group as well. Students feel ostracized and instead of becoming invested with the campus and engaging they retract and lose interest. There must be a more purposeful approach to servicing these students in order to counter some of these challenges and encourage our students to delve into their education.

### **School Mission/Vision & Demographics**

#### ***Demographics***

In order to have a better understanding of this section of the research, I will first lay out the context and circumstances of the school at which I work. To start we will inspect the demographics of the students, faculty, and administration. According to Ed-data.org for the academic school year 2017-2018, the ethnic composition of the school was 93.2% Hispanic or Latino, 2.7% Black or African American, 2.5% Asian, and 1.6% White. Additionally, 88.7% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals (Ed-Data.org, 2020). Next, we can look at the demographic breakdown of teachers. For the same academic school year, 43.3% of teachers were Hispanic or Latino, 34% White, 7.2% Black or African American, and 4.1% Asian (Ed-Data.org, 2020). Administration ethnicity demographics were not available however, a total of 7 administrators serviced the students with a per-pupil ratio of 187 students.

Putting these demographic numbers into context we can look at the data in relation to the demographics of the community. As of the year 2017, about 70.6% of residents in the city were Hispanic or Latino (Datausa, 2020). In contrast to the school, we see about 43.3% of teachers are of the same ethnic background. We see there to be a significant gap in this representation. Building on this point about 11.7% of the residents of the city are White, while 7.2% of teachers are White. At first, these numbers may seem to correlate much more closely but as we look at the breakdown of the actual students being only 1.6% White, we see there to again be a discrepancy in the representation present.

### ***Mission/Vision***

The next aspect of the school we will look at is that of the mission/vision statement. The Vision Statement for my school is as follows: “Our efforts are empowered and inspired by our desire and expectations to prepare students to successfully transition from high school to higher education, career readiness, and the competitive workforce.” The mission statement is “At Sydonym High School, we are committed to fostering a culture of learning with our LEGACY grounded in respect, responsibility, and results. We encourage our students to commit themselves to perseverance and achievement in academic and personal excellence for their success in a diverse community. Our vision is attainable through rigorous and relevant curriculum, effective instructional practices, student engagement, and ongoing school-wide collaboration that is student centered and goal oriented.”

This information can be found on the school’s website. On the homepage of the website there are tabs at the very top, after hovering over the “Our School” section, the Vision and Mission Statement appears. As a result, it is relatively easy to both locate and access this



information. However, information about when these statements were adopted and who they were written by are not available or advertised.

A relationship of positive collaboration with community members is fostered through out this vision/mission. By so clearly displaying the focus and objective, it is clear to students, parents, and community members that this is at the core of what this institution of education stands for. Additionally, a few key aspects can be highlighted for their importance within the community. The concepts of respect, responsibility, and results are fundamental to the community the school services at large. These are factors that are not only important within the classroom and educational setting but in the world at large.

With this being said, the vision/mission is an area of my classroom culture which I would like to make purposefully known and called out. I have not made a very deliberate effort to reinforce the vision/mission and although I believe I foster similar principles in the ecology I set, it would be greatly beneficial to specifically acknowledge the vision/mission and tie it to my class. Through intentionally supporting these goals and focuses, as well as relating them to our work in the classroom and how this directly ties to our classroom culture, I can more effectively support my school community as a whole while strengthening my own class.

### ***Problematize the Issue***

The final part of the School Mission/Vission & Demographics section of my research is problematizing the issue. To begin we will look at some of the achievement data available for my school site. The primary source for the information we will be looking at is the CAASPP exam. This is the California Assessment of Student Progress and Performance test, which is supposed to serve as a baseline report for student learning across the state, with both English

Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics. Although this is not in any way a perfect assessment, it serves as a tool for us to gauge where our student's ability levels are. According to the California Department of Education for the 2017-2018 academic school year, 37.41% of students met or exceeded the standard for ELA and 14.19% met or exceeded the standard for Math (caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.go, 2020). The implication of this data is that students are not meeting what the state deems to be at or above grade level. More than 60% of students need to improve in ELA and more than 85% need to improve in Math. Again, this exam cannot be the one and only deciding factor on the student's performance, however it does highlight a need for improvement, and the drastic need for support in mathematics.

Next, we can touch on parent involvement and what this looks like on my campus. My school is one of the first pilot community schools for the school district. What this means is that we have a community center directly on campus, with specific support and staff to provide links to community resources, events, and happenings. Additionally, this community center is meant to serve as a touchstone for parents, helping answer questions and connecting with the campus. One way in specific the community center is promoting parents and family involvement is by providing bilingual and cultural support. As previously mentioned the majority of the students are Hispanic or Latino, the community is predominantly Hispanic or Latino, and as a result, many require support in Spanish. For many parents, they struggle with official business and buildings due to the language barrier. By providing this support parents feel more a part of the campus.

This being said, there is still area for improvement, specifically with parent outreach. The community center serves as a great starting point, but there needs to be a much higher priority by

incorporating the community and different members in order to foster the most supportive environment possible. Currently, the school waits for a parent to reach out, and then they provide the support. Although it is challenging because many parents work, hold multiple jobs, and have several responsibilities, by doing a more proactive job of reaching out to help, I believe the school could serve as a place of support, encouragement, and resources for the community.

Those that thrive on campus are the students who already have support either at home or through other resources. Those students that take advantage of the community options available to them and support their peers are the individuals that succeed. Usually, these students are already invested in their education and as such are placed on Honors or Advanced Placement tracks. These teachers which serve these classrooms are usually the more veteran teachers with experience teaching the advanced levels of the content. These are also the teachers who are most involved on campus, usually advising for different clubs or organizations on campus. It has seemed to me that those students who come from supportive households, take advantage of the resources available to them, and are enrolled in the advanced classes are most likely to succeed at the site. However, the majority of the students at the campus have some challenges in their personal/familial life, hold significant life experience, and may not be as invested in their education being tracked to lower-rigor classes. A very deliberate and intentional effort must be made to serve this very large population of students on campus; the way I believe we begin going about this is by highlighting and reinforcing those resources available on campus and in the community while creating more options for our students to pursue their interests.

### **Classroom Reflection**

#### ***Ecology***

To wrap up part C of my ethnography, specifically detailing my community, school, and classroom, I will take a moment to reflect on my classroom experience as a whole. I will begin by describing the ecology I made a deliberate and conscious effort to establish within my class. When students enter my classroom they know I have 3 guiding principles that are nonnegotiable, respect, caring, and communication. These are broad concepts, however, we spend the first week of class defining what these terms mean and how they look like within the classroom. I make very specific efforts to establish this foundation, and then go back and reinforce these norms throughout the year. Specifically, I revisit the norms at the midway part of the semester, as well as the beginning of the new semester. Through this repeated effort to establish these rules and remind the students of their significance, I have noticed my students adopting the norms and relying on my routines for structure and stability.

. To facilitate my classroom ecology I intentionally set up my classroom to support collaboration and established routines. As students walk in through the door, they are greeted by an organized class with deliberate seating. Table groups of 4 are set up, where all students face each other and have the ability to communicate. I specifically leave enough room in between the desks to allow me to walk around the room freely, and join groups or answer questions. Another staple of my classroom is music playing in the background. I use audio purposefully to help set the tone and mood, for the specific purpose we have for the lesson, be that silent meditation, reading, writing, or collaboration. In using soft sounds of nature, white noise, and acoustic music I create a welcoming atmosphere that feels warm and encourages my students to work and feel safe.

The norms, procedures, and routines I have in place are vital to reinforce the ecology and relationships I establish throughout the year. In my case in specific, I have seen the stability and structure brought about by having specific routines for students to follow. I made an investment at the beginning of the year to create procedures that I believe would help normalize the classroom, as well as help me stay organized. With reflection I have realized the time I spent at the beginning of the year, as well as subsequently by reinforcing these norms, paid off drastically as I see my students have bought into the norms and appreciate them. Rather than having challenges as the school year progresses with the student becoming more familiar and looking to push boundaries, by constantly referring back to these procedures and systems the students know what to expect in the classroom, and as such are better prepared to act accordingly.

With this same idea of norms in mind, I can describe a specific example of how I help highlight my student's assets and funds of knowledge. The prime scenario that comes to mind is practicing a more healing centered engagement to support my students with trauma. Ginwright speaks to the importance of this within his research and highlights the significance of sifting away from trauma-informed care. Rather than hold a deficit perspective looking at what is wrong with my students the author argues to hold a growth mindset and focus on the assets and funds they carry (Ginwright, 2018, p. 5). By looking at what is right with my students and what strengths they hold, I help create an environment of positivity and help hand power back to my class. My students will better be able to recognize their abilities and build on what they hold, rather than fixating on what they do not have or need.

In the same vein that I try and empower my students, I also make sure to help keep them accountable. I use specific supports, strategies, and interventions to promote my student's

socio-emotional well being, adolescent growth, and individual responsibility. All my procedures are founded in the Social Contract established from the very beginning of the year. The principles of respect, caring, and communication are vital to any restorative practice we try and implement. What has been the most positive tool for me is providing my students with a cooldown time, as well as myself, and then incorporating individual conferences.

What I mean by this is if I am having difficulty with a student rather than participate in a power struggle through argument, I walk away and help another student. I do this to provide time for the student to calm themselves, as well as for me to regain my composure. Once I feel more even-keeled and I believe the student is ready as well, then I hold a 1-on-1 conference with the student in private. This can be done in a quiet corner of the classroom, in the hallway, or in any area with privacy for the student. That is when I hold a very upfront conversation with the student and I provide them the opportunity to give me their perspective. Through this process most students are able to reflect on their actions and identify what the challenge or issue was, to not repeat it again. I believe giving my students a moment to collect themselves, taking a breath myself, and then conferencing with them privately, has demonstrated to them I do not wish to punish them, but rather want to use this opportunity to address whatever trouble we had and then be able to keep moving forward.

### ***Demographics***

Continuing with our wrap-up of my community, school, and classroom, we can shift gears to discussing demographics. I will start by describing the ethnic, gender identification, and linguistic composition of my class. I teach 5 periods total and my different classes hold similar data breakdowns. Ethnically my classrooms are usually about 95% Hispanic or Latino, as I

discussed this previously this is due to the racial makeup of the city and the location of the high school (Ed-data.org, 2020). In terms of gender identification, the majority of my classroom falls under the category of cisgender, however, I do have a student within one of my class periods who is transgender and identifies as male. This student held a conversation with me on the first day of class and explained why their name on the roster did not correlate to what they identify as. The student was sat next to a few classmates whom he already had a strong relationship with, and has grown in confidence in sharing thoughts aloud. Regarding linguistic composition, about 22% of my students are identified as English Learners. Although there are several students who are Reclassified Fluent English Proficient, they still require significant supports and modification regarding English language acquisition.

Another breakdown of the subgroups within my classroom is that of the students classified as GATE, those with 504 plans, and those with an IEP. I teach in high school, and at my specific site students are tracked into different courses. As such I teach College Preparation English, and do not have any students classified as GATE, they would rather be automatically tracked into Honors English. This being said I still have students who are excelling in the class and require further challenge as they are high achieving. For these students, I take away some of the scaffolds available and ask the students to test their ability. I ask these students to write without the use of sentence frames or starters, and I modify their requirements to ask the students to write more and provide increased evidence.

Continuing, I have several students who hold 504 plans or hold specific IEPs. The accommodations I make to these groups varying on the necessity and requirements for my students. For example, there is a student with a 504 plan who requires a hearing aid within the

class. To support this student I obviously allowed them to use their hearing aid and sat them closer to my desk rather than the board so they would be better able to hear the directions that I give. Another example is a student who holds a specific IEP and requires significant modifications. This student has some trouble with focusing on the board, so as such I was intentional with their seating and placed them as close as possible to the material. Additionally, they were sat in a direction where they would not have to turn their body to face the teacher, aiding in their ability to concentrate. Furthermore, this student requires additional time at home to be able to complete writing assignments. When we have timed writes in class the student can become flustered and anxious not being able to produce work. To support the student, they are allowed additional time to collect and express their thoughts. The student is still provided a time limit, but the change in setting greatly helps his learning.

Teaching 5 periods throughout the day, I have noticed that there are distinct differences and similarities within my different classes. The largest difference is the energy level varying by period. I have taken note that my 1st-period class is definitely the one with the least amount of energy. I believe the students are just arriving at school and for many of them they are still only waking up. My third period then picks up the energy having had class and nutrition. My 4th and then 5th-period classes are those with the most energy, the students have just come back from lunch so they are the most active, and at this point; this is when I begin to get a bit tired myself. My final 6th period can be a bit of a mixed bag. Due to it being the end of the day many of the students are ready to head home and are excited, however, other students are very tired by the last class and struggle to stay awake. The differences in energy levels are extremely important to be aware of and directly contribute to the success of my lessons. The striking similarity I have



seen within all of my classes is the idea of respecting my students and treating them as people. I have yet to meet a student who has not liked being addressed in an appropriate manner and providing them a voice within the class. It has worked for me this year and proved to me that this is a best practice I should incorporate with every one of my classes.

### ***Problematize the Issue***

Ending this aspect of my research I would like to problematize the issue by looking at the materials I have in the classroom which have aided me, as well as the resources that are lacking which could be helpful. There are two resources that come to mind which have been extremely useful in my teaching. The first has been the ViewSonic projector located at the front of the room. This tool is essentially a very large touchscreen computer, which aids me in projecting my class slides, playing background music through the speakers, and having the ability to project work for all to see. This tool has been essential to my routines within the class and is a material I know I will continue to use and build on to get better. The second resource which has been greatly helpful is the students' Chromebooks. My site is a 1-to-1 technology campus and as such students should always have their laptops at their disposal. This aid has been extremely helpful as it has opened up many technological opportunities that were not there previously. For example, I can have the students work on a shared document and have them all collaborate via Google Drive. Without all my students having access I would not feel comfortable in assigning this, but knowing that my students do have the materials has helped greatly.

This being said there is a clear area where I believe resources have been lacking, that being physical books. As a class we were to read a novel, however, after visiting the library and collecting our class set I came to realize the challenges. To begin with, there was only a class set

available, this meant that students would not have the ability to take the novel home, as it would be needed for the following period. Furthermore, after getting the books in hand, as a class we discovered they were falling apart. The novels were very old prints of the book and were coming apart at the seams and covers. In order to be able to use the material, we would have to be extremely careful. As we went about reading the book, pages began to fall out and copies had to be put out of commission. We continued to read and the books would only get worse and worse. It was evident to me the materials had been creating us trouble, and instead of supporting us were actually hindering. Moving forward, I will fight to have quality versions of a class set of books, as well as acquire additional copies for students to take home, complete assignments, or extend their reading.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude Part C of my ethnography I would like to share the two largest takeaways from this portion of my inquiry. The first takeaway has to do with schools and the classroom setting. Having now held experience myself within the classroom, conversing with my peers, and observing colleagues one point is clear; students must be respected and empowered within the classroom in order to buy-in and engage. Literature backs this very concept telling us that when students are not constrained and made to feel disempowered the class is much more likely to want to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 354) The community I serve and was born in faces many challenges and as such it is not easy growing up in this setting. Many students hold significant life experiences with obstacles they have faced and as such may not be as invested in their learning. Their divestment can result in teachers placing less attention on them and then them being tracked into lower rigor classes. This ends with the student being in a class they do not

enjoy, and acting out because of so. The system of schooling only further adds to the barriers students face, and should instead look to take the whole student into consideration. By treating our students with respect and empowering them within the classroom they are more likely to invest in their learning.

The second takeaway I have is related to the larger community as a whole. I have first-hand experience in this regard having been born and raised in the neighborhood. Looking at things through the lens of a researcher and holding a greater frame of reference now as a teacher I believe the community is facing many challenges and is looking to heal. The takeaway is the need for restorative practices, specifically within schools, but also within a larger community context. As described previously the community is composed predominantly of people of color, specifically Latino folks. This adds to the complexity of the situation students are forced to navigate. Racial, economic, and social disparities are present but rather than look to blame one another or incorporate zero-tolerance punishments, schools and the larger community should look to implement restorative practices. Hosting neighborhood conversations, town halls, and community events for people to dialogue is what I believe will help the community address its challenges. Research conducted lets us know of the benefit of implementing these more holistic approaches within schools (Payne & Welch, 2016, p. 557). Rather than leaving underlying issues unaddressed, by getting the root causes of problems and creating space to hear our students, they will blossom. This same concept can extend to the larger community and serve to help unify neighborhoods and bring people closer together. It may seem simple and basic, but the first step to healing is communicating with one another so folks can have their voice heard, provide their perspective, and help people empathize with one another.

## **Part D: Reflection of a Critical Social Justice Educator**

### **Introduction**

Having taught in the classroom for a year, experienced graduate-level learning, and described my journey in an ethnographical fashion, I can now close my research with reflection. Hindsight may be 20/20, but it provides us with the opportunity to learn, grow, and get better. It is with this in mind that I hope to conclude with purpose. Teaching is not an easy task, in fact, it is oftentimes very challenging, however, I have identified a few strategies that have worked with my students, classroom, and teaching style. My hope is to end this research by describing specific mindsets, approaches, and practices that ultimately help instill agency and self-efficacy in our students.

### **Classroom Ecology and Teacher Presence**

#### ***Establishing a baseline of respect for students and their learning***

To begin this reflection, I would like to address classroom ecology and teacher presence. I cannot overemphasize enough how much I believe this is crucial to a successful classroom. The very foundation for your learning environment, the success of your kids, and your position as an educator all depend on the relationship established from the very beginning. What I first needed to do within my classroom is to create a baseline of respect from which all other aspects of my classroom could be built upon. Literature speaks to the importance of mutual respect and how it must be the building block from which all teacher-student interactions are had in order to run a successful classroom (Nieto, 2013, pg. ). Far too often we ask our students to leave their culture, identify, and sense of self at the door, rather conforming to hegemonic norms. When students

feel that they are respected and that rather than asking them to change we begin with where they are, students are much more willing to participate in the activity of learning.

It seems common-sensical to start by respecting all my students and then building a relationship from which to start teaching, but it is important enough that we signal it in specific. Respect is fundamental to who I am as a person, stemming from my family values and upbringing, so I stressed to my students how I hoped to uphold this practice. In the classroom, we created a Social Contract to specifically name what we wanted our classroom ecology to look like, and the non-negotiable I begin with is the idea of respect. Furthermore, I describe to my students what respect looks like within my classrooms such as respecting personal space, belongings, and ideas. Making sure to be deliberate and very thoughtful in implementing this at the start of the year is what allows for stronger relationships moving forward and more effective learning in the long-run.

### ***Setting and demonstrating expectations***

Continuing with the theme of solidifying a positive classroom ecology and steadfast teacher presence is the idea of setting and demonstrating high expectations. This concept is the tool I used to reinforce my baseline of respect and helps fortify my teacher presence in the classroom. Students respect those that respect them, and I needed to hold this in mind when thinking of expectations. Many times in high school my teachers told me not to do something and they would then turn around and do it themselves. This did not make me trust them, and rather question if they have my best intentions in mind.

As a teacher, I needed to model what I wanted my students to practice. Just as in lessons, if I was going to hold my students to expectations I needed to first demonstrate to them how to

be successful. My class looks to me for guidance and leadership and as such, I had to set high expectations both of them and of myself. That meant that I had to come prepared, and be knowledgeable about the lesson, but also open and honest when I make mistakes. If I wanted my students to see mistakes as an opportunity to learn and get better, then I needed to model this myself. If I wanted my students to get along and respect each other, I needed to do the same. If I wanted my students to be invested in their learning, I needed to be invested in their learning and take it seriously. What I did set the model for my students to follow.

### ***Supporting productive learning with culturally sustaining practices***

The next aspect of my classroom ecology and teacher presence is one that I feel must be present in every classroom across all schools. If in my eyes the first tenet to teaching is a positive classroom ecology, the second is a strong and respect based teacher presence, then the third is culturally responsive teaching. I discovered very quickly that my students hold very strong and wonderful personalities and identities shaped by their environment and where they come from. I taught in the same community which I grew up in and attended school myself, this reminded me of my own experiences and whether or not I felt culturally sustained practices were implemented to help me be productive. I think back and the teachers that got to know me, respected me, and understood my community, were those that implemented culturally responsive teaching. Those classrooms that did not, were the ones I simply completed or oftentimes outright disliked.

CRT is something that cannot be ignored and I argue should be a principle to all teachers everywhere. Regardless of the background or culture, all classrooms must take this into account in order to truly get a whole understanding of the students within them. When classrooms are aware of this then they are more apt to the feelings and preferences of their students, in turn

leading to a more productive learning environment. In my classroom, I made sure to be authentic to myself and my community, and I believe the students understood and appreciated this. My students all knew, even the ones that may not have liked me as much, that I was not putting on a show but rather meant what I said. This was a practice I believe to be responsive to my community and my students responded. I celebrated who my students were, where they came from, and the fund of knowledge they hold. Latino/a/x and Chicano/a/x music, art, food, literature, and modern events are just a couple of examples of what was a part of the classroom.

***Using knowledge of students to anticipate and limit unproductive behaviors***

With my knowledge of my students in mind, I was able to anticipate and limit unproductive behavior. The approach that I found to work best with my set of students, but I suspect will work well with many students is using positive behavior interventions and supports. What this means is using positive interventions and strategies to mitigate unhelpful behavior. Instead of focusing on the negative and what students did wrong, there is an emphasis on the positive aspects of students and what they can improve on in the future. This change in mindset may seem semantic but it greatly helps with the mindset that students view themselves in.

When students believe they are respected, feel they have a voice in the class, and are going to be approached in a manner geared on fixing what is incorrect rather than punishment for being wrong, they are much more invested in the classroom and listen. With this being said my students were still teenagers and would have days we worked well together and days we did not, however the fundamental idea present that my students knew I cared for them and wanted to support them in a positive manner. I held high expectations and was committed to my decisions,

but my students knew I would correct them in a respectful manner, and only because I wanted what was best for their learning.

### ***Harnessing instructional cohesion and intensity***

Through deliberate actions and repetition, I could harness instructional cohesion and intensity. Classroom ecology and teacher presence work in tandem with many other practices to establish a setting for learning. Through my experiences, you best place yourself in a position to succeed when you plan and create routines. This may seem very simple, it is obvious that planning and practice lend themselves to learning, but I argue they are key actions one must take in order for all other strategies and mindsets to be effective. When I took the time to go over my lessons, and very intentionally plan the teacher moves I would implement, the lesson would go effectively. The routines established in my class at the beginning of my class were still effective and practiced at the end. I was able to harness the most instructional cohesion and intensity when I came prepared and reinforced routines present in the class.

### **Content Knowledge to Promote Access, Learning, and Achievement**

#### ***Developing facility with the curriculum***

Once done with describing the foundation to our classroom, we can now dive more deeply into the content knowledge required to promote access, learning, and achievement. What has been made very clear to me is after establishing a strong classroom ecology combined with effective leadership in teacher presence, one must become familiar with the content we hope to teach in order to best provide instruction. It is not as simple as somewhat knowing the material or having a general feel for the information, to effectively scaffold and support our students we must develop a deeper understanding of what we teach as well as a facility with the curriculum.



It will obviously take time to become familiar with specific standards, objectives, and goals, but taking the time to go through the curriculum you hope to teach and look to understand how it connects will allow you to better relate the topics to the real world, draw connections for your students, and add vocabulary to ease explaining the concepts.

### ***Aligning curriculum and instruction with measurable goals***

Becoming familiar and developing ease with the curriculum is only the first step; next, you must align said curriculum and instruction with specific goals. Research speaks to us of the importance of having concrete learning goals and objectives so our students can have a direct target to shoot for, rather than having to guess what is being asked of them (Zweirs, 2014, pg. 23). This may seem straightforward but was actually much easier said than done. I personally struggled with creating very tangible learning goals throughout the year, and only through repetition and reflection was I able to improve. Through the help of my mentor teacher and academic advisor, I was able to really concentrate on aligning my curriculum and lesson goals. What I found to be most effective is being as specific as possible with what is being asked of the students. Rather than being broad with the objective, take time to directly tie it to the standard you hope to address, and as such focus on how to clearly and specifically ask your students to accomplish something. It is difficult to be very specific and requires forethought prior to the lesson, but taking this time before teaching to be very particular will allow you to more directly connect curriculum with instruction and ultimately learning goals.

### **Instructional Practices to Promote Learning and Engagement**

#### ***Making productive learning accessible***

Having discussed the foundation of the classroom and content knowledge required to be successful, we can now jump into the specific instructional practices implemented to promote learning and engagement. After spending time creating a very intentional classroom setting, and studying curriculum to become familiarized, I began to really try out different strategies and teacher moves to see what would stick. What I became aware of very quickly is that students require order and structure to be successful. As researchers who focus on designing effective lessons tell us students thrive when given scaffolds, support, and regularity, they may not vocalize it but this gives them comfort and encouragement (Walqui, 2019). The days that I came in with a solid plan and resources to support my teaching were the days I held better lessons. Those days I came in and was unsure of the lesson or was just trying random activities I was least successful. This made me quickly adopt a couple of steadfast practices in my classroom and simplify what I did; these turned into my classroom routines. Simple routines such as asking students to begin class every day with their writer's notebook out and then copy down our Agenda/Guiding Question/Objective added to the normalcy of the classroom and gave students practices where they knew how to be successful. Reiterating these same practices and making them routines in my classroom only further helped with the student's familiarity and greatly added to my classroom ecology and teacher presence.

### ***Using instructional practices to grow students' knowledge, skills and understanding***

Furthermore, these routines did something significant; they made my learning accessible and allowed me to grow my students' knowledge, skills, and understanding. In thinking of which routines I would implement in my class, I had to be very deliberate. The routines that worked best were the ones where students clearly knew how to be successful and the entirety of the class

was able to participate. What I had to do was implement simple but specific strategies that all students could implement, and be productive in. Going over the same practice such as breaking into small group discussions and then preparing to share aloud gave students a roadmap for what to do in order to meet the task. Students did not have to struggle to figure what was being asked, the same routine would apply and they already knew how to accomplish this. As the year progressed, I would add more routines and build on the ones we already practiced, this gave the class momentum and allowed us to add to what we already were comfortable with rather than having to always start new. It was very hard to create routines students would enjoy but I had provided them a voice and asked them to give feedback. This resulted in additions such as silent meditation where students would be given time once a week to decompress and center themselves before class would start. This was a practice I tried out once to see how students would react, and because they enjoyed it so much it became a routine in my class. Having stability and familiarity in a class greatly helps make learning accessible.

### **Assessments to Inform Instruction and Promote Learning**

#### ***Identifying and met students where they were academically and socio-emotionally***

Spending time with my students I quickly found an interesting point to be true. I must come in prepared, I must be familiar with the material I hope to teach, and I must implement strategies that promote learning, however, my students are not placed in the best position to be successful if I do not meet them where they are at. As a teacher, it is my job to assess where they are academically and social-emotionally. As mentioned previously the population I work with has been underserved relating to educational resources, affordable housing opportunities, migrant and foreign language support (Gonzales, 2016, pg. 59). Circumstance has placed my students in

very particular positions, and it is extremely important we acknowledge this within the class. My students hold significant life experience as their circumstance has asked many to support their families financially, help with cultural and language barriers, deal with mental health challenges, among many other things. This has placed the impotence on me to better get to know my students and their backgrounds.

It is crucial with any student, but specifically with the students that I teach for me to build a basis of trust and respect. Rather than just jumping into curriculum, by adjusting and meeting my student's academic and social needs the class is better able to engage with the material. When students feel they are being heard and what they say matters, they are more likely to invest in their learning. By building these relationships I get to better know the academic needs of my students, for example, the challenge for many was being an English Learner whether identified or not. Learning about my student's social-emotional well being and the challenges they have faced, helps me think about my students as whole people and in turn, helps develop mutual empathy and the drive to work together.

### *Using assessments strategically*

Getting to know my student's assets and needs, however, is not a one-time thing. To be most effective in the classroom, assessment must be used strategically to check for understanding and adjust practices. When I first began teaching, assessment seemed like a very intimidating word. I believed the only way we could assess was through the use of traditional tests or essays. Not until working directly with my students, and seeing how they best demonstrated their learning did I see that other strategies can be implemented. Verbally checking in with my students, using a writer's notebook to reflect, and creating artwork can all be different

assessments implemented to gauge where our students are at. My class specifically seemed to be very artistically inclined and jumped at the opportunity to demonstrate their thoughts through a visual medium. To be most effective you have to get to know your class and what venues they most enjoy to express themselves. Communication and asking students to contribute meaningfully in the class is what allows for assessment to be valuable and productive. Through the strategic use of assessment, the teacher can check for understanding multiple times throughout the lesson and adjust accordingly. Assessment when done deliberately and in a frequent manner can help steer our learning and hone us in on specific items we would like to improve.

### **Social Justice Dispositions to Promote Access, Learning, Achievement and Future**

#### **Opportunity and Success**

##### ***Growing self-awareness***

The final piece I would like to reflect on are the social justice dispositions that promote access, learning, achievement, and future opportunity and success. Growing self-awareness is the skill that I would like to begin with as I feel it holds significant weight within my classroom. The subject I taught was English, however, I truly attempted to use this subject as a vehicle to more holistically teach my students. When I think back to my time in high school, I can remember very few specific lessons I was taught and the very particular curriculum we were covering, but what does stand out in my mind are the life lessons I learned. How to carry myself, respect others, disagree respectfully, and look to improve as a person. It is with this in mind that I attempted to instill self-awareness in everything I did. Being able to pause and assess your own feelings, thoughts, and actions is a skill I believe not everyone has, but one that is crucial to

navigating challenges and being successful in life. Through this approach we focused on perspective, point of view, and how our position can influence how we see things. I had to be intentional in making this disposition a focus in my classroom but through reinforcement and repetition, my students picked up on the skill and became more aware of their actions and impacts.

### ***Raising consciousness***

The next disposition I would like to highlight in specific is helping raise the consciousness of our students. In particular, this task is a challenging one due to what is being asked of both the teacher and student. Teachers are being asked to help their students become more aware and conscious of themselves, their community, and the larger world. How do students' actions impact their surroundings? How can students better their community? What are the challenges facing this world students care about? Although at first a daunting task, my students greatly helped with their passion to voice their opinion and speak up for their community.

My first year in teaching was synchronous with many large world events. At the beginning of the first semester, the world became aware of a large migrant caravan heading north to the United States from Central America. The majority of my students are Latino/a/x and of immigrant descent themselves. As a result, we had many impactful and important conversations regarding human rights, family, and the pursuit of happiness. Later in the year, the COVID-19 crisis hit, again the class was eager to discuss because they were unsure and afraid of what was going on. We were able to discuss some of the anxieties students held as well as practical approaches to stay well. Finally, to close the academic year, the world saw the rise of Black

Lives Matter protests across the United States, in response to the killings of unarmed black men and women. This topic struck home with many of my students who could relate to the struggles and challenges and again saw my students want to speak up. My students were raising their consciousness whether they wanted to or not, many people were being faced with very difficult realities. However, I felt inspired as my students wanted to take action in their own hands.

### ***Sharing power and tools***

This brings me to the final disposition I would like to reflect on, sharing power and tools. Throughout the entirety of the academic school year, I attempted to provide a genuine voice to my students. It was clear to me that when the class has input and a say in what we do, they are more likely to engage and participate. This sentiment rang true for academic tasks such as analyzing a text, but also at a larger level when discussing challenges facing our community and society. Our class held circle at the end of the week, to voice any feelings we may have, and many students took advantage of this opportunity. This being said there is one specific example of power-sharing that I can think of to encapsulate my first year.

The example that comes to mind occurred at the end of the academic school year. As the BLM movement was picking up momentum across the country and many people were looking to speak up about injustices, one of my students asked for a platform. A student emailed me a list of resources, donation links, websites with information, and other supports for those interested in helping the cause. What my student was asking of me was to help spread her message, she specifically stated she did not want her message to fall on deaf ears because she was just a student. It frequently happens that adults tell students what they can and cannot do, unfortunately, we can show bias in our student's expectations and specifically disenfranchise our

students of color (Truss, 2020). When my student asked for support this made me think back to my experiences and realize that I had felt similarly when in their position. My student was looking to speak up and contribute in a way that people would actually listen to. I responded by helping forward her message to my colleagues and district employees. I do not believe everyone was very happy to receive the message, many preferred to stay silent on the matter. But my student thanked me for my support in sharing my platform, and simply for teaching her. That made it worth it.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, reflection on my ethnography Part D has highlighted three important points. The first point is that I believe all teaching should be based on strong classroom ecology. Students, like any person, react very well to being treated with respect and provided a voice in matters that apply to them. When we center all that we do on first establishing a classroom built on mutual respect, support, accountability, then students are better able to invest in their learning and focus on productively engaging the content.

The second principle I would like to bolden from my research is the importance and influence of a positive and strong teacher presence. I believe that by being a supportive and positive male figure many of my students respected me and took after what I said. Keeping myself to a high standard, presenting in a confident way, and holding myself accountable demonstrated to the students I took them and their education seriously. More specifically still, I believe many young men in specific benefited from having a positive male role model. I did not name it (although I hope to do so in further research), but by redefining masculinity from toxic to



positive students were presented with a new framework from which to see themselves and a possible example to follow.

The third basic principle of teaching I would like to close with is the need for culturally responsive teaching. Now having the opportunity to reflect I believe that part of what allowed me to be successful in the classroom were the practices I implemented keeping true to myself and my culture. Serving the community I grew up in allows me to provide a different perspective, one that I feel was able to relate to my students on a deeper level. Having been a student sitting in the very same classroom I now teach, I try and consider the opposite perspective. Simple things such as language, music, and emphasis on family topics showed the students I was genuine to the community and wanted to practice what I would have liked as a student myself. Culturally responsive teaching is so functional because it can serve as the jumping-off point for many other positive structures in classrooms. Culturally responsive project-based learning, positive behavior interventions and supports, universal design language, just to name a few frameworks that work great hand in hand with being responsive to whatever culture of students you are teaching.

Positive classroom ecology, a strong teacher presence, and culturally responsive teaching are the three items of reflection made clear in this final part of my ethnography. These tenets to teaching may seem very straightforward, but their intentional implementation lays the groundwork for all success within the classroom. I believe all teachers can serve to build their practices incorporating these three components as a bedrock.

## **Conclusion**

### **Closing Thoughts**

To conclude my ethnography as a whole there are a few closing thoughts I would like to share. Having gone through the experience of conducting research as an ethnographic project I can highlight the takeaways I have from each portion of my work. Regarding background, I have come to find that the person you are outside of the classroom directly shapes who you are inside; to improve as teachers we must inspect our own biases. Regarding student research it is crucial to get to know students on an individual level, familiarizing yourself with their culture, family, and background. No two students are the same and we must do the work to get to know them all. Community, school, and the classroom are all layers in the education system which are meant to but do not always work in tandem. In order to be successful in learning, you must identify the different factors at play and use them to your advantage.

Reflecting on the experience in its entirety has led me to arrive at three core tenets I believe allow me to be effective in my classroom and I argue any teacher can use to be successful. Everything done in the classroom must be built first upon a strong and positive classroom ecology. When students have a voice they are more willing to invest. Second, as an educator one must have a committed and stable teacher presence. By being an example in the class and maintaining high expectations the students have leadership to follow. Lastly all teachers must incorporate culturally responsive teaching in order for real learning to occur. Educators need to be aware of the background of their students, and not only this, but they must directly involve their culture so student learning is more applicable and meaningful.

I believe these foundational principles anyone can use within their classroom. They are universal approaches to being an effective teacher. To best serve our students we need not be overfocused on theoretical approaches but rather focus on our students and act practically.

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