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When ESL Doesn't Cut It: Why Memphis Latinos Need Extra Enrichment to Excel

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Key words: bilingualism, bilingual education, Latino education, English as a Second Language, English Language Learners, Shelby County Schools, Memphis

Abstract: This paper examines the factors contributing to the success or failure of Latino students in the Memphis area's Shelby County School district. Findings consistent with previous literature include the failure of ESL to develop academic English proficiency, the benefits of bilingual education in developing first and second language skills, and the importance of individual attention to students' unique needs as English learners. In interviews with schoolteachers and administrators, non-profit staff, and former students of Shelby County Schools, participants underscored that the need for family empowerment in the Spanish-speaking Memphis population presents a level of challenge equal to that of language barriers in the classroom.

When ESL Doesn't Cut It: Why Memphis Latinos Need Extra Enrichment to Excel

Introduction

This paper seeks to address the factors contributing to the success or failure of Latino students in the Memphis-area school system. After providing context for Memphis Latino communities and Latino education in the United States, I will briefly engage the current literature on bilingualism, bilingual education, and Latino education. An explanation of my research methods will follow, after which I will relate my findings on local Memphis Latino education. I will conclude with a series of policy recommendations for the improvement of Latino education in Memphis and an explanation of the broader significance of my findings in Memphis and Shelby County. In brief, my research led me to the following argument: notwithstanding ESL gains, Shelby County Schools Spanish speakers need extra enrichment to excel. Solutions to this problem include bilingual education, individual attention, and family empowerment.

A Brief History of Bilingual and Latino Education in the United States

The conflicts surrounding bilingual and Latino education have a long and complicated history in the United States. The first desegregation ruling for U.S. schools, in *Mendez v. Westminster*, occurred in Orange County, California, in 1947, with the integration of Mexican and Mexican American students from “Mexican schools” into the main federal school district. That ruling set a precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education* and represented a significant change in opinions regarding access to equal and integrated education.¹ However, the public education

¹ Wollenberg, Charles. "*Mendez v. Westminster*: Race, Nationality and Segregation in

system continues to disadvantage Latino youth by failing to properly address their unique challenges. As they did in 1947, children from Spanish-speaking homes enter into a “total immersion” system that teaches all courses in English. As a result, many Latino children fall behind in subjects such as math and reading because they must focus their full effort on learning the English language during their first years of education.² The effects of this deficit can be seen later in life, as Latinos comprise “the least-educated major population group and the least likely to graduate from four-year universities” and, as of 2002, reached dropout rates of up to 50 percent or more in certain areas of the country.³ In 2015, Latino students in public schools had a national average graduation rate of 75% and a Tennessee state graduation rate of 81%. However, children with limited English proficiency had a national graduation rate of only 61% and a Tennessee graduation rate of 73%, indicating that current methods of English language instruction are failing 39% of English learner students nationwide.⁴

Just as Latino education suffered in the mid-20th century, so did bilingual education in the U.S. a century earlier. The Oklahoma Cherokee developed a public school system in the 1850s in which 90% of Cherokee children learned English alongside their native language. However, by the late 1800s the federal government took thousands of Native American children away from their families and placed them in English-speaking boarding schools that prohibited the use of

California Schools." *California Historical Quarterly* Vol. 53, No. 4 (1974), pp. 317-332. Web.

² Gandara, Patricia C. and Frances Contreras. *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP (2009). Print.

³ Diaz Soto, Lourdes. *The Praeger Handbook of Latino Education in the U.S.* Westport, CT: Praeger (2007). Print.

⁴ Education Week. “Map: Graduation Rates by State, Student Group.” *Editorial Projects in Education* (May 29, 2015). Web.

their native languages. By the second half of the 20th century, 40% of Cherokee children were illiterate in any language, and 75% had dropped out of school.⁵

Juan González writes, "...75 percent of Hispanic immigrants are speaking English on a daily basis by the time they have lived in the United States for fifteen years, and 70 percent of the children of those immigrants become dominant in or only speak English."⁶ According to González, most Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. champion the importance of mastering the English language. English immersion programs in the early 1950s quickly assimilated thousands of Spanish speakers into the English language and American culture, but those students who did not excel were held back or placed in special education or vocational programs. González advocates for the "transitional model" of bilingual education, which provides instruction in the native language for two to four years while the child achieves a mastery of English. Children in immersion programs fall behind in other subjects because they learn them in English at the same time that they are learning English itself. Many scholars and observers agree that rather than viewing a primary knowledge of Spanish as a handicap, schools and the government should view it as an asset.

Literature Review on Bilingualism/Bilingual Education and Latino Education

As history demonstrates, the United States staunchly resists non-English and non-mainstream public education. Consequently, the U.S. has a longstanding legacy of total immersion education programs, i.e. all-English instruction, for emergent bilingual students. Scholars have found that

⁵ González, Juan. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America (Revised Edition)*. New York: Viking, Penguin (2000, 2011), p. 229. Print.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 246.

this format may develop conversational ability but falls short of academic proficiency.

Resultantly, students fall behind on academic language development, often performing poorly on standardized tests, losing their native language proficiency, and even dropping out of school.

Bilingual education offers a positive alternative from academic, professional, and cultural standpoints.

Based on the information provided in other research reports and scholarly works, the most apparent challenge for Latino students in the United States is the language barrier, along with the many factors that accompany it. The following quote sheds light on some of those accompanying factors in comparable setting:

“Students in Austria attend academic secondary schools or less academically challenging general secondary schools, and a small proportion attend special schools for students with disabilities. Luciak (2008) finds that the greatest proportion of immigrant and ethnic minority students who speak a language other than German at home are found attending special schools rather than the other school types (24% attend special schools, compared to just 9% of students who home language is German). The finding that emergent bilinguals are overrepresented in special education programs is not limited to Austria, but found also to be the case in other immigrant receiving countries such as Germany...and the US...”⁷

Studies conducted in Israel, Canada, Austria, and the U.S. have demonstrated that emergent bilingual students perform more poorly on standardized tests, in both language and mathematics, than their English-proficient (or national language-proficient) peers. In order to perform well on

⁷ Menken, Kate. “Emergent bilingual students in secondary school: Along the academic language and literacy continuum.” *Language Teaching*, Vol. 46, Is. 4 (Oct. 2013), pp. 438-476. Web.

such tests, students must possess an understanding of everyday language as well as math and science vocabulary, graphs, and symbols. For emergent bilingual students, those terms and figures appear in a language that they are still learning, adding to the exam a layer of challenge from which native language-proficient students are exempt.

Cummins addresses this discrepancy by distinguishing between BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) in order to explain certain “misconceptions about...language proficiency and academic failure among bilingual students.”⁸ At its base level, Cummins’s explanation clarifies that while a student may speak a second language proficiently in conversation, he or she must possess a very different language skill set for reading and writing for the purposes of math, science, literature and language arts, etc., than for conversation. Thus, Latino students with conversational proficiency may test out of an ESL program but continue to struggle academically because they lack proficiency in academic English.

On the other hand, a bilingual education format – rather than an ESL program structure, which primarily focuses on vocabulary acquisition and conversational ability – simultaneously develops conversational and academic second-language skills while maintaining and enriching the student’s understanding of his or her native language. Instruction in the first language (L1) in fact promotes proficiency in the second language (L2). Cummins writes,

“[L]earning academic context in the first language allows English Language Learners (ELLs) to progress in academic subjects at the same pace as their native English-speaking peers because they are learning in the language they know best...Instruction in the home language increases the likelihood that their parents, who typically speak little or no English, will be able to

⁸ Cummins, Jim. “BICS and CALP: Clarifying the Distinction.” *Opinion Papers* (1999). Web.

support their children's education by reading to their children and supervising homework, etc.”⁹

This form of bilingual education, transitional bilingual education, teaches students in two languages at once until they are capable of receiving instruction exclusively in the L2.

In the village of Greenport, New York, on the North Fork of Long Island, a growing Latino population has presented new challenges that the school system has met head-on. The Greenport school system is small and underfunded, but because the local population is one-third Hispanic, services for non-native English speaking students have come to occupy a position of sufficient importance not to be affected by budget cuts. Beginner English speakers spend two to three hours each day in ESL classes, and more advanced high school students spend one hour each day in ESL. Greenport's school program also incorporates activities beyond the classroom, including visits to community chefs and farmers and enrichment field trips to cultural and community events and locales.

Author Diana Gordon writes of Greenport Hispanic students that their conversational fluency is deceiving, because important vocabulary could be missing from their repertoire, for instance knowing the word “leg” but not “knee.”¹⁰ Additionally, while students may speak very well in English, their reading may be labored, in part because their parents do not or cannot read to them in either English or Spanish.

If immigrant students arrive at 15 years or older, they often struggle entering high school and striving to finish before age 21, when U.S. law no longer provides for free public education.

⁹ Uchikoshi, Yuuko and Helen Maniantes. “How Does Bilingual Instruction Enhance English Achievement? A Mixed-Methods Study of Cantonese-Speaking and Spanish-Speaking Bilingual Classrooms.” *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, Vol. 33, Is. 3, pp. 364-385. 2010. Web.

¹⁰ Gordon, Diana R. *Village of Immigrants: Latinos in an Emerging America*. “Schooling New Citizens,” pp. 74-87. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, NJ. 2015. Print.

Their home countries' education systems likely were not on par with U.S. education, if those young people even attended school consistently leading up to their departure for the United States.¹¹ Furthermore, the need of immigrant children's families for additional income to contribute to rent and utilities can take precedence over school, prompting many students who immigrate later in life to drop out before completing high school. Other struggles for these students include a lack of necessary vocabulary for content courses (e.g. biology, algebra, and history) and an inability to participate in extracurricular activities due to after-school jobs.

In spite of these challenges, Greenport schools are working hard to meet the needs of the Hispanic community. Teachers and administration send home letters in Spanish, and the schools' outgoing phone message is provided in Spanish and English. Some teachers supplement English readings with Spanish handouts. In addition, "inclusion teachers," who work in collaboration with the primary teachers to help individual students, are designated for all content courses that include ESL students. Primary teachers have even requested to take a Spanish course so that they are capable of helping their students directly. But how do theories of bilingualism, or small schools in a quiet New York community, connect to the grit and grind of Memphis?

Context for Tennessee and Memphis/Shelby County

Background and Statistics

On a national scale, the populations of non-native English speakers and Hispanics have reached levels that demand attention from policy makers and educators alike. According to the Internationals Network for Public Schools,

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“The number of limited English proficient school-age children in the United States has increased dramatically over the last 20 years. According to 2011 data from National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, from 1998 to 2009 the general population of students increased by 7.2 percent, to 49.5 million, while the population of English language learner students enrolled in public schools increased by 51%, to 5.5 million. Now, English language learners (ELLs) make up 11% of this country’s student population.”¹²

Furthermore, a study by Snyder and Dillow estimates that for the year 2012, Hispanics in the United States comprised a group of 53,028,000 individuals, second only to whites at 197,706,000, and ahead of Blacks at 38,727,000.¹³ This places the Hispanic population at approximately 17% of the national population.

Within the national context, Tennessee has the third fastest growth rate of Hispanic persons among all fifty states, with a median age of nine years old. The largest Latino populations in Tennessee reside in Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and their respective suburbs. Shelby County now has the second highest number of Hispanic persons in Tennessee (52,092 in the year 2010) and 18.0% of the state’s total Hispanic population. Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the Latino/Hispanic population as the third highest population in Shelby County in July 2015, after Black/African American and White, non-Hispanic or -Latino.¹⁴

¹² Internationals Network for Public Schools. “Immigration and Opportunity” (2013). Web.

¹³ Snyder, Thomas D. and Sally A. Dillow. “Digest of Education Statistics 2013.” National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (May 2015). Web.

¹⁴ United States Census Bureau. “Quick Facts: Shelby County, Tennessee.” U.S. Department of Commerce (2015). Web.

Local Memphis Latino population growth reflects national and statewide trends. Enrollment of Hispanics in public and private schools of Memphis and Shelby County was at a meager 572 in 1992-1993 but reached 2,581 in 1999-2000. The schools with the highest enrollment of Hispanic students in the 1999-2000 school year were, in order, Jackson Elementary, Bruce Elementary, South Park Elementary, Macon Elementary, Treadwell Elementary, and Sheffield Elementary.¹⁵ Currently, the neighborhoods around Treadwell Elementary (which encompass Grahamwood, Berclair, and Jackson Elementary schools) are Shelby County Schools' (SCS's) highest concentration of Spanish-speakers throughout the district.¹⁶ In the 2000, a total of 6,761 Hispanic children (both students and non-students) were reported to reside in Memphis and Shelby County.¹⁷ By the 2015-2016 year in Shelby County Schools, 76.38% of students were Black, 12.31% were Hispanic (totaling 14,481 students), and 7.56% were white.¹⁸ Of 117,590 total students enrolled, approximately 87,800 were economically disadvantaged, and approximately 7,300 spoke limited English.¹⁹ Researchers report that in Memphis (along with 53 other cities in the United States) “at least 80% of Hispanic [students] attend majority low-income schools,” and furthermore, Memphis is number 16 on the

¹⁵ Mendoza, Marcela, David H. Ciscel and Barbara Ellen Smith. “Latino Immigrants in Memphis, Tennessee: Their Local Impact.” Center for Research on Women, University of Memphis (January 2001), pp. v-18. Web.

¹⁶ Andrew Duck, 06/30/2016.

¹⁷ Urban Child Institute. “A Demographic Profile of Children in Memphis and Shelby County” (2000). Web.

¹⁸ See Appendix 2, Table “Shelby County Schools and Exceptional Children Demographics, 2015-2016.”

¹⁹ Figure “Our Students Pre-K – 12.” Shelby County Schools. “About Us” (2016). Web.

list of “cities where the most Hispanic kids attend schools of concentrated poverty.”²⁰

Beyond poverty, linguistic isolation presents an imposing challenge for Latino students in Memphis. “High linguistic isolation” entails that no individual 13 years or older in the child’s home speaks English “very well.” Currently, 36% of all Hispanic children in Tennessee ages 5-9 live in linguistic isolation, and among children 0-4, the number is 44%. As a result, ELLs experience higher high school dropout rates than non-ELL students.²¹ However, research states that the majority of Latino children in the U.S. live in two-parent homes, which purportedly create greater stability than single-parent homes and foster a strong work ethic and good behavior.²²

Policy

In 2013, the Shelby County Board of Education implemented a Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners program. The purpose of this program is outlined in official documentation: “To ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and have the opportunity to meet the same challenging State academic content and student achievement standards as all children are expected to meet.”²³

²⁰ Boschma, Janie and Ronald Brownstein. “The Concentration of Poverty in American Schools.” *The Atlantic* (February 29, 2016). Web.

²¹ Nagle, Nicholas N., Randy Gustafson and Charlynn Burd. “A Profile of Hispanic Population in the State of Tennessee.” University of Tennessee Center for Business and Economic Research (August 2012), p. 18. Web.

²² *Ibid*, pp. 17-18.

²³ Shelby County Board of Education. “Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners” (2013). Web.

This policy attempts to meet the educational needs of non English-proficient students and provide them with educational opportunities equal to those of their English-proficient peers. The policy mandates the development, periodical update, and administration of English as a Second Language services by the Superintendent.

Cultural Challenges

Although language lies at the center of challenges for Latino students in the Shelby County School system, the issue is not necessarily their own language acquisition. Many of these students are at least conversationally English-proficient by the time they finish elementary school, but their parents speak only Spanish. As a result, children must interpret between teachers and parents at meetings, simultaneously disempowering the parent and burdening the child with responsibility beyond his or her years. In addition, non English-speaking parents are less likely to be able to help their children with homework that provides instructions in English. Particularly as children advance beyond the education level of their immigrant parents, who received an average of an eighth grade education, at-home educational enrichment become increasingly less possible.²⁴ These issues do not affect all Latino students in Shelby County Schools, but rather those who come from Spanish-speaking homes, often the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves.

Research Methods

My original research question sought to address what challenges Latino students faced in the Memphis-area school system, and what programs were available to help them overcome

²⁴ Helene Harris and Grace Anne Boyd, 06/28/2016.

those challenges. However, as my data collection progressed, a new question took shape. It was clear to me that the language barrier was the root of most challenges for many Memphis-area Latino children, but breaking down that barrier was not as simple as moving from not knowing English to “knowing English.” Thus, my new question centered on what specific factors contributed to the success or failure of Latino students in Shelby County Schools.

The subject population included teachers at select Memphis-area schools that have large Latino populations, ESL administrators and teachers, workers and volunteers at non-profits that work with Latino youth in academic contexts, and adults who went through the Memphis school system as Latinos with a Spanish-speaking background. The schools included Treadwell Elementary School, Cordova Middle School, and Kingsbury High School, and the non-profits included Su Casa Family Ministries, Multi-National Ministries, and Streets Ministries. No children were recruited to participate in this research. In order to maintain the privacy of individuals, schools, and organizations, I offered to use aliases for all subjects specifically mentioned, as well as for the institutions and organizations at which they worked. Furthermore, I solicited written consent from all subjects for their interviews, identities, positions, and places of work to be revealed in this essay, and for the interviews to be recorded in audio form.

Although I initially planned to work closely with a teacher at each of the three target schools, I found that school administrators provided me with sufficient information in most cases. I employed a modified snowball sampling method, establishing new contacts as interviewees recommended them to me. In total, I formally interviewed ten subjects. When conducted in person, interviews lasted approximately one hour and followed a loosely structured outline of questions.²⁵ Those interviews were recorded on an audio device and stored securely

²⁵ See Appendix A, “Interview Questions”

for the safety of the participants. When conducted over the phone, interviews were not audio recorded, and key information was recorded in written form. All interviewees and associated organizations that are mentioned by name in this essay have given their explicit consent to share that information. Because the communities on which I focus my study are both Spanish-speaking and of Latin American origin or descent, I use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably.

Findings

After gathering both general information and personal stories from my interviewees, I organized my findings into the following five key points. First, the vast majority SCS ESL students are Spanish speakers, and they perform on the same level as their native English-speaking peers. However, a disproportionately high number of Hispanic students are enrolled in special education for language impairments. Second, ESL classes are geared towards spoken language development rather than academic English proficiency. As a result, many Hispanic students fall behind in academic vocabulary development needed for content courses, e.g. biology or algebra. Additionally, many Hispanic students who arrive and enroll as teenagers drop out of school because they are not provided with adequate resources to catch up on curriculum and learn English in time to graduate. Third, many Spanish-speaking parents are unable to help their children with homework or enrich their learning at home, and children are tasked from a very young age with interpreting for their parents at school meetings. Fourth, many Spanish-speaking students develop a complicated or even negative relationship with their native language due to the pressures of the classroom and their own perceptions of the Latino communities of which they form a part. Fifth and finally, some schools and non-profits are

taking extra care to help Latino students succeed (for example, through tutoring programs at Su Casa Family Ministries, Latino Nights at Wells Station Elementary, and DACA clinics at Kingsbury High School).

1. Hispanics in ESL and Special Education

Hispanics comprise not only the most numerically significant ELL population in Shelby County Schools, but also one that is exceptionally high-performing, on average. According to Andrew Duck, head of ESL for Shelby County Schools, approximately 81% of SCS English Language Learners (ELL) students are Spanish speakers. Many, but not most, of the ESL teachers speak another language, a skill technically unnecessary because teachers provide ESL instruction in English but useful in cases of very limited English knowledge in students.

Furthermore, Mr. Duck estimates that there are at least 40 different languages currently represented in the school district, so it is unlikely that all languages could be represented on the ESL staff. The Memphis City School (MCS) ELL program has existed since the middle to late 1970s, and it began only slightly later in Shelby County Schools, which merged with MCS in 2013. Mr. Duck has been working with the local school system for more than 20 years, and originally, many of the families in the ELL program came from Southeast Asia. The growth of the Hispanic population took off around 1996.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind law strengthened emphasis on ESL programs throughout the country's school systems, as well as an emphasis on standardized testing. The total ELL subgroup in SCS performs lower than the total school population on certain subjects such as math, but within the total ELL group, the Hispanic subgroup performs within a percentage point of the total school population and sometimes scores higher. Throughout the

district, Shelby County Schools are attempting to increase student achievement on standardized tests and general academic performance, in part by closing the afore-mentioned gap between ELLs and native English speaking students. Thus, they are always looking for instructional strategies that will help the teacher to engage and elevate every student throughout the school day. Mr. Duck believes that one such strategy could be bilingual schools, which would benefit not only the district but also Tennessee education as a whole.

Toward this end of increasing achievement, SCS also collaborates with Latino Memphis on the Abriendo Puertas program, which provides mentoring and academic support, and students in that programs are experiencing great success, even achieving valedictorian status. Furthermore, ESL students in Tennessee ultimately must meet the same requirements as any other Tennessee student in order to graduate from high school. However, the system accommodates English Language Learners by exempting them from the English Language Arts portion of achievement tests during the first year of enrollment in a U.S. school, and the other sections' scores on the first-year test are not used to calculate school or district growth. This year, the exemption was extended to Social Studies, and even after the first year, ELLs are designated as such on test forms.

A key factor influencing the administration of ESL programs is the widespread dispersion of Memphis Latino communities. Latino students comprise 12.31% of the Shelby County Schools' total population, but they are unevenly distributed and may constitute up to 40 or 50% of some schools' populations. For this reason, along with insufficient ESL staffing to cover the whole district, not every school offers ESL classes. If a student with an ESL need enrolls at a non-ESL school, administration tries to arrange for that child to move to a nearby school that does offer an ESL program. At the same time, if the Latino or other non-native English speaker

population at a particular school grows significantly, administration establishes ESL programming at that school according to the students' needs.

Memphis Latino students also hold a noteworthy place within SCS special education. Shelby County Schools' Exceptional Children special education program covers all thirteen categories of disability included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with the addition of two more. These include autism, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, and visual impairment (including blindness), among others. Out of 14,481 Hispanic children (12.31% of the total student population) enrolled in Shelby County Schools for the 2015-2016 year, 1141 are enrolled in Exceptional Children, comprising 7.84% of the special education population. Black or African American children comprise the largest percentages of the overall (76.38%) and special education (79.85%) student populations, while white children comprise a smaller percentage of the overall SCS student population (7.56%) than Hispanic students but a higher percentage of the special education population (9.14%). This school year, 143 Hispanic students were classified as having a developmental delay, 163 as having language impairments, and 501 as having a specific learning disability.²⁶ As these data demonstrate, a relatively smaller percentage of Hispanic SCS students are enrolled in special education, but a higher percentage of Hispanic students than either Black or white students is placed in special education due to language impairments. This clearly indicates an over-diagnosis of special needs in language development among Hispanic children, who should be receiving specialized English instruction rather than education geared towards language disability.

²⁶ See Appendix 2, Table "Shelby County Schools and Exceptional Children Demographics, 2015-2016."

2. Strengths and Limitations of SCS ESL

General Information and Administrative Perspectives on SCS ESL

Mr. Duck additionally provided me with substantial information on the manner in which SCS ESL programs function and led me to conclude that they are, in fact, well organized and fairly extensive. Children enter the English Language Learners program at many different levels of English ability. Most ELLs are elementary school students born in the US, but they enter school speaking their parents' native language. Students entering the SCS system are identified first as coming from a non-English background, and then they are assessed to determine their level of English proficiency. The ESL classes are geared towards language development, but some non-ESL teachers also work with ESL students in order to develop language proficiency in academic subjects such as math, science, and language arts. Shelby County Schools' transitional ESL program moves its students along in language development as quickly as possible in order to place them in the main classroom full-time.

In the elementary schools, teachers pull out small groups of students according to proficiency to meet the state's requirement for an hour each day of direct instruction. The elementary ELL curriculum is now designed to parallel topics that students in the regular language arts program are covering so that ESL students are hearing the same type of language, and possibly the same stories or topics, as their non-ELL peers. The middle and high schools have coded classes for beginning, intermediate, and advanced, along with an ESL version of social studies. Administrators annually use results from those courses to group students and establish which classes they need. High school ELLs can use two of their ESL credits toward the 4-credit English credit requirement needed to graduate. The other two credits must come from the regular English program to ensure that ELLs have reached a level of proficiency at which

they can pass a traditional high school English course.

Largely due to the arrival of Central American students who have been out of school for years and are entering SCS as high school students, one issue in the spotlight lately is a major learning gap to be filled for new immigrant students, sometimes spanning from elementary level to high school level education. Where do schools find the time to fill in the gap for a student who is so far behind? As Mr. Duck commented, “We need to adjust our program...newcomer programs that would give us a chance to work with students, new arrivals, and try to help them learn English and fill in those gaps at the same time, but those are expensive endeavors, and the current economic climate for the school system...it’s rough, it’s constricting...”²⁷ Several SCS high schools have succeeded in establishing such newcomer classrooms, a model in which students spend more time each day in an ESL environment where the teacher works with them on language acquisition and on filling in gaps in basic math, science, etc. Teachers also provide transitional classes designed for relatively new English speakers in high school as companion classes for regular English courses. After the first two years of ESL, a student could take a companion class, optimally during a study hall period, to help him or her through the standard English classes. However, research that SCS uses as reference states that it takes seven to ten years for a non-English speaker to reach the same level of proficiency as a native speaker, a time frame which does not accommodate children that arrive in their later teenage years.²⁸

It is clear that Shelby County Schools ESL teachers and administrators are working very hard and seeing success in their students, but they are forced to reckon with the limitations of their outreach. As noted above, many but not all ESL teachers in Shelby County speak another language proficiently, and the classes are for the most part instructional in conversational English

²⁷ Duck.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

language. This means that they focus on acquisition of general English language ability, not specifically on the academic English needed for math, science, and social studies or history, leaving many ESL students to fall behind in those content courses.

One local school is providing an effective alternative to traditional ESL programs in spite of limitations imposed on the school system. The state of Tennessee has an English-only provision mandating that the language of instruction in public schools be English, with the exception of foreign language programs, effectively banning bilingual education programs. However, Treadwell Elementary has offered an English-Spanish bilingual pilot program with a select group of native English- and Spanish-speaking students since 2009. The majority of instruction is provided in Spanish, and by fourth or fifth grade most students are proficient in both academic and conversational English and Spanish. Treadwell's Dual Language Immersion Optional program is the only public school bilingual program in Shelby County and all of West Tennessee. Beyond classroom instruction, the program includes bilingual extracurricular activities such as Spanish Reading Club, chess, soccer, literacy, drama, and garden clubs, as well as choir, community service projects, and robotics field trips. A significant body of research suggests that bilingual programs should be increased, but that is unlikely to happen in Memphis in the near future due to the state's language provision.²⁹

Student Experiences in SCS ESL

Former students of Memphis City/Shelby County Schools ESL spoke favorably of their experiences in the ESL classroom itself, but they also shed light on the particular shortcomings of ESL in preparing its students for the mainstream classroom. Ivonne Cornejo did not begin ESL classes until 3rd grade, and she continued them through the end of 5th grade. She recalls that

²⁹ Menken (2013); Cummins (1999); Gandara and Contreras (2009); González (2000, 2011).

her ESL teacher worked very hard to understand the students' unique learning challenges. When Ivonne began ESL, she struggled with the language, but by the end of 4th grade she had a clear grasp of the language. However, she decided to remain in the ESL program through the end of her 5th grade year, because not only were her closest friends in the program, but also she wanted to help other ESL students who were experiencing the same struggle she faced. She reported positively on her experiences in ESL and in elementary school, in general. However, spelling, reading, and anything else grammar-related posed significant challenges for Ivonne. In elementary school, she was tested to qualify for CLUE, the high achievers program at Shelby County Schools, but in the end she was not placed in the program. Although she wishes not to blame her ten hours each week in ESL, she wonders if that schedule, along with her as yet unperfected English at the time, influenced the school's decision not to place her. As she remembers, her ESL classes focused on conversational English rather than academic proficiency, which leads her to believe that she may have fallen behind non-ESL students on the lesson plan each week. However, she found her overall ESL experience very rewarding.

Veronica Virgen feels that because her ESL courses took place during math and social studies, she was unable to build a foundation of basic math in the first year and a half of her schooling in MCS. She continued to struggle in math throughout high school and college. Although she understands the difficulty of scheduling ESL at a time that works with both teachers' and students' schedules, she believes that one year and a half of ESL in place of math class was not the best solution.

On a more positive note, Ivonne and Veronica agree that the test-out exam to leave the ESL program was well thought-out. It began with identifying pictures and naming items and then moved on to writing and speaking portions, clearly favoring a proficiency of conversational

English. Furthermore, in high school, when students who had taken ESL classes at any point were preparing to take the state exam, they took a pre-test to determine their linguistic preparedness so that their scores would not reflect poorly on them if more English instruction was needed.³⁰

Non-Profit Staff's Perceptions of SCS ESL

Helene Harris and Grace Anne Boyd of Su Casa Family Ministries see many children placed in ESL classes who do not need conversational English education, whether simply because they are Hispanic or because their parent speaks Spanish. All of Su Casa's elementary children are completely orally bilingual – not perfectly, but they can communicate in English, because they learn in English in school. They do, however, need additional help in literacy and academic enrichment. Examples of ESL homework that Grace Anne has seen consist of an identical page in English and Spanish. Because other school classes are taught in English, the children cannot read in Spanish, so she assists them with the Spanish side more than with the English side. Furthermore, children are pulled out of regular classroom instruction to receive ESL instruction, again falling behind their non-ELL peers on class content.

Helene and Grace Anne also testified to the issue of high school dropout rates in local Latino communities. Once these children reach high school, many take on the responsibility of helping with the family's income and thus drop out of school to work, particularly if they are able to legally work while their undocumented parents cannot legally work. Some also drop out once they realize that college is an unlikely option due to high out-of-state tuition costs for immigrant

³⁰ Ivonne Cornejo and Veronica Virgen, 07/11/2016.

children, whom the state treats as non-residents in terms of not only tuition but also loan and grant eligibility.³¹

3. Barriers to Parents, Burdens on Children

Student Stories of Barriers and Burdens

Ivonne and Veronica provided poignant insights into the effects on students and their families of being non-native English speakers in an English-dominated school system. Ivonne attended Memphis City Schools (before the merger with Shelby County) K-12 after arriving in the United States at the age of two. The first two years were difficult, because her family only spoke Spanish at home. Additionally, both of her parents worked full-time, so they could not offer much help in the transition from home to school. Unlike many Latino immigrant parents, Ivonne's father strove to help her maintain her Spanish language heritage by reading in Spanish with her at night. Although she is grateful now for her continued proficiency in Spanish, she feels that Spanish instruction at home made school more difficult for the first two or three years because she was not receiving paired English instruction at home.

Veronica attended Memphis City Schools from 4th grade to 12th grade, and at the beginning she spoke no English. Another Latina student in her class who did speak English helped Veronica make it through the first year, but Veronica had no adult to approach with her scholastic problems aside from the ESL teacher. In reflecting on those circumstances, she senses that Latino and Latina students were not a priority for MCS at the time. Compounding the problem, her father was the only one of her parents living in the US and had no proof of residence, so her uncle registered her for his own school zone, necessitating that she ride the bus

³¹ Harris and Boyd.

every day. She found herself attending a predominantly white school outside of her more Latino-populated neighborhood and feeling linguistically and culturally isolated at the outset of her U.S. education.

Responsibility for relaying information across languages forms one, if not the, key component of the burden placed on many Latino children. Ivonne's mother learned enough English to work in a restaurant kitchen, and her father still speaks minimal English. When Ivonne's mother registered her for school, Ivonne performed all necessary interpretation. Ivonne's mother also did not know the rule about cutting off kindergarten registration for children born past September 30 who were still four years old their kindergarten year. As a result, Ivonne, who has a November birthday, recalls being turned away from registration the first year that they attempted to register. Ivonne continued to interpret for her mother in school-related matters and was responsible for keeping her mother apprised of upcoming deadlines (when registration would start, what documents they needed) and for filling out everything but the signature on school forms. She recalls a particular parent-teacher conference in 4th or 5th grade after she had failed a spelling test, and rather than relay the teacher's message that Ivonne needed to work on her spelling ability, Ivonne told her mother that all of her work was going well, unbeknownst to the teacher. Ivonne's mother always believed that Ivonne was doing well in school, and Ivonne constantly hid her struggles from her parents so that she would not disappoint them or burden them with more weight than that which they already carried from work and the need to pay bills, buy food, etc.

Veronica's father spoke some English when she first entered school, but her uncle helped her and her mother register for school and get vaccinations. However, throughout all her childhood, Veronica served as the interpreter for her mother. When her brother was born, a nine-

year-old Veronica was in the hospital room interpreting between her mother and the doctor, and that same year, Veronica had to interpret between her mother and law enforcement when someone attempted to break into their house. Ivonne continues to act for her brother in the same capacity that she acted for herself as a child. Besides attending his parent-teacher conferences, she schedules his doctor's appointments and takes him to those appointments, registers him for school, writes him notes for school, and calls his teachers when necessary, even though he speaks more English than he does Spanish. Like Veronica, Ivonne interpreted for her parents' doctor's appointments, and even for those of her extended family.

A responsibility for one's own wellbeing and success in school often accompanies Latino students' responsibility for interpretation. Veronica senses that her parents expected her to be her own advocate, motivated by their lack of English language ability and the understanding that "life was the way it was," that is to say, challenging. Her mother felt unable to participate in PTA in Memphis although she had done so in Mexico, because she would not be able to communicate with other mothers. This left Veronica feeling lonely and left out when other parents attended school events. Ivonne knows that her parents cared about her schooling, but like Veronica's parents, they did not have the resources to help her. As a result, it was easier for them to remain distant from Ivonne's school experience and let her find her own way, rather than to face their daughter's disappointment when her parents could not help her through her problems. Neither Ivonne nor Veronica wanted to burden her parents with school problems when they were working hard simply to put food on the table, so the girls instead maintained their silence and carried their burdens alone.

Non-Profit Staff's Perceptions of Barriers and Burdens

According to Helene, "Any lower income family needs additional enrichment because in

a lower income [household], regardless of race, there's less access to books, the parents are less educated, they're younger, they're unmarried...there's less of a support structure in the home life."³² Likewise, she reported, Memphis Hispanics are not highly educated in general (with an average of an eighth grade education among parents at Su Casa, as mentioned above), which suggests that they are less likely to create a culture of learning in the home – magazines and books may not be available to these children, and many of the parents do not read for enjoyment.³³

Another way in which the school system has missed the mark, Helene reported, is that it has relied on children to interpret for their non-English speaking parents, as exemplified through Ivonne and Veronica's stories. As discussed above, this results in an extra burden on the child, in addition to loss of information in the relayed communication. Furthermore, it forces the parent to rely on the child, leaving no one who can advocate for the child-as-middleman.

Further issues arise with the families' unfamiliarity with the education system. Very young children and their parents sometimes do not understand that certain forms need to be signed on certain dates, or that a folder has a "take home" side and "bring back" side, and this lack of understanding could result in the child not having his or her work when required or missing out on a field trip or other event. One teacher at Grahamwood sends home a bilingual schedule in English and Spanish for her Hispanic students, but even in that case, a lack of cultural understanding can inhibit the parent and child from accomplishing certain tasks. This lack of understanding does not coincide with a lack of concern – parents are very involved and faithfully bring their children to tutoring every week. However, misunderstandings of this nature continue to inhibit Latino students on their paths to academic success.

³² Harris and Boyd.

³³ *Ibid.*

4. Students' Relationships with the Spanish Language

The pressures of acquiring English in combination with the personal suppression of Latino cultural influences complicate many local Latino children's relationship with their native language. Grace Anne has taken note of a particular stigma regarding the Spanish language among children at Su Casa. They do not want to speak Spanish, especially to authority figures, because they have not seen "successful" Latino people in their lives (e.g. businessmen, doctors). When volunteers and employees speak to the children in Spanish, the children respond in English. However, Su Casa encourages them to speak Spanish because it is, as Helene said, "a gift and an asset" that many people lack. Such encouragement empowers not only the children to develop an in-demand skill but also the parents to reconcile their Latino heritage with their own and their children's lives in the broader Memphis community.

Veronica took pride in the fact that she spoke Spanish as a child, but figuring out her own identity, and what it meant to be Latina, was a long and difficult process. Ivonne likewise came to terms with her Latina identity only at the end of high school. In elementary school, she tried to say Spanish words and phrases in class in an American accent, the way her peers did, because she feared that people would make fun of her. She would tell her friends that she only spoke a little bit of Spanish, and she suffered internal humiliation when she left class for ESL every day.

Problems with the Spanish language later arose for Veronica when she attempted to enroll in high school Spanish classes. Veronica participated in the International Baccalaureate program at her high school and took French for the first year. When her French teacher moved to a different school and the new teacher failed to meet expectations for IB test preparation, Veronica and several other students proposed to their principal a switch from French to Spanish.

Administrators resisted the switch because they believed that a native Spanish speaker should not take a Spanish class in high school due to the alleged unfair advantage she would have.

However, the school relented and allowed Veronica and the other students to switch to Spanish, provided that those who were native Spanish speakers did extra work to ensure that they were challenging themselves. Taking Spanish in an academic setting helped Veronica to better understand her native language, and she and Ivonne wish they could have taken a Spanish writing course in order to improve their proficiency in that capacity. As Ivonne pointed out, native English speakers take English writing and literature classes in high school, so there seems to be little logic behind prohibiting Spanish speakers from doing the same.

In anticipation of increasing loss of Spanish language ability through the generations that follow Latin American immigrants, Su Casa regularly encourages parents to read to their children in Spanish. Many of Su Casa's children, much like Veronica, are not under normal circumstances permitted to take Spanish in high school because they already "know Spanish." The reality is that they speak improper Spanish and cannot read or write in Spanish because their parents have not taught them how. As a result, these children have an asset of Spanish-speaking ability when and if they graduate and go to college or begin working, but it is not highly marketable because they cannot read or write it proficiently, nor put together complex ideas in Spanish.³⁴

5. Additional Resources Through Non-Profits and Schools

Streets Ministries, Multi-National Ministries, and Su Casa Family Ministries provide tutoring, assisted reading, and other programs that target underprivileged, Latino, and other

³⁴ Harris and Boyd.

English learner students from pre-K to 12th grade. However, only Su Casa focuses exclusively on Latino communities. The organization was founded approximately eight years ago when Second Presbyterian Church adopted Berclair Elementary through the Memphis City Schools Adopt-A-School program. The church realized that many of the students spoke Spanish and felt called to start an English program that quickly expanded into a multidimensional service organization.

One popular program that Su Casa offers during the school year is Adult ESL, with Su Casa Kids included. Su Casa Kids started merely as childcare for adults enrolled in ESL, but it quickly took on a more educational role. In the morning, children ages 3 months to 5 years participate in crafts, alphabet lessons, and practicing spoken English. Staff and volunteers also read to the children in English so that they do not start kindergarten behind their peers in reading comprehension or knowledge of the English language. This is especially important because in most cases, the children's parents do not read to them in English. In the evenings, Su Casa holds homework help hours for elementary school children, but as the program expanded, staff and volunteers found it difficult to work individually with the children. As a result, this semester Su Casa launched an after-school one-on-one tutoring program, and it hopes to expand the program in the coming years. Mothers come to tutoring with their children and sit with the tutor and child in order to learn how to help their children at home. Often the difficulty for parents stems from the fact that homework instructions are written in English. Thus, by sitting alongside the tutors, the mothers are empowered to help their children and find confidence in doing so. The program has been so successful that it has received grant funding to be expanded in the fall. Many other local tutoring programs target literacy or another specific learning category, but they may not look at the child's homework and target the individual child's particular struggles.

For middle school children, Su Casa maintains an on-staff intern who works with Memphis Soul for the City, which is affiliated with Streets Ministries. The program is geared towards working with urban youth, as Su Casa is the only Latino youth organization in its particular neighborhood. Su Casa is also unique because, while many programs are school-specific, the children whom Su Casa serves attend several different schools because they are the children of Su Casa's adult English learners. Su Casa serves children at Kingsbury, Berclair, Jackson Elementary, Wells Station, and Cape Bond, as well as certain charter schools. Helene remarked that this diversity allows Su Casa to serve children across various neighborhoods, but it also hampers what could be very issue-specific educational help if the organization were able to focus on children from only one or two schools. For this reason, she insists that schools can and should better target specific learning challenges. On the other hand, Helene and Grace Anne agree that programs like those offered at Su Casa are important in part because school teachers cannot realistically attend to the individual needs of every child; it is not their fault nor their responsibility. They must teach a whole classroom and keep up with the yearly curriculum, thus Su Casa provides the enrichment that these children cannot receive at school or at home.

As an employee of a non-profit herself, Veronica feels that non-profit organizations' involvement in tutoring and other forms of help for Latino students is important, but that non-profits are often left to "pick up the slack" when schools fall behind on their responsibility to non-English speaking students. She perceives that the schools are choosing not to make ELLs a priority, and that it is not the duty of non-profits to make up for the school system's failings. Ivonne added that non-profits have significantly fewer resources in terms of funding and human power, whereas schools receive funding from the state to meet their educational responsibilities. Furthermore, schools target a specific geographic community, whereas non-profits strive to meet

the needs of people from all over the city who bring unique problems from their different neighborhoods, as Helene and Grace Anne confirmed with regards to Su Casa.

In spite of certain persistent shortcomings, Veronica believes that vast improvements have occurred since she left the Memphis-Shelby County School System. Kingsbury High School, for example, runs DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) workshops, a program that Veronica finds to create a sense of community among the Latinos and the school and remove the shame from being undocumented. Additionally, Wells Station Elementary has organized several Latino Nights for parents and children, with games, non-profit involvement, and socializing.

Su Casa and SCS also work to continue students' education over the course of the summer. Su Casa's popular and successful three-week summer day camp includes art, recreation, Bible study, and education components. During the children's camp time, Su Casa also runs a mothers' program that teaches nutritious cooking and biblically based parenting. In addition, some Latinos harbor a fear or uncertainty about leaving their neighborhoods, but Su Casa's summer camp field trips are designed to inform parents that they can and should take their children to public parks, libraries, and museums. Shelby County Schools administration looks at all ELLs in their first year in an English-speaking school environment, either coming into kindergarten from a non-English speaking home or coming into another grade as an immigrant, and invites those students to its summer program. The elementary students follow a 20-day curriculum with English learning through music, PE, activities around the city, and specific language instruction. For middle and high school students, SCS has arranged a schedule that moves students through English, math, science, computer, and music classes to adjust them to the high school class rotation system, and that program utilizes a newcomer curriculum. The

summer programs have been very successful on both educational and community-building fronts.³⁵

Moreover, Su Casa has started a library program that takes children to library reading time and encouraging parents to obtain a library card. Helene commented that the most improvement she has seen as a result of this program is in the parents' growing confidence in their ability to help their children with academic work. One problem with the library system, though, lies in the fact that acquiring a library card requires parents to prove residency with a photo ID, which undocumented immigrants generally do not possess. Many of their children are documented immigrants or U.S. citizens, but they cannot get their own library card without parent ID until the age of 18. Furthermore, both the central Memphis Public Library and the Randolph branch – at the latter of which close to 60% of patrons are Spanish speakers, some with no English ability – offer few to no resources directed at Spanish speakers. Neither library is currently running programs dedicated to the Latino communities or language acquisition in general, and although Randolph held weekend ESL conversation classes as recently as this spring of 2016, the classes were discontinued for the summer. According to individuals on the Rhodes faculty and the Su Casa staff, the Randolph branch has not had a Spanish speaker working on staff in over a year. At the same time, the Memphis Public Library has poured significant funds into the teen center at the central branch of the library – a clear illustration of one way in which Memphis bypasses its Spanish-speaking population, even with regards to the youth. In spite of those barriers, Su Casa's program continues to grow and to encourage Latino Memphians to engage with local libraries and with reading in general.

³⁵ Duck

***Behavior**

It is worth noting that Latino students in SCS are generally perceived by teachers, administrators, and non-profit workers as well behaved and hard working, indicating that behavior is not a major factor affecting Latino students' success or failure.³⁶ As all of my sources have likewise done, Su Casa reports few to no behavioral problems in its Latino students. Su Casa typically receives compliments on field trips for the excellent behavior of their children, and Helene and Grace Anne attribute that to the involvement of parents with their children's lives and their emphasis on discipline. However, they also claim that such excellent behavior on the part of Latino students can be a detriment to their learning, in the sense that if they were poorly behaved as well as struggling with their work, they might receive more attention from a teacher than they do simply struggling with schoolwork but never causing trouble in the classroom. Previous research on Tennessee Hispanics, as mentioned in the section "*Context for Tennessee and Memphis/Shelby County, Background and Statistics*," reports the same positive behavior trends across the state.³⁷ This relative lack of behavioral difficulties demonstrates that challenges to Latino students do, in fact, stem largely from the other factors delineated above.

Recommendations for Change

Two categories of bilingual children emerge in my examination of the local school system: those who are truly emergent bilinguals and need particular attention in the development of their English language ability, and those who are fully bilingual, speaking and reading English with the same proficiency as the average urban youth in Memphis. The most effective solution

³⁶ Duck; Harris and Boyd; Stacy Taylor, 04/2016; Wendy Williams, 04/2016.

³⁷ Nagle, Gustafson, and Burd (2012), pp. 17-18.

for children in the first category is bilingual education. Treadwell Elementary's pilot program has demonstrated that a child can achieve full bilingual proficiency in four to five years, coming from either an English or a Spanish background, if educated according to such a model. In order for bilingual education to become a reality, the Tennessee State Government must revise its English-only educational provision. A school district with a largely non-native English speaking population of such magnitude as SCS Latinos merits an optional bilingual program at every grade level.

For children in the second category, bilingual education is unnecessary, although it would benefit them later in life by equipping them with a highly marketable skill and preserving a component of their cultural heritage that they may desire in hindsight. Those children need one-on-one tutoring or other forms of individual assistance to address the areas in which they struggle as students. Furthermore, although language poses the primary challenge for Hispanic students, it affects each of them uniquely. SCS should budget for inclusion teachers who work alongside primary teachers in content courses that include ESL students. These teachers would attend to individual students' needs as developing English speakers. With the understanding that Memphis public schools are much larger and more widespread than those in Greenport where inclusion teachers have had success – with a Memphis city population of more than 650,000 compared to a Greenport population of less than 3,000 – the provision of inclusion teachers still merits consideration for installment in the Shelby County School System. More students require more assistance, but a larger school district also entails a larger budget for English Language Learners.

In order to empower parents to help their children succeed, Shelby County Schools should provide interpreters for parent-teacher meetings and registration day at every school that offers

ESL, as well as parent newsletters in Spanish. As discussed above, many children currently interpret for their parents at such meetings, and the parents are often unaware of events and updates in the school system.³⁸ Furthermore, Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act entitles parents of ESL students to translation services explaining the reason their child was placed in ESL, the level of English proficiency their child has been assessed to have, and the program's method and goals of instruction, in addition to other translation services.³⁹ However, the lack of understanding that parents at Su Casa report regarding their children's education indicates that they are not receiving the services due them, and they likely do not know of their rights as such.⁴⁰ By providing means by which Spanish-speaking parents can be informed as to their children's educational needs and accomplishments, Shelby County Schools would empower parents to take a more active role in furthering their children's education. These actions would also unburden children of the responsibility for mediating between their parents and the school, allowing them to focus on academic and extracurricular activities and, in at least one area of their lives, enjoy the freedom of being a child.

A New Crisis and New Opportunities

As demonstrated above, Shelby County Schools exhibit thorough dedication among ESL faculty and administrators and great potential for future improvements in relations with Latino communities. However, a new crisis has been plaguing Latino youth in Memphis since 2014, when thousands of Latin American minors made national news by entering the United States

³⁸ Cornejo and Virgen.

³⁹ TN Department of Education. "ESEA Title III." Tennessee State Government (2004). Web.

⁴⁰ Harris and Boyd.

unaccompanied, often in search of their parents, safety from gang violence and recruitment, and a quality education.⁴¹ Shelby County in particular has seen significant growth in the Central American population, with approximately 2,352 unaccompanied minors relocating to the Memphis area between 2014 and 2016.⁴² In response to this influx, Shelby County Schools have been denying enrollment to teenagers between the ages of 16 and 18 on the basis that they could not learn English and catch up on curriculum quickly enough to graduate on time.

Burke and Sainz report that sixteen-year old Candelario Jimon, a 16-year-old Guatemalan boy, came to the U.S. seeking an education. He attempted to enroll in the Shelby County School System in January of 2016, but school officials have prevented him from enrolling, as they have with dozens migrant youth who have fled violence in Central America, because “[school] officials contend the teens lacked transcripts or were too old to graduate on time.”⁴³ Similar situations have occurred across 14 states in at least 35 school districts with migrant minors from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. This proves problematic in light of a 1982 Supreme Court ruling determining that “states cannot deny children a free public education, regardless of immigration status.”⁴⁴ That ruling entails not only that Candelario qualifies for enrollment in the

⁴¹ Carpenter, Ted Galen. “The child migrant crisis is just the latest disastrous consequence of America’s drug war.” *Washington Post* (July 21, 2014). Web.; Ahmed, Azam. “Flow of Central American Children Headed to U.S. Shifts but Doesn’t Slow.” *New York Times*, (Oct. 6, 2015). Web.; Hennessy-Fiske, Molly. “Frustrated by new U.S. program to take in migrants, Central American parents turn to smugglers.” *Los Angeles Times* (April 21, 2016). Web.; Tobia, P.J. “No country for lost kids.” *Public Broadcasting Service* (June 20, 2014). Web.

⁴² Zamudio, María Inés. “Migrant student’s dream is deferred.” *Commercial Appeal* (July 22, 2016). Print.

⁴³Burke, Garance and Adrian Sainz. “Dreams Dashed.” *Commercial Appeal* (May 2, 2016). Print.

⁴⁴ *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982.

Shelby County School System, but also that the Shelby County School Board is breaking the law by denying enrollment to him and other migrant youth. SCS directed Candelario and other recently arrived teenagers such as Guatemalan Rolfi Ramirez, who fled his native country after being targeted for recruitment by gangs, to the Messick Adult Center.⁴⁵ Messick offered English classes in various parts of town and had collaborated with SCS and MCS over the years, but the Tennessee state government ended its contract with adult education facilities in Shelby County and defunded the 800-student program mid-semester. The following quote illustrates the desperation of these minors' situations:

“Instead of enrolling Jimon and the other minors in high school, their cash-strapped district routed them to an adult school in East Memphis that offered English classes a few hours a week. But before Jimon could even register, the state shut down the GED and English-language programs over concerns that few students were graduating, effectively ending his chances for a formal education.”⁴⁶

Mr. Duck believes that the students were not outright rejected, but rather that the schools were following a process that seemed appropriate in light of the students' situation.⁴⁷ However, as detailed above, not only does the school board have no legal right to deny enrollment to these youths, it also do not have the right to discourage them from enrolling, particularly when language and social barriers inhibit those students and their families from fully understanding their rights and advocating for themselves.

Mr. Duck also reported that when the Messick Center abruptly closed, SCS took steps to

⁴⁵ Zamudio, 2016.

⁴⁶ Burke and Sainz, 2016.

⁴⁷ Duck

bring those students back into the regular high school program. The SCS ESL program received a grant from the state earlier this year for adult English language education, thus SCS moved those programs to areas where they could attract adults displaced by the Messick closure. SCS continued the program through the rest of the school year and the first half of the summer, and it succeeded in helping some of the displaced students as a result.

The U.S. Department of Education has responded to Shelby County Schools' actions by launching an investigation through the USDOE Office of Civil Rights on July 13 of this year.⁴⁸ I believe, as Mr. Duck suggests, that Shelby County Schools were well intentioned in directing these teenagers to what seemed the best option given their educational deficits. However, the clear injustice of the situation should make clear to SCS that reform must occur within the local school system. My hope is that this investigation will allow SCS to reflect deeply on its policies toward Latino immigrant youth and on the many opportunities for positive change that can result from these unfortunate and unjust circumstances.

Conclusion

This research, while paralleled by scholars across the United States, is the first of its kind conducted in the city of Memphis. Findings demonstrated that Memphis Latino students share experiences that non-native English speakers encounter in U.S. schools at large, including the insufficient development of academic English proficiency in ESL courses, the struggle to catch up on lost years of education in order to graduate on time, the benefits of bilingual education (where available) in developing first and second language skills, and the need for individual attention to their unique learning needs. Moreover, Memphis Latino students carry significant

⁴⁸ Pignolet, Jennifer. "Talking to Latino community, SCS officials say." *Commercial Appeal* (July 22, 2016). Print.

burdens due to a lack of resources for family information and empowerment. However, Shelby County Schools and local non-profit organizations are providing means of advancement and enrichment, such as family-friendly tutoring programs, newcomer classrooms, and continued summer learning, that are already having a positive effect on these students' academic achievement.

Memphis Latino communities truly form a vital segment of local society – pull them out, and the fabric of this city would unravel. Nonetheless, these communities and individuals continue to go largely ignored and uninvolved in conversations of race relations and policy making. City and county officials need to adapt their policies and their mindsets, and in some cases change them altogether, in order to accommodate and appreciate a burgeoning Latino population – in particular, the more than 14,000 Latino children enrolled or attempting to enroll in Shelby County Schools. They, together with Memphis youth of all backgrounds and ethnicities, are the future of this city, and their betterment is the betterment of Memphis as a whole.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Are you originally from Memphis?
2. Why did you choose a career in education/non-profit work?
3. There is a prevalent idea that a total immersion language program is the best option for children learning English in the US. What is your opinion on that statement based on your experiences with Latino students learning English in Memphis?
4. What programs or extra aid do you/does your school/does this organization offer to help children (specifically, Latino children) who are still in the process of learning English?
5. How do you think these programs or aid are impacting Latino students' educational achievement?
6. Language seems to be the most prevalent issue for Latino children in our school system. Are there any other key issues you have noticed that Latino students face?
7. Is there anything else that you think I should know?
8. Is there anyone else with whom you think I should speak?

Appendix B

“Shelby County Schools and Exceptional Children Demographics, 2015-2016”

	HISPANIC	AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE	ASIAN	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER	WHITE	TWO OR MORE RACES	TOTALS
All Students	14481	105	1859	89815	50	8894	2386	117590
Autism	53	4	12	571		177	21	838
Blind	2			24		2	1	29
Deaf-Blindness				2				2
Deafness			1	1		1		3
Developmental Delay	143		22	947	1	93	45	1251
Emotional Disturbance	7			302		38	12	359
Functional Delay	21		1	451		5	5	483
Hearing Impairments	10		2	141		22	6	181
Intellectual Disability	52	1	12	1180		75	27	1347
Language Impairments	163		15	627		58	26	889
Multiple Disabilities	34	1	4	215		23	7	284
Orthopedic Impairments	3		2	26		9		40
Other - Health Impairments	61		3	1,153		228	44	1489
Specific Learning Disability	501	3	33	5,145	6	407	99	6194
Speech Impairments	86	2	11	802		185	30	1116
Traumatic Brain Injury	2		1	19		1	1	24
Visual Impairments	3			17		7		27
TOTALS	1141	11	119	11623	7	1331	324	14556
SPED PCT	7.84%	0.08%	0.82%	79.85%	0.05%	9.14%	2.23%	
PCT OF ALL STUDENTS	12.31%	0.09%	1.58%	76.38%	0.04%	7.56%	2.03%	

*** Excludes Gifted