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Each year, the United States becomes more ethnically and linguistically diverse, with more than 90 percent of immigrants coming from non-English-speaking countries. In order to develop the best educational programs for these learners, we need to understand their diverse backgrounds. This study explores student autobiographies and how they impact mainstream teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of English language learners. Fifth and sixth grade ELLs wrote their autobiographies in ESL class. These autobiographies were shared with the fifth grade teachers. A questionnaire was administered before the teachers read the autobiographies and a focus group was conducted after they were read. After the analysis of the questionnaires and the focus group, it is concluded that the fifth grade teachers gained understanding of the ELLs' backgrounds, which influenced them adapt teaching materials to the students' needs.

Impacts of Student Autobiographies on Mainstream Teachers' Perceptions, Attitudes, and
Instruction of English Language Learners

by
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

By the time school began, most of us have bartered successfully enough to have clothed ourselves, and when we sat down that first day, we really felt like students, and the school really seemed like school. The classrooms were thatched rooms, roofs without walls, and on the first morning of classes, the fifty-one boys sat on the ground and waited...the first day's lesson covered the alphabet...ABC... He wrote the three letters and read them aloud, demonstrating the sounds they denoted. Because we had no paper, Mr. Kondit sent us outside. There, we copied the letters into the dirt with sticks or our fingers...I had never written before; the first time I tried to write the letter B in the dirt, Mr. Kondit came behind me and clucked disapprovingly. He leaned over and grabbed my finger roughly, then guided it through the dirt to make the proper B, pushing my finger so hard into the ground that my fingernail cracked and bled. (Eggers, 2006, p.268)

Everyone has a story. The story that starts this capstone is of a young Sudanese boy, Valentino, at his first day of school in a refugee camp. As I read Valentino's story in *What Is the What* (Eggers, 2006), I thought about the power of his experience – of his story – and its ability to open a brief glimpse into his life and school experience.

Through his story, I gain access to pieces of his personal, linguistic, and cultural background. I know that Valentino had limited formal literacy training, was poor and lived in a refugee camp, and was attempting to escape a war in Sudan. I know that his school experience was not positive. Such knowledge allows me to be a more culturally responsive instructor. Using information derived from his story I, in turn would be able to more effectively reach and teach Valentino.

Personal stories are powerful. Stories provide a framework on which we base our understanding of the world around us. They validate our views and influence our

wants and desires. Stories tell where we've come from and they influence where we are going. Our stories tell who we are; likewise, our students' stories tell us who they are. Hearing and reading about different values and beliefs may challenge us. If we learn more about ourselves, our roots, and our history, we are better able to understand, interact, and connect with people who have a different history than our own. This is a key step toward building a strong community where all people are valued, included, and given opportunities to belong and contribute.

As suggested by Carrasquillo and Rodriguez (1996) and Howard (2007), our students' personal stories allow us as teachers to gain a better understanding of the cultural diversity in our schools. They influence the way we perceive our students, and if we use them wisely, they ultimately can influence how we instruct our students. Exploring student autobiographies allows for a deepened understanding between cultures and builds cultural competence.

As an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher I am well aware of the changing linguistic and cultural demographics within my school system and the lack of understanding many mainstream teachers have of our English language learners (ELLs). The growing number of language minority students intensifies the challenge of meeting student needs and understanding their respective linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Mainstream teachers need to become aware of not only what their students are experiencing, but also how today's teaching strategies and classroom assumptions in the U.S. may affect those who come from different cultures with different values. Many of our language minority students do not share the Anglo-European cultural orientation

which the United States is based (Clayton, 1996). If this is the case, how do teachers become aware of their students' experiences, learn about their students' cultures, and structure their instruction to best meet the needs of these language minority students?

In an attempt to learn from my students, I have my students write in journals and participate in discussions throughout the school year in ESL classes. My objective is in part to build their English skills, but also to help the students to reflect on their own experiences and those of their classmates and to consider and realize that we all hold different, but valid cultural perspectives. In addition, students' varied experiences are relevant to how they perceive the concepts studied in class. As the school year passes, students share more and more of themselves as they improve their English skills.

Personally, I have found this to be very effective in encouraging students to open up to each other and to me in the classroom. Further, it has helped me understand their cultural background. I am able to build on their background knowledge and scaffold instruction based on their experiences and learning styles. I have worked to create a culture in our classroom that is one of understanding and acceptance. I have often wondered if this understanding, acceptance, and instruction could be duplicated in the mainstream classroom if students opened up for their mainstream teachers as they do for me.

We can't take our students to a higher level of understanding if we don't know where their current level of understanding is. Phillion, Fang He, and Connelly (2005) discuss how exploring experiential narratives provides an understanding of multicultural issues in education as teachers are able to better understand students and their cultural experiences. They assert that a teacher's multicultural understanding helps create an

environment of trust where the students are more able to take an active role in their education. Banks (1996) suggests that multicultural knowledge helps create equal education opportunities for all students. In knowing our students' cultural experiences, we are able to provide an education that is relevant to what they know, and we are able to move them from one level to the next.

In this chapter, I will introduce student autobiographies and how they might be used to impact teacher perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of English language learners.

ELLs and Schooling

The number of ELLs in the U.S. is on the rise and many schools nationwide are experiencing rapid growth in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students from low-income families. Howard (2007) describes these schools as places of vibrant opportunity and places where we as educators are called to do meaningful and exciting work. With this work comes the need to grow, learning both from and with our students and their families. Presently, there are models designed to deliver support for ELLs. Most of these models recommend that ELLs spend only a portion of their day in the ESL or bilingual classroom and the majority of their academic day in an inclusive, mainstream classroom. However, many classroom teachers are not prepared to integrate these students. Questions of mainstream classroom teachers' abilities to effectively instruct these students remain (Clair, 1995).

For the past six years I have worked with mainstream classroom teachers to improve the education for our school's ELLs. During this time, many mainstream

teachers have welcomed my knowledge and insight, but others have not. Many mainstream teachers welcome ELLs into their classroom while others are hesitant. Clair (1995) suggests that mainstream teachers will continue to be hesitant about working with ELLs until there is more teacher in-service training and better ways to learn about other cultures and backgrounds. As educators in rapidly transitioning schools, we need to reexamine everything we are doing.

In looking at the current makeup of U.S. public schools, ninety percent of our teachers are white; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English speaking, predominately white communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly white colleges and universities (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003). Therefore, many white educators simply have not acquired the experiential and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

To help build authentic relationships, Moran (2001) points to the importance of bringing ELLs' cultures into the classroom and building on their experiences and knowledge. Howard (2007) points to the need for transforming the way educators carry out instruction in order to become more responsive to diversity. For teachers, this means examining pedagogy and curriculum as well as their own expectations and interaction patterns with students. Teachers need to form authentic and caring relationships with students, use curriculum that honors each student's culture and life experience, shift instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of students, communicate respect for each student's intelligence, and hold consistent and high expectations for all

learners (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McKinley, 2005; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). Student autobiographies are a step towards school transformation.

To better reach our ELLs, Clayton (2003) discusses the need for students to speak for themselves. She writes, “ELLs need to define the essence of their experience and their beliefs. While outsiders may apply general characteristics to a cultural belief and provide a different perspective, we also need to hear it from the viewpoint of the insider who experiences it” (p.6). By listening to our students’ stories and creating a learning environment in which each story is accepted, teachers will not only be able to celebrate the richness of their students’ stories, but will also gain insight to their cultures as well.

School Setting

I teach in a school district that has implemented the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. The mission statement of the IB program is:

The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.

These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2006).

As an IB school, we not only need to teach our students to live the mission statement, but we also need to adapt it ourselves as professionals and continue the journey of becoming internationally-minded. A piece of this discovery is an awareness and understanding of students’ personal stories.

The IB mission statement is a natural fit for me as a language teacher. I am able to use language and language learning as a vehicle as my school district adopts the mission statement of the International Baccalaureate Organization and works towards a more internationally minded curriculum and way of instruction. I promote inquiry-based, authentic language learning. In addition, the autobiographies encourage mainstream teachers to learn about our ELLs and their backgrounds.

I have always been interested in my students' stories and their impact on student learning and teacher/student relationships. I began to really start thinking about their stories' impact during REACH (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage) training. In this training, we discussed the changing demographics of U.S. schools and the profound implications they have for all levels and functions of a school community. To help confront these changing demographics, we discussed five phases of transformative work in our schools. According to REACH training, educators must first build trust with their students. Second, they must engage personal culture. Third, educators need to confront issues of social dominance and social justice. Fourth, schools and educators need to transform instructional practices. Fifth, the entire school community must be included in this transformative work (Howard, 2007).

In connection to these five phases of change, we also discussed the connection between the mind, heart, and hands. To be effective teachers we must have knowledge (mind) of our students, their backgrounds, and their cultures. In addition, educators must feel empathy (heart) towards their students. This will help build cultural bridges between differences. Finally, together we must use hands and be proactive to infuse

change within our schools (Howard, 2007). These discussions gave me incentive to work towards change at my school.

Not long after REACH training, I began to read the autobiography of Valentino, the Sudanese refugee whom I quoted to begin this capstone. The autobiography connected so well with REACH components and the IB mission statement that I immediately felt its power and wanted to bring the power of autobiographies and the knowledge I gained from my training back into the classroom.

Professionally and personally, this research is important to me because the greatest needs I have observed are authentic relationships between ELLs and mainstream instruction that meet ELLs' learning needs and a school climate that honors ELLs' culture and life experiences. Perhaps these issues simply stem from the teachers' and school system's lack of knowledge. However, to become culturally responsive teachers, mainstream teachers need to be responsible for connecting with ELLs. These connections can happen when the student backgrounds are validated and when students are given the opportunity to talk about their homeland and tell their stories (Clayton, 1996). Through student autobiographies, I hoped that a connection between ELLs and mainstream teachers could be fostered. In turn, I hoped mainstream teachers would self-reflect and examine their teaching in light of expectations, practices, attitudes and beliefs of ELLs and their families.

Role of Researcher

In this study, I worked with five fifth grade mainstream teachers and eight fifth and sixth grade ELLs. The students were part of a group of ELLs I worked with in a

pull-out model thirty minutes each day throughout the 2008-2009 academic school year. My students come from Mexico, Romania, Laos and Thailand. For this study, I have worked with students to create their personal autobiographies.

I administered an initial questionnaire to the students' mainstream teachers. When the autobiographies were completed, they were published and read by the teachers. A follow-up focus group was conducted with the mainstream teachers to learn if reading students' autobiographies impacted teacher perceptions of, attitudes toward, and instruction of ELLs.

Guiding Questions and Rationale

In this study, I looked at one central guiding question: How do student and family autobiographies impact mainstream teacher perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of English language learners?

In addition to my guiding question, I looked at the following sub-questions: What are the teachers' initial attitudes and perceptions of ELLs? How do mainstream teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction change after reading their ELLs' autobiographies? Is there an increase of positive attitudes after reading student autobiographies? Is there an increase of negative attitudes after reading student autobiographies? How do mainstream teachers modify curriculum to meet the diverse needs of ELLs? How is culturally responsive teaching affected after reading ELLs autobiographies?

Since part of the aim of my study is to increase recognition of the lives and feelings of ELLs, I am following Davis and Skilton-Sylvester (2004) who review scholars who "advocate studies for, with, or by rather than about, participants" (p.389).

Not only should the students' writing skills improve as they write their autobiographies, but their participation as writers and informants for their mainstream teachers is connected to the questions above; in other words, the students themselves should become empowered when they experience the effect of their stories.

Conclusion

In this study, I focus on the impact of student autobiographies and how they might change mainstream teacher perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of ELLs. Research suggests that sharing personal stories helps build a bridge between students and teachers. Personal stories allow for us to connect as human beings; though we may possess entirely disparate cultures and experiences, there is commonality that can be gained through the sharing of, listening to, and validation of stories. Clayton (1996) discusses that when students and parents from around the world share their life stories and genuinely participate in the life of the classroom, growth occurs for everyone.

In this chapter, I introduced my research question by establishing the purpose, significance, and need for this study. The context of the study was briefly introduced, as was the background and role of myself as researcher. In Chapter Two, I will provide a review of literature relevant to the importance of making connections with ELLs and how autobiographies can make this connection. Chapter Three will include a description of the research design and methodology that guides this study. Chapter Four will present and discuss the results of this study. In Chapter Five I reflect on the data collected. I will also discuss the limitations of the study, implications for further research and recommendations for using student autobiographies in the classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Munching on a sandwich at lunch time, Sally, the first grade teacher, looked at me, “Can I interrupt your lunch long enough to talk about Yoshio?” Yoshio was one of my ESL students from Japan; he had been in her class for two weeks. Learning English was not easy for him. Before I could answer, she continued, “I just do not know how to reach him. Yesterday morning I gave him some seat work – some of the things you and I talked about that he could do – and he would not sit at his desk and get it done. He kept hanging around other kids’ desks, which made it hard for them. Then, after lunch when it was time to come back to the classroom, he wrapped himself around a pole in the lunch room and would not let go. It took the principal and the guidance counselor and me to loosen him from the pole and march him upstairs. It’s like he’s from a different planet. What’s going on? I really don’t understand. I wish you could keep him in your class longer than just that one period until he can learn to talk a little and act like the other kids in class.” (Clayton, 1996, p.1)

After teaching ESL for 7 years, I have encountered several experiences similar to the above incident. Perhaps the story of Yoshio is merely showing a lack of the teacher’s cultural knowledge. The teacher is obviously concerned about Yoshio’s learning. However, from her perspective, the best thing for Yoshio’s learning is to act like the other students.

We are born into a family, community and culture, and from the day we are born, we absorb what is acceptable in our culture as we also begin to absorb our own perspectives. Culture is always changing. Within a culture, this change is gradual. But when one is removed from a home culture and relocated to a foreign culture, the change is instant and often traumatic (Trumull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, Quiroz, 2001). Our ESL students often experience shock from the grave culture changes as they leave their

birth culture, their familiar language, community and social system. Yet many teachers fail to understand their students' birth culture as well as the impact of changing culture (Igoa, 1995).

ELLs arrive in the United States and our school systems with a variety of emotional and cognitive adjustments. Howard (2007) argues that we cannot just expect our culturally and linguistically diverse students to act like the other students; we must learn their personal histories and stories to understand their perspectives, their birth cultures and the changes they have experienced. Personal stories are the bridge to understanding our students and their cultural histories and can help contribute to school change and reform. Banks (1996) agrees that personal narratives build connections between school and community. They can help teach us to better understand our students and the personal histories and cultures they bring with them into the classroom. These histories are not the same as ours, yet they profoundly influence the educational process.

My central question encompasses student stories and their impact on mainstream teachers: How do student autobiographies change mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of ELLs? In this chapter, I review literature that discusses culture and the American school system, English language learner diversity, and the use of autobiographies to create more culturally responsive teaching within our school system, and I indicate what my study will contribute.

Diversity and School Performance

Each year, the United States becomes more ethnically and linguistically diverse, with more than 90 percent of recent immigrants coming from non-English-speaking

countries. From the 1989-1990 school year through 2004-2005, the number of identified students with limited English proficiency in public schools (K-12) grew 138 percent while total enrollment increased only by 21 percent (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). Thus, the proportion of ELLs in the schools is growing more rapidly than the actual numbers might indicate. In 2004-2005, close to five million school-age children were identified as limited English proficient. That is almost 10 percent of the K-12 public student population (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008).

Unfortunately, many teachers in today's classrooms are not prepared to effectively teach this changing student population. Traditional teaching techniques are not meeting the needs of our culturally and linguistically diverse students. Consider the following statistics:

- Only 30 percent of all secondary students read proficiently, but for students of color, the situation is worse: 89 percent of Hispanic students... read below grade level (Perie, Grig, & Donahue, 2005).
- Only four percent of eighth-grade ELLs and 20 percent of ELLs exited from ESL programs scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the reading portion of the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress (Perie, Grig, & Donahue, 2005). This means that 96 percent of the eighth-grade ELLs scored below the basic level.
- A dramatic divide in achievement exists between native English-speaking Caucasian students and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds on state and national measures of achievement (California

Dept. of Education, 2004; Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003; Kindler, 2002; Siegel, 2002).

- English language learners have some of the highest drop out rates and are more frequently placed in lower ability groups and academic tracks than language majority students (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008).

As can be seen from the above statistics, educators in the U.S. are not adequately prepared for meeting the needs of the changing demographics in today's schools. It will take significant effort on the part of schools, districts, and universities to better our instruction and understand the backgrounds of our diverse learners. Mainstream teachers are often perplexed or intimidated in their relationships with ELLs in their classrooms (Clayton, 1996). Teachers should not be blamed or judged for this; their daily responsibilities are tremendously demanding and most teachers have not received formal training in how to serve the needs of ELLs. This, however, does not relieve them of the responsibilities they indeed have to their ELL population.

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, U.S. public school teachers face more and more responsibilities. This Act requires increased accountability for schools to reach high standards for all students in reading and mathematics. Each year, the state of Minnesota, as part of the NCLB requirements, releases Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports for public schools. Among other things these reports measure our students' performance in terms of the proportion of students who are at or above state-defined academic standards in reading and mathematics as measured by the Minnesota statewide assessments. Based on the results

of the state assessment, my school did not meet the state's annual AYP proficiency rate. ELLs were a subgroup of students that did not meet the AYP proficiency rate for reading and mathematics. To make AYP the 2008-2009 school year, my school district must close the achievement gap. If we are to create effective schools that truly serve all children, then closing the achievement gap must be an essential priority. A consistent pattern emerges when examining data from schools throughout the country. Race, culture, ethnicity, language, and economic status continue to be powerful predictors of school failure. Whether the measure is grades, test scores, attendance, discipline referrals, drop out or graduation rates, those students who differ most from mainstream (white, middle/upper class, English speaking Americans) are those most vulnerable to being mis-served by our nation's schools (Howard, 2002). Teachers, administrators, school board members, scholars, policy leaders, students, and parents are aware of this gap in educational equity, and numerous programs, initiatives, and strategies are beginning to be established to address it (Kozol, 1991), but the system is still failing many students. It is thus not only that the students are failing, but that the educational system is failing to teach them.

Howard (2002) discusses the assumption of "rightness" and the luxury of ignorance and how they are related to the achievement gap in today's schools. The assumption often leads teachers to assume that the problem of school failure lies in the students and their families and not in the structure of schooling. We make assumptions about who can and cannot learn; the more uncomfortable we are with the difference, the

greater the likelihood that we will relegate certain children to lower levels of expectation and academic opportunity.

The luxury of ignorance explains why many dominant culture educators remain unaware of the misalignment between home and school that is experienced by students from poor and culturally diverse backgrounds. Comer (1988) says that even poor, culturally and linguistically diverse students who are academically successful experience school as an alien environment not attuned to their needs.

Public education in the United States has historically been a hope for an escape from poverty for the majority of people of color. However, culturally diverse students continue to fall through cracks in our public schools. Howard (2007) and Darder (1991) discuss traditional pedagogical values and how they have contributed to the underachievement of diverse students. Howard argues that the American public education system is faced with three simultaneous statistical realities: (1) Our teacher force is mostly white. (2) Our student population is highly diverse, and children of color are increasing. (3) Children of color are precisely the students most at risk of being caught at the negative end of the achievement gap. He further suggests that although diversity in our classrooms is not a choice, our responses to it are.

Public schools are also dealing with more language and religious diversity than most teachers have been trained to embrace effectively in their classrooms (Banks, 2006). Kozol (2005) insightfully speaks of the problems facing today's public schools: disproportionate academic outcomes for different cultural groups, increasing incidents of racially motivated violence and hate-group activity, inequalities in educational funding,

inadequate preparation of teachers to deal effectively with increasing diversity, curriculum that remains Eurocentric and monocultural, and the resistance of educators, school boards, and communities to face realities of their changing populations.

Bilingual and multicultural education has been part of education for many years, but racism and inequality still remain and public initiatives have abolished bilingual education and restricted immigration. Howard (2007), Banks (2006) and Ovando and McLaren (2000) all agree that although schools in the United States are based on an Anglo-European school system, we must not be “color-blind.” We need to listen to our students, to hear their perspectives and transform our curriculum to meet their needs. We need to make their voices heard. Igoa (1995) believes student autobiographies will help teachers to address the discussion of multicultural education as teachers learn about and learn from our students’ personal histories and cultures.

English Language Learner Diversity

In order to develop the best educational programs for ELLs, we need to understand students’ diverse backgrounds. These learners bring a wide variety of educational and cultural experiences to the classroom as well as considerable linguistic differences. These characteristics have implications for instruction. Once we know their backgrounds and abilities, we can incorporate effective techniques and materials in our instructional practices (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008).

By no means are all English language learners in schools today alike. They have diverse educational backgrounds, expectations in schooling, socioeconomic status, age of arrival, personal experiences while coming to and living in the United States (Echevarria,

Vogt, Short, 2008). Further, there is diversity within every culture; not every person in every culture upholds the same beliefs and maintains the same values (Carrasquillo and Rodriguez, 1996). As teachers, we have the responsibility to educate ourselves about student cultures and backgrounds, while remembering that we cannot make generalizations and lump all immigrant students together.

Freeman and Freeman (2002) discuss three types of English language learners. First, there are the newly arrived ELLs with adequate schooling. These ELLs are recent arrivals with less than five years in the United States. They have received adequate schooling in their native country. They typically are able to catch up to their peers academically. However, they may still have lower scores on standardized tests given in English. The second group of ELLs are the newly arrived with limited formal schooling. Once again, this group is made up of recent arrivals with fewer than five years in the United States. Their schooling in their native country may have been limited or interrupted. They have limited native language literacy, are below grade level in math, and have poor academic achievement. The third group of ELLs are the long term English learners. This group has been in the United States for seven years or more. They are below grade level in reading and writing. Some of these students receive adequate grades, but score low on tests. Finally, there is usually a mismatch between student perception of achievement and their actual grades.

As can be seen from the descriptions above, language minority students are racially, ethnically, linguistically and academically diverse. Carrasquillo and Rodriguez

(1996) discuss that it is as much a fallacy to consider all ELLs as one single group as it is to consider all members of any group the same.

This diversity poses the need for educators to accept the cultures that students come from and to value each student as an individual within their cultures. As educators, we must also remember that cultures are always changing. They are never stagnant. Clayton (2003) suggests that autobiographies allow for an understanding of cultural diversity and also for individual diversity within cultures. This understanding will help eliminate stereotyping and allow students to acculturate positively into the school society.

Families that risk nearly all they have to leave their home country and culture often do so in hopes of providing their children the chance to be educated in the U.S. and to have an opportunity to live the American dream (Igoa, 1995). As an educator who has devoted my career to serving these children, it is heartbreaking to know that many of these are among the most misunderstood and voiceless students in public schools. In taking a walk through any public school in the U.S., it is not uncommon to hear educators of minority students uttering complaints similar to those of Yoshio's teacher: "I cannot reach him." "I wish he were like the other students." "He's just not trying hard enough." "I don't know what to do!" Is it Yoshio to blame, or the teacher? Or both? Or neither? More important, what can we as teachers do to help immigrant students?

The reality is that in order for us to effectively serve all students in a rapidly demographically changing school system, pedagogical assumptions and practices must be acknowledged and altered for the specific needs of students inhabiting our classrooms (Howard, 2007). Student autobiographies are one way to challenge the assumptions

guiding our pedagogical practices and to infuse our schools with a more inclusive and embracing atmosphere (Comer, 1988). In doing so, we will be able to better reach Yoshio, and others who are statistically more inclined to fall victim to the achievement gap.

Mainstream Teachers Learning from Student Autobiographies

Often people don't know much about their own culture, especially if they have lived in one place most of their lives. People are most likely to discover what they like and dislike, and what they call right and wrong when they encounter someone who behaves or believes differently than they do. That is because people learn their culture's rules, values, and beliefs gradually as they grow up: at home, at school, at a place of worship, and in friends' homes. And usually everyone around behaves very much the same (Blohm&Lapinsky, 2006).

However, when people travel to a different country or a person moves from another country to a new community, people have the great opportunity to learn about themselves and the new people around. As people find people saying and doing things differently, many may begin to question their ways of life. If people take the time to understand what values are in conflict, people will learn about themselves as well as the newcomer (Blohm& Lapinsky, 2006).As educators, a way to do this is to read the stories about young people and their families who have moved to the United States from many different cultures (Igoa, 1995).

Autobiographies also allow for students to reflect on things they miss from their birth country, what they find different and difficult. Clayton (2003) believes

autobiography writing creates meaningful interactions between teachers and students. She discusses the need in our schools to listen to our students' experiences and to use them in the learning context and to promote change in today's school systems. The more we learn about our students and ourselves as educators, the more we will be open to their cultures and the more comfortable we will feel about changing our instruction to better meet their needs.

Igoa (1995) believes that educators working intensively with immigrant children are able to see their silence, their reluctance, and their shyness. These educators know that these students bring to school with them much more than we are able to see. As stated earlier, ELLs bring with them a variety of cultural backgrounds, life styles, religious preferences, educational values, and attitudes to the school and classroom setting. Personal autobiographies provide a brief overview for mainstream teachers to read about these different ethnic and linguistic groups and can help mainstream teachers understand the perspectives of ELLs and to respect students' cultural and religious differences (Clayton, 2003). Howard (2007) discusses the need for this awareness and knowledge if we are to reach all of our students, especially those from diverse backgrounds. Autobiographies teach us the student's personal qualities, the specific challenges of adjusting to a new school environment, and the bundle of characteristics they bring with them.

Autobiographies can help students to place themselves in their new environment and can open the eyes of teachers to the students' world views. Autobiographical writing can contribute to cultural identity formation and it allows students and readers to connect

with themselves, with their family histories as well as their dreams for their futures. Telling, writing, and presenting themselves to the world, students see themselves as teachers (Berriz, 2000) while providing teachers a way to know them better. This is empowering to students. Autobiography writing involves deeper levels of the person; it entails the processes of critical reflection, self-awareness, meaning, and perspective change (Mezirow, 1991). On the teachers' side, involvement of deeper understanding and awareness promotes culturally responsive teaching. Karpiak (2007) tells of his experience reading his students' autobiographies and how he learned from them:

Their stories drew and compelled me, no less than characters in novels might do. I had not expected such an expressive and reflective effort, this willingness to invest themselves so deeply, or their disposition to disclose the personal and often painful details of their life. Pain, joy, adversity, humor – all were contained on these pages...it is difficult to imagine that this group of individuals, who appeared on the surface to be so stable, so unassuming, could have led such varied, turbulent, self-creative, and multi-faceted lives. As an educator, I wondered to what extent I and perhaps other educators were omitting this more personal and historical aspect of students' lives, and to what extent we were missing the opportunity to include students' relevant experiences into the learning context(p. 32).

As can be seen from this educator's experience, student autobiographies contribute to a connection between the teacher and the student. However, research also indicates that autobiographies contribute to a wider connection between school, community, and family, which leads to student success. Support across these three bases – school, community, and family – gives students a grounded foundation from which they are more likely to experience success in the classroom. Comer (1988) has spent years documenting significant gains in student success through strengthening the ties between schools and communities and actively engaging parents in every aspect of schooling. Gay (2000)

brings together extensive research and experience to demonstrate the power of classroom teaching strategies that are culturally responsive to the reality of students' lives and that of their families.

Social Action and Culturally Responsive Teaching

The aim of reading student autobiographies is to promote culturally responsive teaching in our educational systems. Trueba (1989) and Banks (1996) discuss the need for curriculum transformation and how students' voices and personal narratives can help change current educational programs for ESL students. Mainstream students who struggle in the mainstream classroom should know how to use writing as a social tool and to introduce themselves to a particular audience. Igoa (1995) believes that literacy is central to learning and the child's sense of self-empowerment. She argues that writing allows students to actively educate those around them and to develop responsibility for their own educational process.

Howard (2007) refers to "culturally relevant" or "culturally responsive" teaching that teaches the students in our classrooms in ways that address their learning styles. Three essential areas are addressed by such culturally responsive teaching: (1) concept of self and others, (2) structure of interactions, and (3) construction of knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1994) challenges educators in diverse classrooms to know who we are as educators and to know our students well, to be competent in the structuring of relationships that work, and to allow space for students' authentic cultural knowledge to inform and intersect creatively with our teaching.

Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) offer seven principals for building culturally responsive learning communities: “(1) affirming students in their cultural connections, (2) being personally inviting, (3) creating physically welcoming classroom spaces, (4) reinforcing students for their academic development, (5) accommodating our instruction to the cultural and learning style differences of our students, (6) managing our classrooms with a firm, consistent, and loving control, and (7) creating opportunities for both individual and cooperative growth.”

Whichever theoretical approach we take, Howard (2007) believes culturally responsive teaching calls us to a deep engagement with knowing ourselves, knowing our students, and knowing our practices. Knowing our students and forming authentic relationships allows us as educators to design curriculum and pedagogical strategies that are responsive to and honor our students’ actual lived experiences.

Autobiographies, Building Background, and Academic Literacy

As a teacher, there have been times that I have carefully prepared a lesson; however, as I am teaching it, I see confused faces and off-task behaviors. I soon realize that the students cannot make a personal connection to the lesson. There is a mismatch between what my students have learned and experienced and the key concepts that I was teaching. English learners are frequently disadvantaged because their schooling experiences – whether they have had little schooling or exceptional schooling – may be considerably different from U.S. educational contexts. Further, ELLs may not have learned the academic language and key vocabulary necessary for understanding content information (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008). As educators, it is important that we not

assume that all students lack knowledge of academic language; some students may know academic language well in their native language, but not in English.

Effective teaching takes students from where they are and leads them to a higher level of understanding. Students learning English must have many opportunities to use the target language – to hear, see, read, write, and speak the new language within the context of subject matter learning. The language must be meaningful (Krashen, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978), and the tasks must be relevant to their lives while increasing their English language skills.

The foundation of school success is academic literacy in English. Although not understood by many educators, age-appropriate knowledge of the English language is a prerequisite in the attainment of content standards (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008). Without proficient oral and written English language skills, students have difficulty learning and demonstrating their knowledge in the classroom. There is a strong relationship between literacy proficiency and academic achievement. Therefore, we must give our ELLs instruction and experiences to use their language.

At some point, a child has enough language that it can also be used as a resource for further learning and cognitive growth. However, writing skills are more easily learned if students write about content they know well. Language itself can then also be used to negotiate new meanings and construct knowledge about the world (Thompson, 2009). At this point, literacy becomes increasingly important as more abstract learning takes place. Students must articulate their thinking skills in English. They must also pull together their emerging knowledge of the English language with the content knowledge

they are studying in order to complete the academic tasks (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2008). This being said, student autobiographies are a beginning towards literacy development and building upon our students' background experiences. Students are able to write more thoughtfully if they are writing about experiences they know well. Student autobiographies thus allow educators to both teach the key components of literacy and learn about and build on ELLs' background knowledge and experiences with content that the students know well: their own lives.

Filling in the Research Gap

With my research and student autobiographies, I have provided a means for more mainstream teachers in my building and beyond to be able to provide education that is relevant to what ELLs know and move them from one level of understanding to the next. As an International Baccalaureate school, we need to begin the journey of an internationally minded education that is relevant to all students regardless of their background. As the IB mission statement says, "these programmes encourage students across the world to be compassionate, lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences can be right" (International Baccalaureate, 2006). My goal is that our school can begin to live the mission statement of IB and become more knowledgeable, culturally sensitive, and internationally minded. I will provide data that supports student autobiographies develop more culturally responsive teaching.

In addition to becoming more internationally minded, my school district needs to address the issue of Adequate Yearly Progress. My school has not made AYP for two consecutive years and we have been identified for program improvement. Staff has

worked to raise test scores and close the achievement gap. However, I see many colleagues still questioning themselves. They do not feel prepared to meet the needs of students as demographics continue to change year after year. Rigorous test-prep is not likely the answer to raising our school's AYP report. The issue is clearly deeper than teaching students the format of any given test; this is further discussed in Chapter Four. By listening to student stories and creating a learning environment in which each story is accepted, my hope is that my colleagues will be able to celebrate student stories, gain insight to their cultures and examine pedagogy and curriculum that is more responsive to diversity. Student autobiographies can be a step towards my school's transformation and cultural understanding is a missing piece to what is needed as we work towards becoming more internationally minded and making AYP the 2008-2009 academic school year. In turn, the research I am conducting can lead to possible remedies in other local settings.

Conclusion

This chapter included a review of literature relating to the American school system, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and how we as teachers can use autobiographies to change our perceptions and attitudes of ELLs. In addition, autobiographies can be used to alter our instruction to better meet the needs of our diverse learners. As research suggests, autobiographies allow for reflection. They give students a chance to tell their stories and be the teacher, and they give teachers insights that can help them teach more effectively.

The next chapter includes a description of the research design and methodology used to collect data about my central question: Does reading student and family

autobiographies change mainstream teacher attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of ELLs? Chapter Four presents the results of this study. In Chapter Five, I will discuss my major findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

What goes on in the inner world of the immigrant child? Would it help the child if the teacher knew? Would the teacher's approach and methodologies be different? Or would the teacher use the same ones, but with different purposes? (Igoa, 1995, p.xi)

This chapter describes the methodology and research instruments used to collect data about and explore my central question: How do student and family autobiographies impact the perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of mainstream teachers toward ELLs? The objective in investigating this question is to gain insight into building cultural bridges between mainstream teachers and ELLs. The rationale and research design are presented along with a description of the qualitative paradigm. The data collection protocols are then presented. The research and study results will be analyzed and then used to formulate recommendations for using student and family autobiographies in schools.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

The focus of my study is a qualitative investigation of mainstream teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of ELLs before and after reading their ELLs' autobiographies. Merriam (1998) describes qualitative research as a concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Qualitative

researchers are interested in the meanings people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of the world and their experiences in the world. Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is lived, felt, or undergone” (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p. 7).

There are five characteristics that help define qualitative research. The key characteristic in qualitative research is understanding the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s. This is defined as the emic, or insider’s perspective. The second characteristic in qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). The researcher needs to step back and analyze what has been observed, providing an etic perspective. There is often an interplay between emic and etic throughout the research.

A third characteristic of qualitative research is that it usually involves fieldwork. That is, the researcher goes to the people, site, setting, institution in order to observe behavior in its natural setting. Fourth, qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy. It builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory. Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gained in the field (Merriam, 1998).

Finally, since qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding, the product of a qualitative study is descriptive. Rich descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest are used to convey what the researcher has learned. In addition, data in the form of participants’ own words and direct citations are likely to be included to support findings in the study (Merriam, 1998).

The reliability of qualitative research depends on what is termed dependability. Dependability has to do with the degree to which the results in the study can be trusted or reliable. To achieve dependability, the researcher must provide comprehensive details about procedures and record data with rich description of the students involved, the context of the study, and most importantly the steps the researcher took to carry out the study (McKay, 2006).

An Ethnographic Study

My research is qualitative with some characteristics of an ethnographic study. An ethnographic study is a form of qualitative research employed by anthropologists to study human society and culture. Merriam (1998) refers to culture as the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior pattern of a specific group of people. Through student autobiographies, beliefs, values, and attitudes of the immigrant students will be uncovered.

An educational ethnography typically deals with the culture of a school community or the culture of a specific group within the school community. Educational ethnographers try to gain an emic or holistic view of teachers and learners (McKay, 2006). Whatever the unit of study – students, schools, learning, curriculum, informal education – an ethnographic study is characterized by its cultural context. Merriam (1998) says, “The history of the neighborhood, socioeconomic factors, the community’s racial and ethnic make-up, and the attitudes of parents, residents, and school officials toward education – all would be important considerations in an ethnographic study” (p. 15). The data collected describe the social order, setting, or situation being investigated,

according to Merriam. In this study, I have looked at a part of the culture of my school by studying the fifth grade teachers and how student autobiographies impact their perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of ELLs.

In my study, the set of methods used to collect data area questionnaire and a focus group. A questionnaire was given before mainstream teachers read ELLs autobiographies and a follow-up taped focus group was conducted after the autobiographies were read to see if and how teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of ELLs changed.

Questionnaires

This study is designed to explore how autobiographies may change mainstream teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of ELLs. One research tool utilized in an ethnographic study as mentioned above is questionnaires (see appendix D). Dornyei (2003) says that questionnaires are the most natural way to obtain information, and their main strength is the ease of their construction. Questionnaires are used to collect three types of data: factual, behavioral, and attitudinal. Factual questions are asked to identify the respondents. These questions typically cover demographic information such as age, gender and race. Behavioral questions are asked to learn about the respondents' actions, life-styles, habits and personal histories. Finally, attitudinal questions are used to gain information about persons' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests, and values (Dornyei, 2003).

There are many advantages to using questionnaires. Their main advantage is their efficiency. One can collect a large amount of information in a short amount of time.

In addition, if a questionnaire is well constructed, processing the data can be fast and straightforward (Gillham, 2000). Questionnaires are also versatile: they can be used with a variety of people, fitting the goal that a qualitative study be emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress (Merriam, 1998).

Along with advantages come disadvantages. Questionnaires can produce unreliable and invalid data. Respondents may simplify their answers. They may be unmotivated to complete the questionnaire. They may have literacy problems, although that was not assumed to be a problem in my research. Finally, people do not always provide true answers about themselves. They may report what they think the researcher wants to hear. They may also over report or underreport (Dornyei, 2003).

Questionnaires are appropriate to my research because I am looking for the mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions and instruction of ELLs before they read the student autobiographies. I am able to collect a large amount of information in a short amount of time. I am interested in how mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions and instruction are impacted from ELL's autobiographies; I therefore used a questionnaire in conjunction with a focus group.

Focus Groups

A focus group (see appendix E) is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their attitude, beliefs, and desires towards a particular topic or idea. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. Focus groups can give the researcher information on how groups of people think or feel about a particular topic. They can give greater insight

into why certain opinions are held by opening up topics the researcher may not previously have considered. In addition, they can help improve the planning and design of new programs and provide a means of evaluating existing programs. Finally, focus groups are able to produce insights for developing strategies for outreach (Krueger, 1988).

Participants in a focus group are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. The interviewer creates a permissive and nurturing environment that encourages different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants (Krueger, 1988).

There are many advantages to using focus groups. They take advantage of the fact that many people naturally interact and are influenced by others. Also, they provide data more quickly and at a lower cost than other forms of research. They generally require less preparation and are generally easy to conduct. The researcher or convener is also able to ask participants for clarification, ask follow-up questions, and probe for more information. In addition, since data uses respondents' own words, the researcher is able to obtain deeper levels of meaning, and make important connections.

There are also disadvantages with focus groups. Because the researcher is less able to control what information will be produced, they require a carefully trained interviewer who is knowledgeable that group dynamics results may be biased by the presence of a very dominant or opinionated member; more reserved members may be hesitant to talk and discuss, and the convener needs to insure that everyone has the opportunity to talk freely (Marczak & Sewell, 2009). The fifth grade group of educators

has been collaborating throughout the school year as they created International Baccalaureate curriculum. Therefore, there is an established environment of trust and professionalism among these colleagues.

Focus groups take advantage of group interactions. Therefore, it is important to use the information at the group level, not the individual level. Focus groups are not a valid way to find out how much progress an individual has made towards a goal. However, they are a good tool in finding out how much progress a group has made. Also, because focus groups are made up of a very small number of people, the researcher cannot assume that their views and perceptions represent those of other groups who may have different characteristics (Stewart, 1990).

Data Collection

Location/Setting

The setting of my research was at a suburban, public, elementary school in an upper Midwestern suburb. The school is made up of a little over 900 students; 109 of them are ELL. The school has had an ESL program for twelve years.

Participants and Procedure for Collecting Data

Participants in my study included five mainstream teachers and eight students. The students were fifth and sixth grade ELLs at the suburban elementary school. Students and their families come from Mexico, Romania, Laos and Thailand. All students are literate in English. Students worked for 30 minutes a day in a pull-out ESL model. The research was done at school and in collaboration with students' families (see appendices

A & B). Students worked with their families to collect information for their autobiographies.

In addition to the students, I was also working with the fifth grade teachers. This group of educators has been working together all school year as they develop and write International Baccalaureate curriculum. There is an established, working environment among these educators where different perspectives are respected. A questionnaire (see appendix D) that included open-ended, short answer questions was given before they read the ELL student autobiographies. Open-ended, short answer questions allow the respondents to write in their own answers. Short answer questions encourage information regarding some aspect of second language teaching or learning.

I used attitudinal questions to seek information about their attitudes, perceptions and instruction of ELLs, as recommended by McKay (2006). These questions were used to seek or find out information about the opinions, beliefs, or interests of the teachers. The questionnaire contained short answer and open-ended questions in which the respondent answered questions with detailed information.

A focus group (see appendix E) was conducted and taped after reading the autobiographies. Data was collected to see how their perceptions, attitudes, and instruction changes after reading students' stories. My colleague and IB coordinator conducted the focus group.

Analysis of Data

To collect and analyze my data, I needed the cooperation of my colleagues to participate in the questionnaires (see appendix D). I also needed my colleagues to read

theELLs' autobiographies. I needed the cooperation of my students' families (see appendices A & B) to participate and help their children gain information about their families. Finally, I needed interpreters who assisted in translating material sent home.

I analyzed this data by evaluating teacher attitudes, perceptions and instructional methods before and after they read the students' autobiographies. This type of data analysis is defined as the constant comparative method, a method developed as a means of developing grounded theory. A grounded theory consists of categories, properties, and hypotheses that are the links between and among the categories and properties. The researcher begins with a particular incident, interview or document and then compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. Rather than being imposed from the outset, as in a controlled study, the theory emerges through data analysis (Merriam, 1998).

Data analysis is best done in conjunction with data collection. A rich and meaningful analysis of data is not possible if analysis is begun after all data are collected because there is interplay throughout the study as data is collected and analyzed, which often results in asking more questions as for clarification as the study progresses. Further, the chances of a researcher being overwhelmed by data in a qualitative study will be greatly reduced if analysis begins early (Merriam, 1998). In my study, I continuously examined data as I took notes and observed and discussed findings with colleagues.

Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology and research instruments used to collect data about and explore my central question: How do student and family autobiographies

change the perceptions, attitudes, and instructional methods of mainstream teachers toward ELLs? The next chapter includes a presentation and analysis of the questionnaire and focus group results. In Chapter Five, I will discuss my major findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

To give up your country is the hardest thing a person can do: to leave the old familiar places and ship out over the edge of the world to America and learn everything over again different than you learned as a child, learn the new language that you will never be so smart or funny in as in your true language. It takes years to start to feel semi-normal. And yet people still come - from Russia, Vietnam, and Cambodia and Laos, Ethiopia, Iran, Haiti, Korea, Cuba, Chile, and they come on behalf of their children, and they come for freedom. Not for our land (Russia is as beautiful), not for our culture (they have their own, thank you), not for our standard of living (it frankly ain't that great), not for our system of government (they don't know about it, may not even agree with it), but for freedom. They are heroes who make an adventure on our behalf, showing us by their struggle how precious beyond words freedom is, and if we knew their stories, we could not keep back the tears. (Keillor, 1988)

This study took place at an, suburban, public IB elementary school in an upper Minnesotan suburb. The school consists of a little over 900 students, 109 of whom are English language learners. For this research, I worked with fifth and sixth grade ELLs in a pull-out ESL program and with fifth grade mainstream teachers. During this time, students wrote personal autobiographies in ESL. Their autobiographies were used as a tool to gain insight into the fifth grade teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction of ELLs. A questionnaire was given before teachers read the student autobiographies and a focus group was conducted after they were read. Through the collection of these data, I sought to find the answer to the following question: How do student autobiographies impact mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of ELLs?

In addition to my guiding question, I looked at the following sub-questions: What are the teachers' initial attitudes and perceptions of ELLs? How do mainstream teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and instruction change after reading their ELLs' autobiographies?

Is there an increase of positive attitudes after reading student autobiographies? Is there an increase of negative attitudes after reading student autobiographies? How do mainstream teachers modify curriculum to meet the diverse needs of ELLs? How is culturally responsive teaching affected after reading ELLs autobiographies?

Questionnaires

I used a questionnaire (see appendix D) to gain insight into how the fifth grade teachers perceived and instructed English language learners before they read the students' autobiographies. I included a consent letter (see appendix C) with the questionnaire that explained my research and the main benefit of writing autobiographies (see appendix F), which is to help teach students the writing process and to build cultural bridges between mainstream teachers and ELL students. I told the teachers that the questionnaire was anonymous and that I was primarily interested in personal opinions of teachers. I asked them to give their answers as sincerely and completely as possible so as to contribute to the success of my study. Upon returning the consent letter, teachers then completed the questionnaire.

The first question of the questionnaire was: *How many English language learners (ELLs) do you typically have in your classroom?* The questionnaire concluded that my colleagues typically had two to four ELLs in their classrooms.

The second question asked: *Do you have any concerns about having ELLs in your classroom? If yes, what are they?* Two of the five fifth grade teachers had concerns for their ELLs. One teacher said, "Having them find their 'place' and not feel singled out or that they are different. Making sure they see others like them in activities and books."

Another colleague stated, “Yes, that they are being supported as much as possible in the mainstream.” The remaining three teachers answered “no” to this question.

Question number three asked: *When thinking about ELLs, what are your perceptions and attitudes?* Many teachers did have initial perceptions and attitudes of their English language learners. “ELLs are sometimes shy, afraid to make mistakes, aware they are different than the typical majority culture students.” Another teacher noticed, “Many are very reluctant to share with the entire class about their own life and culture.” “I see that they are typically lower than the rest of my class and their backgrounds and home lives are difficult.” Finally, “Though not always the case, I assume they will need more one-on-one help with reading and vocabulary.”

The last question on the questionnaire asked: *When working with ELLs, how do you modify your instruction and curriculum to make it more culturally responsive and conducive to their background?* Teachers said, “I try to come at all topics from multiple perspectives and highlight books that may have cultural significance to all students.” “I try to get students to make connections with their own cultures to whatever it is we may be studying.” “It is hard to modify curriculum and differentiate instruction for all my students. I could do a better job at that, but reality is, we have so many needs to address and not enough time in the day.” “I try to use culturally diverse literature, dedicate time to all backgrounds and discuss a variety of holidays.” Lastly, “Sometimes we put so much time into the diversity of our school, we start to lose our own culture in our instruction.” After reading the teacher responses in the questionnaire, I discovered that

the teachers are aware of the need to be culturally responsive when teaching; however, they usually do not take the time incorporate it into their teaching routines.

Focus Group

A focus group (see appendix E) was conducted after teachers read the student autobiographies to see how the student autobiographies impacted the fifth grade teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of English language learners. My colleague and International Baccalaureate (IB) coordinator conducted and taped this focus group. The fifth grade team has been working together throughout this academic year to develop and write International Baccalaureate curriculum for our school. This group of educators works very well together. They have created an environment of professionalism and trust. They respect each others' different perspectives and perceptions. For this reason, I thought these teachers would be likely to open up and be more truthful with their answers.

The focus group began with the question: *What are your thoughts and feelings about the student autobiographies?* Teachers really enjoyed reading about the student families and what brought them to Minnesota. They felt the autobiographies gave them insight about lives in other countries and allowed them to know the student more personally. One teacher said, "After reading the autobiography, I feel like I know her on a whole different level. I feel like I am able to better understand why her family came to the United States and am more empathetic and understanding with this background knowledge."

We then discussed what teachers found interesting about the autobiographies. Again, the group discussed how interesting it was to read about the families' background and the reasons why many ELL students come to the United States. Of importance, teachers did not realize what the families had to go through to get here. They discussed how this knowledge allows them to understand the students better in the classroom.

Teachers also felt that autobiographies allowed for students to open up on a different level. They were able to write about what was comfortable to them. Many teachers talked about the fact that many of their ELLs do not feel comfortable to "open up" in class and as a teacher they have not been sure what to ask or how to get them to open up in class.

As discussed in the literature review, students are more successful when they are able to make connections between what they know and what they are learning by relating classroom experiences to their own lives. Authentic, meaningful experiences are especially important for ELLs because they are learning to attach different labels and terms to things already familiar to them. Their learning becomes situated rather than abstract when they are provided with the opportunity to actually experience and express what they are learning about (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). Therefore, the fact that the mainstream teachers in my building discussed the power and importance of knowing and learning about the ELLs' backgrounds may have implications on instruction and learning in the classroom. This is discussed further below.

From here, the focus group discussed if they had any personal connections to the stories. They all said that after reading the autobiographies, they have increased empathy for the ELLs. One teacher reflected:

I had no idea as to why my ELL students came here, the challenges they faced to get here, and how difficult it is for them here. I also did not understand how many of my students view school and how hard learning English is for them. As a teacher, school is a safe place for me. If I did not view it that way, I probably would not have become a teacher. It is good to acknowledge the fact that not all students feel that way and it is our job to make it a safer place for them.

After discussing connections with the autobiographies, the group discussed if their perceptions and attitudes of ELLs changed after reading the students' stories. Two teachers responded as follows:

I now have a lot more respect for their parents with an understanding of their home life. I did not give them enough credit for what they have gone through to bring their children here for a better education and a better life. I also did not understand that many of our ESL families are living in small apartments and homes full of people.

I now look at my ELL students through a different lens. Their families work so hard and they do want the very best for their children. Many families came here just for a better life and a better education for their kids. It is up to us to understand their backgrounds to more effectively teach them in the classroom.

After listening to the teachers' responses, I am able to conclude that the teachers felt more empathetic towards their ELLs after reading their autobiographies. They are able to understand the struggle that many families went through to bring their children to the United States for a better education and a better life. It is my hope that this empathy and understanding allows the teachers to more culturally responsive in their teaching.

Lastly, the group discussed if the autobiographies changed their instruction. As a result of the student autobiographies, the teachers agreed that they will be making

significant changes in their instruction. Each grade level has curriculum guides that outline various units of inquiry of each grade level as part of our IB curriculum. After reading the student autobiographies, the fifth grade teachers have decided to center their “Communications” unit around autobiographies. They felt the student stories were so powerful that all students should write their personal histories. This change and awareness is a critical beginning. As an IB school, we not only need to teach our students to live the mission statement that was cited earlier in this capstone, but we also need to adapt it ourselves as professionals and continue the journey of becoming internationally minded. A piece of this discovery is an awareness and understanding of students’ personal stories and their diversity.

Research supports that to be effective teachers we must have knowledge of our students, their backgrounds, and their cultures. In order to develop the best educational programs for ELLs, we need to understand their diverse backgrounds. These learners bring with them a wide variety of educational and cultural backgrounds into the classroom that have implications for instruction, assessment, and program design. Once we know their backgrounds and abilities, we can incorporate effective techniques and materials in our instructional practices, as recommended by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2008). In addition, research discusses the need for educators to feel empathy towards their students and to help build cultural bridges between differences. These autobiographies are a powerful tool to help achieve this. With this, educators can become proactive to infuse change within their schools, as recommended by Howard (2007).

The teachers also discussed the difficulty with today's mandates on public education. These mandates do not take a child's background into account. One teacher stated:

Standardized testing does not take a student's background into account. Basically, all students are looked at the same and tested the same. It just isn't fair. After reading these autobiographies, it validates the fact that each child is unique, their stories are unique, and we need to teach them in ways that will reach them on an individual level.

As discussed in the literature review, the educational landscape has shifted in the past decade. The implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has held schools more accountable for the success of all of their students. However, NCLB does not validate the uniqueness of each child. Earlier in this capstone, I pointed out that if we are to create effective schools that truly serve all children, then closing the achievement gap must be an essential priority. Data point to a consistent pattern that race, culture, ethnicity, language, and economic status are powerful predictors of school failure. Whether the measure is grades, test scores, attendance, discipline referrals, drop out or graduation rates, those students who differ most from the mainstream are the most vulnerable and the most being underserved in today's schools (Howard, 2002). Teachers, administrators, school board members, scholars, policy leaders, students, and parents are aware of this gap in educational equity, and numerous programs, initiatives, and strategies are beginning to be established to address it (Kozol, 1991), but the system is still failing many students.

As can be seen from my research, student autobiographies allowed the mainstream teachers to begin to address the issue of inequality among students in our

school system. The students' autobiographies provided a brief overview for mainstream teachers to read about different ethnic and linguistic groups and helped them understand the perspectives of ELLs, all of which influences how students learn. My study supported research stating that autobiographies teach us about the student's personal qualities, the specific challenges of adjusting to a new school environment, and the bundle of characteristics they bring with them. Research supports the need for this awareness and knowledge if we are to adapt our teaching to reach all of our students, especially those from diverse backgrounds. This is a beginning towards change.

Conclusion

Many U.S. educators, including some in my school, are not adequately prepared for meeting the needs of the changing demographics in today's public schools. With the implementation of federal mandates, daily responsibilities are becoming more and more demanding and most teachers have not received formal training in how to serve the needs of ELLs. Culturally and linguistically diverse students continue to fall through the cracks. Student autobiographies are one way to challenge the assumptions guiding our pedagogical practices and to infuse our schools with a more inclusive and embracing atmosphere. My study encompassed student stories and their impact on mainstream teachers: What are the impacts of student autobiographies on mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of ELLs? In this chapter, I presented the results of my data collection. After the analysis of the questionnaires and the focus group, it is concluded that this group of fifth grade teachers were impacted by ELL student autobiographies. The autobiographies did change mainstream teachers' attitudes,

perceptions, and instruction of ELLs and have resulted in a change in the fifth grade curriculum. In Chapter Five, I will discuss my major findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Our challenge as teachers is to know how to reach these children, to teach them, to know what to do when they reveal – or cannot express – themselves to us. But with every challenge successfully undertaken, I believe we contribute to the world. Teaching then becomes purposeful. (Igoa, 1995, p.3)

We all have individual stories and individual histories. However, immigrant children have inner struggles as they wrestle with the changes in their lives. Their development began in another country; their lives first attuned to a different culture. Even after they have been in the United States for some time, when they are asked to express their thoughts about their birth country, it is evident that they still feel connected to their homeland. Without reading our students' stories, we don't know their joys and their inner conflicts. Our challenge as educators is to know how to reach and teach these children. One of my students wrote:

I love my parents. But, sometimes it is hard being the child of an immigrant. Sometimes it is hard to help them with English when I am still learning too. I like being the child of immigrants because we have our own secret language. People do not know how to speak Romanian so we can talk in public and people don't know what we are talking about. This is the story of my family and their immigration to the United States. Thanks for reading.

Students who are learning English as an additional language are the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population in the United States. Most educators are not adequately prepared and trained to meet the needs of these linguistically and culturally diverse students in their classrooms. However, through student autobiographies, mainstream teachers discovered that a knowledge and background

history of the students in their classroom impacted their teaching, their perceptions and attitudes of English language learners. After reading their students' stories, the teachers felt empowered to better reach and teach ELLs in the classroom.

Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how student autobiographies written in ESL class as a language project can change mainstream teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and instruction of English language learners. Major findings have to do with teacher perceptions and instruction. Teachers who participated in this study found that student autobiographies can empower their students and bolster student-centered instructional practices. They also felt the autobiographies gave them, as teachers, insight into lives in other cultures and allowed them to know the students on a different level. Reading about students' family background and the reasons why many ELL students come to the United States provided a new lens through which teachers were able to self-reflect on perceptions of students and their own teaching practices. In discovering personal connections to student stories, teachers learned of newfound empathy for students and felt better equipped to foster a classroom environment favorable for all students, regardless of cultural or linguistic background. Teacher perceptions and attitudes toward ELLs and their parents were changed. A tangible result is the planned incorporation of student autobiographies as a tool to enhance curriculum within the International Baccalaureate.

Upon analysis of the questionnaire and focus group, I learned that through student autobiographies, teachers gained knowledge, explored ideas, stories, and histories of the

English language learners in their classrooms. Teachers read the students' stories and were able to reflect upon their own teaching styles. They discovered that these stories have great significance in the classroom. The teachers were able to read about the students' personal qualities, specific challenges of adjusting to a new school and community, and the bundle of characteristics each child brings with them to school. This knowledge and background empowers teachers to better reach and teach ELLs in the classroom.

Major findings were also within student learning. The IB learner profile encourages students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can contribute to our society. In my study, my ELL students explored the English language through autobiographies. They were better able to understand the relationship of language and meaning and how language works in the construction of knowledge, thus extending their knowledge beyond basic skills. The students became active in their learning as they worked to create change within our school through sharing their autobiographies with mainstream teachers. ESL by nature focuses on teaching language skills, but cultural understanding is related to language. We need to embed language teaching and cultural understanding in everything we do. As Postman (1996) says, "Almost all education is language education" (as cited in International Baccalaureate Organization, 2007).

As a result of this study, student autobiographies are now going to be the central part of the fifth grade *Communications* IB unit. This shows me that the teachers are themselves living the IB aim to develop internationally minded people who help to create

a better and more peaceful world. When teachers begin to “live” the IB profile, they can more authentically teach and reach the students in their classrooms.

Student autobiographies also solidified the importance of building upon students’ background knowledge and life experiences as we plan our lessons. It has been well established in research literature that taking a few minutes to build upon past learning, to explicitly link previous knowledge with a lesson’s objectives will result in greater understanding for English language learners.

Implications

The knowledge that teachers gained through student autobiographies has several implications. What I didn’t expect, but emerged from my study, is the need to begin to look at all teachers as language teachers. Language cannot be learned in isolation from other situations and life experiences. It needs to be embedded in everything we do.

Language is integral to exploring and sustaining personal development, cultural identity and intercultural understanding. As well as being the major medium of social communication, language is tightly linked to cognitive growth because it is the process by which meaning and knowledge are negotiated and constructed. It is the main tool for building our knowledge of the universe and our place in it. Language then, is central to learning, as well as literacy, and is thus related to success in school (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2007).

In addition to language development, we as teachers must build upon our students’ background knowledge. We need to know their stories and hear their voices. When planning our lessons, we need to consider our students’ culturally based learning

styles and build on their schemata or knowledge of the world. This knowledge provides a basis for understanding, learning, and remembering facts and ideas found in stories and texts. This has great implications for our instruction. As educators, we must make explicit connections between new learning and material, vocabulary, and concepts previously covered in class and in life. Research clearly emphasizes that in order for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with what students have previously learned (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

All teachers must give immigrant children the message that they are included, and they are important, accepted and appreciated just the way they are, and that learning a new language is merely adding to what they already know, helping them become communicative in more than one way. More than anything else, our students need friendship, companions, warmth, and continued renewal and connection to their roots. The following student, Dung, quoted by Igoa, gives his perspective and advice to teachers:

Try to get them [students] to talk to you. Not just everyday in conversation, but what they feel inside. Try to get them to get that out, because it is hard for kids. They don't trust-I had a hard time trusting and I was really insecure because of that.

Just talk, just talk with the student. Get a closer relationship with your student. Because the teacher is an important person in the child's life. The teacher is the person who the student is going to look up to in school. And the kid is in school most of the time.

You learn a lot from school and in school, not just study, work, and things like that, but about life. The person who's going to guide the student helps the student develop a good personality, good insight of who she is, who the kid is. The kid looks up [to the teacher]. The teacher is that person who is there to help the child (Igoa, 1995, p.103).

As Dung points out, teachers need to know the students in their classrooms. The relationships we create with our students have great influence on their learning; students learn and grow from teachers as well as from their peers. With their stories and background at heart, we need to begin to reexamine and advocate for all of our students. When we fully accept the students within our classrooms, everyone grows and everyone learns.

The topic of celebrations has been a heated dialogue throughout the academic year in my school. Many questions have been raised. Is it acceptable for us to celebrate Christmas in a public school when we have many non-Christian students? Valentine's Day? St. Patrick's Day? When we begin to question if a public school is the correct place to celebrate these holidays, many mainstream teachers get offended and upset. What they know and who they are is at the heart of this discussion.

If our students come from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, then we need to celebrate that. It is important to preserve the values and traditions of our ELLs. They will make a difference in our world; they are a part of American history in the making. That being said, as my school continues to have the discussion of what should be celebrated at school, I believe the answer is clear. We need to celebrate the life in our own classrooms. When we celebrate all students, everyone grows and everyone learns.

In many schools, there is a cultural split between our teachers and the students. However, through this study, I found that once teachers read their students' stories and backgrounds, they became more empathetic and inclusive. The impact of student

autobiographies clearly empowered the fifth grade teachers. Now I believe that we need to spread this impact throughout the school. Once everyone gains a glimpse into the wide variety of educational, cultural, and linguistic differences our ELLs bring with them into the classroom, program design and instructional change can be implemented.

With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, federal mandates, and standardized testing, schools need to begin to look at all learners and how to better meet their needs. Data indicate that race, culture, ethnicity, language and economic status are powerful predictors of school success or failure, not because non-majority students are less able, but because these most vulnerable students are the ones who are being underserved in today's school system. In order for students whose first language is not English to succeed in school and become productive members of our society, they need to receive better educational opportunities in the United States that take into account their stories, their background experiences and background knowledge. Then we can begin to scaffold our instruction and create programs to better meet their academic needs in the classroom.

Limitations

This study was qualitative research and was limited to five fifth grade mainstream teachers and eight fifth and sixth grade ELLs. Qualitative research requires spending a larger amount of time with relatively few informants. Teachers who participated in this study did so voluntarily and therefore demonstrate an invested interest in learning more about students and their stories. The study's time span of one academic year limits my

current ability to study long-term impacts of student autobiographies with a larger population.

Further Research

As stated earlier, this study was limited to a small sample of teachers from one school in Minnesota. All teachers who participated in the study did so voluntarily, which suggests openness and invested interest in serving ELL populations. Teachers from this study work in an ELL-friendly school environment with administrators who value ELL teachers and students. Not all schools share this philosophy. Further randomized research in schools throughout the U.S. would generate deeper dialogue among educators on impacts autobiographies can have on perceptions and teaching practices. Ideas for further study could include schools from areas of the country showing rapid demographic changes where teachers may not yet have been offered professional development in teaching and reaching ELLs. Further research will also benefit from a longer time span in which the researcher follows long term impacts of changed perceptions and teaching practices on the academic success of the students.

Conclusion

Those of us who work with children know that our task is complicated; we have to examine the teaching practices we use, the policies we are expected to follow, the theories we adapt. In the end, regardless of policies, philosophies, theories, or methodologies, the success or failure of an individual child – the way the child experiences school – depends on what happens in the classroom. English language learners are more than just “language minority” children. They are children who have

been uprooted from their own cultural environment and replaced in a new environment (Igoa, 1995). These children need to be carefully guided as they adapt to this new culture and as they learn the new language. As teachers, we need to know our students' stories to respectfully and sensitively guide our ELLs through the American school system. We need to help them open up to the new while they retain the old.

This study has examined student autobiographies and the importance of listening to the children, the importance of the feeling of having roots, the importance of understanding others' cultures and perspectives, and finally the importance of belonging. It has fulfilled the teaching goal of improving writing skills while empowering the students as they convey to the teachers their life experiences as immigrants. It has fulfilled the aim of giving the mainstream teachers glimpses of their students' lives that they had not previously been aware of; the end result, the enthusiastic response of the teachers to incorporate autobiographies into the fifth grade curriculum marks positive change in acceptance of the ELL students into the mainstream without sacrificing their own cultures. The students themselves have been active participants in this change.

Everyone has a story. It is our challenge as educators to read and listen to our students' stories. For they tell who are students are and where they are going.

Go to the people. Learn from them, live with them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. The best of leaders are those when the job is done, when the task is accomplished, the people will say, "We have done it ourselves." (LAOTSU, 604 B.C.E., as cited in Igoa, 1995, p.70)

APPENDIX A

Parent Letter

September 2008

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am completing a master's degree in education at Hamline University. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research from September-December 2008. The purpose of my letter is to ask your permission for your child to take part in my research. Participation is voluntary. The final product will be a printed, bound capstone that will be shelved in Hamline's Bush Library. I may also publish or use my findings in scholarly ways in the future.

My research will be based on fifth grade autobiographies done as part of their ESL (English as a Second Language) class. I want to find out how student autobiographies affect mainstream teachers' perceptions and attitudes of English Language Learners. The main benefit of writing autobiographies is that I will be able to help students with the writing process and to build cultural bridges between mainstream teachers and ELL students.

As I normally do, I continue to teach the writing process as we work to complete our autobiographies. However, we will publish our autobiographies, read them, and conduct focus groups with the fifth grade teachers. In my capstone, I will report how the autobiographies affected the teachers' attitudes and perceptions of ELL students.

If your child participates in my research, his or her identity will be protected. No real names or identifying characteristics will be used. All results will be confidential and anonymous. This eliminates risks for your child and other participants. Also, you or your child may decide not to participate at any time without any negative consequence. There are no risks involved.

I have already received permission to do this research from my principal, Ms. Garling as well as the Hamline University School of Education. You may contact Ann Mabbott at Hamline with any questions at amabbott@hamline.edu or 651-523-2600.

Please return the permission form on the second page by October 1, 2008. If you have any questions, please call me at 651-457-9426. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Emily Schmidt

I give permission for my child, _____, to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate degree program. I understand that all results will be confidential and anonymous and that my child may stop taking part at any time without negative consequences.

APPENDIX B

Parent Letter (Spanish)

Noviembre 2008

Estimados padres y tutores,

Estoy terminando mi Maestría en Educación de la Universidad de Hamline. Como parte de mi tesis de maestría, planifico hacer investigaciones entre los meses de septiembre-diciembre 2008. El propósito de esta carta es pedirle su permiso para su hijo/a tomar parte en mi investigación. La participación de su hijo/a es voluntaria. El producto final será un libro publicado, encuadernado, y disponible en la Biblioteca Bush en la Universidad de Hamline. También puede ser posible que publique o use las conclusiones en maneras eruditas en el futuro.

Mis investigaciones serán basadas en las autobiografías de los alumnos de quinto grado como parte de su clase de ingles como segundo idioma (ESL). Quiero investigar como las autobiografías afectan las actitudes y percepciones de los maestros principales hacia los alumnos de ingles como segundo idioma. El beneficio principio de escribir las autobiografías será que yo voy a poder ayudarles a los alumnos con el proceso de escribir y intentar a eliminar las faltas de comunicación entre los maestros principales y los alumnos de ESL.

Como hago normalmente, voy a seguir enseñándoles el proceso de escribir mientras que terminemos con nuestras autobiografías. Sin embargo, vamos a publicar nuestras autobiografías, leerlas, y conducir grupos de conversación con los maestros de quinto grado. En mis conclusiones voy a escribir sobre como las autobiografías afectaron las actitudes y percepciones de los maestros hacia los alumnos de ESL.

Si su hijo participa en mi investigación, su identidad será protegida. No voy a usar nombres reales o características que podrían identificarlo/a. Todos los resultados serán confidenciales y anónimos. Eso eliminará los riesgos para su hijo/a y los otros participantes. También, usted o su hijo/a tiene el derecho de no participar en la investigación sin cualquier consecuencia negativa. No hay ningún riesgo.

Yo ya he recibido permiso de la directora de la escuela, Ms. Garling y la Universidad de Hamline Escuela de Educación hacer esta investigación. Si tiene cualquier pregunta usted puede comunicarse con Ann Mabbott en Hamline al amabbott@hamline.edu o 651-523-2600.

Favor de entregar la hoja de permiso en la segunda pagina antes del primer de diciembre, 2008. Si tiene cualquier pregunta, favor de llamarme al 651-457-9426. Gracias por su cooperación.

Atentamente,

Emily Schmidt

Yo le doy permiso para que mi hijo/a,
_____, participe en el proyecto de
investigación, lo cual es un parte de su programa de maestría. Entiendo que todos los
resultados serán confidenciales y anónimos y que mi hijo/a puede dejar de participar en
cualquier momento sin consecuencias negativas.

Firma de padre/tutor

APPENDIX C

Colleague Letter

December 2008

Dear Colleagues,

I am completing a master's degree in education at Hamline University. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research from September-January 2009. The purpose of my letter is to ask your permission for your child to take part in my research. Participation is voluntary. The final product will be a printed, bound capstone that will be shelved in Hamline's Bush Library. I may also publish or use my findings in scholarly ways in the future.

My research will be based on student autobiographies done as part of their ESL class. I want to find out how student autobiographies affect mainstream teachers' perceptions and attitudes of English Language Learners. The main benefit of writing autobiographies is that I will be able to help students with the writing process and to build cultural bridges between mainstream teachers and ELL students.

I would like to ask for your help by answering the following questions concerning mainstream teachers' attitudes and perceptions of English Language Learners (ELLs) in your classrooms. This questionnaire is anonymous; you do not need to write your name on it. I am interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answers sincerely and as fully as possible, as this will only guarantee the success of my study.

I have already received permission to do this research from Ms. Garling as well as the Hamline University School of Education. You may contact Ann Mabbott at Hamline with any questions at amabbott@hamline.edu or 651-523-2600.

Please return the permission form and the attached questionnaire on the second page by February 1, 2009. If you have any questions, please call me at 651-457-9426. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Emily Schmidt

I wish to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate degree program. I understand that all results will be confidential and anonymous.

Signed,

APPENDIX D

Questionnaire

Questionnaire

1. How many English Language Learners (ELLs) do you typically have in your classroom?
2. Do you have any concerns about having ELLs in your classroom? If yes, what are they?
3. When thinking about ELLs, what are your perceptions and attitudes?
4. When working with ELLs, how do you modify your instruction and curriculum to make it more culturally responsive and conducive to their background?

Thank you so much for completing this questionnaire and providing your most honest answers. I sincerely appreciate your time!

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. What are your thoughts/feelings about the autobiographies?
2. What did you find most interesting about the student autobiographies?
3. Did you have any personal connections with the students' stories?
4. Many times as educators, we don't know our students personal stories. After reading these stories, how do you think they changed your perceptions and/or attitudes of your ESL students?
5. Will you or do you change your instruction to better meet students' needs after knowing their background?

APPENDIX F

Student Autobiographies

My Life Story

Life in California

In California, I lived in a blue house. My mom used to work in nursing home helping old people. My dad used to work in a casino flashing cards and passing cards. My brother used to work in a big bank in his own office – it's big. My sister worked in McDonalds in the cashier. When I used to go to school in California, I used to be in third grade. In California schools, you don't have a pin number or you don't have to pay for lunch. Also, a lot of kids get in fights and no one does anything about it. In California, recess is way different than over here in Minnesota. When it is time for lunch the lunch people let you go outside the school for a little bit and then they take you back inside the school and you go back to your class.

My Family's Decision to Leave

My family's decision to leave California was because my mom had problems with my sister. My sister was skipping school and she would go out with her friends and come home really late. That is why we came to Minnesota.

Life in Minnesota

Life in Minnesota is good because it is calm. My family does not see gangs or killing here. I like it because my mom has a good job and I go to a good school. I live with my mom and my aunt. I have a lot of relatives that live by me too. I like school because my friends treat me very well. I like it because my teacher teaches me the best he can. Sometimes math is hard for me, but my teachers are getting me help so I can be

better. I really like reading and gym because I really like to read and I like to run too. I like Minnesota because my sister can forget about gangs and have a better life than in California. My mom and my sister do not fight here.

In the Future

In the future, I want to be a basketball player. If that does not work, I want to be a doctor. In my future, I want to have a good life. I want to have a family and help people and send money to people who need it. I would like to help children who do not have clothes or a house. I would also like to help my sister raise her son well. I also want to make sure my family and my nephew have a good life in the future.

My Life Story

Life in Mexico

In Mexico, my family worked on a farm and they owned cows, pigs, roosters, and chickens. They lived in a normal house with running water. I lived with my brothers, sisters, and my parents. We came to Minnesota in 2000. We came in an airplane. We came here because we were trying to make a better life.

Decision to Leave

We decided to leave Mexico to find a better life. We left our house and all of my stuff. The only thing I brought with me was my clothes. When we left Mexico, we went to California. Life in California was very hard. It was not very safe there and my dad was killed. I miss him very much. Once he died, we came to Minnesota to start a better life.

Life in Minnesota

My family works in Cleaner Express. They wash clothes and hang them. I live with my two brothers and one sister. I have a lot of friends and I like my life here.

My Experience

In school, I am in sixth grade. I really like my teacher and my school. My favorite subject is gym. Now my family has better work and they are happy.

My Life Story

Life in Mexico is Different from Life In Minnesota

My mom was born in Mexico in the city of Matamoros. It was a small town. My mom worked in the house cleaning. She lived with her three brothers and four sisters. Her second oldest brother died when he was a baby. They lived in a house that had three separate buildings. They had a kitchen, a living room, and five bedrooms.

The Decision for My Family to Leave Mexico was Difficult

My grandma left Mexico because they wanted more money and a better life. They felt sad because they left their grandparents behind. When they were on their way they all were afraid of having no money and how to speak English. At the same time they knew that they were going to have everything they dreamed of.

Coming to America

When my mom and the family were coming to America, they were riding on a bus. But, my mom was only three months old. This was 32 years ago. When they arrived in California, my mom did not work because she was a student. Now she has a good job in Minnesota working for the government. My mom has two children and we live in the three-story house.

My Experience

My school is good. I am getting good grades. I have a lot of friends. I live with my mom, my sister, grandma, grandpa, and my dad. When I grow up, I want to be a first grade teacher.

My Family Autobiography

Life in Laos is very different from life in the United States. In Laos, my family worked in the garden and they planted vegetables and other stuff. My dad was a medicine man. My family's house was made of straw and sticks and their floor was mud. They had little lights. My grandmas, aunts, uncles, and cousin still live in Laos. My family moved to Thailand from Laos because they had a war in Laos. My brother died in Laos because he was so sick and my other brother died when he was little. They went to Thailand to get safe.

Deciding to come to America was hard. They moved to America on September, 29, 1989. They really like America because it was their first time coming to America. My cousin helped my family move to Wisconsin. They went on the airplane and they landed in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Life is better for my family in Minnesota. I live in a white house with my mom, dad, brother, sisters, nieces, and nephew. My mom babysits and cooks and my dad drives a van. My older brother works security and my older sister works at Burger King. We have two dogs. Their names are Chico and Foxy. My experience in America is fun. I am in sixth grade and my favorite thing in school is math and reading. I have a record for the longest ball thrown in shot put. When I turn 16, I want to work at Burger King.

My Life Story

I was born in Minnesota at Hospital Ramsey at 8:15 at night in 1996. When I was 9 months old, I went to Mexico because my grandparents had a problem with the immigration. When I went to Mexico City, I stayed in my grandparent's house. The house was really pretty. It had three bedrooms and I lived with my mom, dad, sister, grandpa and grandma. My grandparents worked by selling food on the street, my mom worked in a company selling houses, and my dad was in construction.

My mom brought me here because she wanted a better life for me. I thought I was here for vacation. We went from bus to bus to bus until we got to Guadalajara where my uncle Pepe was. He thought that my mom was joking about coming to America. But, then we stayed at their family's house. My mom, cousins, my aunt and I all went to America.

When we were coming, we stopped so a police can check us if we had guns or drugs or anything. Then we went across Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and then to Minnesota. My mom's brother lived in Minnesota. My uncle did not know that we were coming. We were going to surprise him. I got into a black bag and my uncle gave the bag to my mom's brother. When he opened it, I came out and said, "Boo!" My uncle started crying. Then my mom came out of the van and my uncle started crying even more. He welcomed us in his house. He had a wife, daughter, son and a dog. I stayed with my cousin and my mom stayed in an extra room that my uncle had. We used to talk to my dad on the computer all the time. Two months later, my little sister came to

see us. She did not remember us because when we left her in Mexico she was only one month old. She thought that my grandma and grandpa were her parents. My godmother brought my sister here in a plane. We were very happy.

When my dad came here, he crossed the boarder. It was hard for him. He stayed with my mom and my sister. Two months later, my mom got a job. It was hard for my dad to get a job because he did not have papers. But, one month later, he got a job. After a year, we moved out of my uncle's house and got our own apartment. I have lived here for three years now. My grandparents still cannot come here. I know that they will not be able to come. We are still trying to live better everyday.

It has been hard in Minnesota because my father used to not have an established job. It was hard because of the taxes on our apartment. Also, it has been hard because I miss my grandparents a lot. They were like my parents. My mom goes to work at 8:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. So, I miss her. But, now she does not work so much. I miss my grandparents and I hope they come back.

The Shadow of Immigrants

Life in Romania

My family is from Romania. My parents were born there. I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in Regions Hospital. I have visited Romania with my family many times. When I went to Romania, I thought it would be the same as Minnesota. But, it is very different. In Romania, kids come up to you and ask you for money. There are a lot of poor people in Romania. Also, there are more people in the United States than in Romania.

Work

When my parents lived in Romania, they did not work because they were very young. My grandma used to work at a vinery. They saved money for my mom. But, then my dad asked my mom to marry him. They used the money my grandma saved to get married and come to the United States. In the United States, my parents have citizenship. They do not have college degrees. My mom stays home with me and my sister. My dad drives a big semi-truck. He is gone a lot. He is usually gone for three or four days.

Family

In Romania, my mom lived with nine people. She lived with one sister, six brothers, and her two parents. They lived in a small apartment. My mom had to share her room, clothing, and her shoes.

My dad was also poor. He lived with one brother, one sister, and his two parents. He is the only one still alive. That is very sad. Now we live in Minnesota and have a big family. We have three cats and one dog. I have one sister and my two parents. My sister is in first grade.

Home

In Romania, my mom lived in a small apartment. Three people slept in one bed. It had a small living room and a small bathroom. In Minnesota, we live in a big house. We even have a guest bedroom. We have a huge basement. We have an upstairs and a lot of rooms for us to be in. My sister and I have our own rooms.

Decision to leave Romania

My parents came to Minnesota to have a better life. In Romania, the teachers hit you across the hands if you get something wrong. My mom has gotten hit across her hands. My parents did not want to see us get hurt. My parents also wanted to get better jobs so they could provide more for my sister and me.

The Romanian government would not allow my dad to leave. So, he had to swim across the lake to get to another country. After that, he flew to the United States. Then he got passports. My mom had to wait for a year until she was allowed to leave Romania.

Feel

When my parents left Romania, they felt very scared. They felt scared about the airplane. They thought that it was going to fall. They were also afraid that they couldn't

buy a house. They were also afraid they couldn't learn English. My parents hoped that we would make it and have a good life in Minnesota. We do have a good life here.

Coming to America

My parents came here on April 8, 1991. They came here on an airplane. When my parents came here, it was strange. It was hard over here because they could not speak English. My mom and dad traveled through the whole country by driving a semi-truck. My dad is a truck driver and he still is today. They adopted a cat (Now he is dead. He died on September 28, 2007.) We miss our cat. My parents have adjusted to life in Minnesota. But, sometimes my parents still have a hard time with English. I have to help them with words.

Life in Minnesota

We live really well and I love where we live. We will never move. We made our roots in a nice house. My dad drives a big truck. He is a truck driver. He delivers food products and other stuff. We have 4 people in our house – my dad, mom, me and my sister. I have a lot of friends in Minnesota. We have good neighbors and I have been able to go on a lot of trips. Life feels good to me.

This is the last year that I will be going to elementary school. Then I am off to High School. I want to be a police officer when I'm older. It is my biggest dream to be a police officer and I will love it!

I love my parents. But, sometimes it is hard being the child of an immigrant. Sometimes it is hard to help them with English when I am still learning too. I like being the child of immigrants because we have our own secret language. People do not know how to speak Romanian so we can talk in public and people don't know what we are talking about. This is the story of my family and their immigration to the United States. Thanks for reading.

My Autobiography

Life in Laos

Life in Laos was hard for my grandma and grandpa. They worked on a farm. They grew vegetables. They fed pigs and chickens. My grandma had to go cut wood. Sometimes my grandma slept in the barn. They always helped each other. They raised horses, buffalo, cows and goats. My grandparents' house was made of straw and wood. There was no water in their house. They had to go to the lake to get water. They didn't have a laundry machine so they had to go to the lake to wash their clothes. They dried them off on the side. My grandma, grandpa, my dad, and my uncle lived in the same house. My family had to leave Laos because there was a war. So, they went to Thailand. Two of my uncles died from being sick.

Deciding to come to America was difficult. When they came to America, they didn't know how to speak English. So a tall white guy helped my grandpa find a job. They came here in 1989. Then they lived in Wisconsin. I was born on February 20, 1996. We moved to Minnesota to live in the house we live in now.

Life in Minnesota is better for my family. My uncle and my aunt live with me. My grandma works on a farm. My grandpa drives a bus. My house is white and we have five bedrooms and two bathrooms. We eat chicken, noodles, and a lot of rice. We have two dogs. I like my house and my life in Minnesota.

My experience in Minnesota is good. I live with my grandma. I'm in sixth grade. My favorite subjects are math, reading, and PYP. My favorite sports are football and

basketball. My family likes to go to the farm. When I grow up, I want to be a football player.

My Life Story

My mom was born in Zacatecas, Mexico on October 21, 1978. I was born on April 30, 1996. My grandpa worked on building houses and my grandma took care of the kids. They lived in a normal house. My mom didn't finish sixth grade because she crossed the boarder. This was very scary for my mom. After my mom crossed the boarder, she stopped in Arizona. Then she went to Boston with her sisters. My mom decided to leave Mexico to live a better life with her sisters. It wasn't really sad because our grandma and grandpa could come here later. It was a little bit sad because she left some of her brothers. She was scared from immigration. Her hope was to learn more from her sisters.

I came to Minnesota when I was in third grade. I was nervous. I came with my mom and brother because my dad had already come to Minnesota. Life in Minnesota is sometimes good because you live in a better house. It is also hard because my mom got a disease and she can't work because she has lupus and arthritis. My aunt helps her a lot because she is like the person that helps my parents.

School is good here because I think I learn more than I did in Boston. My family likes it here but they miss Mexico, Boston, and our family. We are thinking of moving back. Work is good here though. But, it is hard to pay our bills without my mom working. This is my family's story.

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