

# Looking Holistically in a Climate of Partiality: Identities of Students Labeled Long-Term English Language Learners

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In recent years there has been growing awareness about a sub-group of students labeled *Long-Term English Language Learners* (LTELLs). Our study seeks to show how students who fall within the LTELL category see themselves through the lens of their lived experiences as (emergent) bilinguals, students, family/community members and transnational individuals. Countering discourses which frame these students as deficient, we apply the discourse of partiality framework as a lens through which to better understand how these students perceive themselves via their languages, ethnic-connectivity and academic trajectories. We argue that the discourse around the label can be understood as a racial project that serves to perpetuate white supremacy through the marginalization of the language practices of communities of color. We conclude by exploring how schools can take a broader view of this population to create positive learning opportunities that build on who they are and how they see themselves.

**Key words:** Emergent Bilinguals, Long-Term English Language Learners, Youth, Labels, Secondary Schools, Spanish

Armando: So seven times in a row, seven years in a row?

Interviewer: So . . . yeah. If you don't pass the exam, then you stay a [long-term] English learner.

Armando: You made me feel stupid.

In recent years there has been growing awareness about a subgroup of emergent bilingual students labeled *long-term English language learners* (LTELL) (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012; Olsen, 2010). Although definitions vary, these students have generally been educated in U.S. schools for 7 years or more and have not tested out of their *English language learner* (ELL) status, requiring them to continue to receive bilingual

education or English as a second language (ESL) services. Since this population represents a significant percentage of emergent bilinguals in secondary schools across the nation, attention has been given to their educational backgrounds and needs, as well as programming possibilities for them (Calderón & Minaya Rowe, 2011; Menken et al., 2012). While this body of literature is still developing, a general understanding of the pedagogical needs and approaches for these students is gradually emerging.

A lesser-known aspect of students labeled LTELL is how they see themselves, especially in contrast to how they are perceived by others. As seen in the initial quote by Armando, a student labeled LTELL, he is grappling with what the term means and its underlying implications. The label positions students as deficient in English as well as their home language and as doing poorly in school. We argue that LTELL has become synonymous with and has replaced terms such as *semilingual*, which have fallen out of favor for their “politically incorrect” nature. Countering such perspectives, we apply the discourse of partiality framework as a lens (Benesch, 2008) through which to better understand how these students perceive themselves via their languages, ethnic connectivity, and academic trajectories. Here we seek to show how students who fall within the LTELL category see themselves through the lens of their lived experiences as (emergent) bilinguals, students, family/community members and transnational individuals. We aim to bridge students’ holistic identities with the deficit views of this population reproduced in their schooling experiences.

To that end, the questions guiding this study are (a) How do students negotiate the discourse of partiality that positions them as LTELLs? and (b) How do students describe their ethnolinguistic and academic identities? We employ qualitative methods to answer these questions through an analysis of students’ words in interviews, writing artifacts, and classroom observations. Taken together, these data can shed light on the lived realities of students labeled as LTELL through their views and experiences. By placing the experiences of students labeled as LTELL at the center of our analysis, we hope to improve the educational experiences, outcomes, and life chances of these students by probing how schools can take a broader view of this population and use that information to create positive learning opportunities that build on who they are and how they see themselves.

### Long-Term English Language Learners in the Literature

The label *long-term English language learner* is a relatively new one that has been increasingly used in U.S. schools in recent years. According to Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) and Freeman and Freeman (2002), there are three main groups of emergent bilinguals at the secondary level: (a) newly arrived with adequate schooling, (b) newly arrived with limited/interrupted formal schooling (also known as students with interrupted formal education or SIFE), and (3) long-term English language learners (LTELs). These authors define newly arrived ELLs with adequate schooling as students who have been in the United States for 5 or less years and who are typically literate in their home language because of the schooling they received in their country of origin. They describe SIFE students as similar to the first group in that they recently arrived in the United States but lack formal education in their home language.

This study focuses on students labeled LTELs, who are set apart from the 2 other groups because they are not new arrivals, but rather have been in U.S. schools for 7 or more years. In New York State, where this study was conducted, the label has been institutionalized in

that LTELL students are identified as a subgroup of ELLs and monitored for achievement on standardized exams; that is, emergent bilinguals are designated as LTELLs after 6 consecutive years of not “testing out” of their ELL designation as determined by the state’s standardized English language proficiency test<sup>1</sup> (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Menken et al., 2012).

The increased concern about emergent bilinguals on different points along the literacy spectrum has in part been galvanized by current U.S. federal education policy, which requires that emergent bilinguals take (and pass) standardized tests in English as a means for schools to prove to the federal government that they are progressing in their acquisition of English literacy and academic content. The stakes of this testing regime are high, as the results are used to determine student retention and graduation, as well as school-level restructuring or closure (Menken, 2010). In addition, the tests currently being used define academic language and literacy in very narrow terms, in ways that fail to account for the complex language practices of bilinguals in general, with especially negative consequences for LTELLs (García, 2009; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Menken, in press). Not surprisingly, emergent bilinguals are far more likely than their monolingual peers to fail such tests, and this “achievement gap” is particularly wide for those labeled LTELLs. From our prior study on students within this category, we found that they tested about 3 years below their actual grade level on English literacy and 3.5 years below on Spanish literacy. Their cumulative high school GPA was 69% or a D+ (Menken & Kleyn, 2010).

A general consensus in the field has begun to emerge as to how best to meet the needs of LTELLs within the current testing climate. Overall, researchers have identified the greatest need of this student population as building up their academic language and literacy skills in order for them to meet the demands of education today (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). There has also been a discussion of the need to separate these students from more “traditional” ESL students for a portion of their school day to work on strengthening their academic literacy (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Newell & Smith, 1999).

Another thread that has emerged in this literature is the need to develop the home language literacy skills of these students (Forrest, 2006; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Newell & Smith, 1999). For example, as Forrest (2006) argues, “A study program might include foreign-language classes for students who already speak and read the language. In addition, classroom libraries and independent reading activities could include literature written in the students’ first languages” (p. 110).

This small but growing body of research on LTELLs primarily focuses on meeting the academic needs of this population but fails to critique the negative positioning of students labeled LTELLs as linguistically deficient. As scholars who have worked with students labeled LTELL for many years we became increasingly uncomfortable with this deficit framing and our own complicity in reproducing it in our work. We experienced cognitive dissonance when writing about the alleged language deficiencies of students who we observed using English and Spanish in fluid, creative, and innovative ways on a daily basis. This article is our attempt to address this cognitive dissonance by offering a more complex understanding of the identities of students labeled LTELLs and the powerful ideologies that position them as deficient in current schooling practices.

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<sup>1</sup>This exam is called the NYSESLAT (New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test), and comprises four components: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Passing this exam is the only way to “test out” of the (LT)ELL status.

## A POSTSTRUCTURALIST READING OF THE LTELL LABEL

Poststructuralism has been a productive framework to use in addressing the cognitive dissonance described above. From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is not an innate characteristic of individuals. Instead, identity is a performance constructed as individuals make meaning of themselves and others through the repetition of discourses that have been “written” by the society in which they live. It is this repetition, or what Butler (1993) calls *iterability*, that lies at the core of the performative nature of identity construction. As Weedon (1987) describes it:

As we acquire language, we learn to give voice—meaning—to our experience and to understand it according to particular ways of thinking, particular discourses, which pre-date our entry into language. These ways of thinking constitute our consciousness and the positions with which we identify structure our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity. (p. 33)

In other words, language and discourse shape “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). Yet, this sense of self is not static but “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (p. 33).

A poststructuralist view of identity offers 2 threads useful for our purposes in this article. First of all, it denaturalizes all norms and exposes the power relations embedded in identity constructions. The repetition of discourse is inherently embedded within complex relations of power that privilege subjects and populations who conform most closely to an unmarked norm. Secondly, the exposure of these power relations has a flip side in that it also allows for new ways of conceptualizing agency by creating spaces for counternarratives; that is, if identities are inherently in flux then exposing the normalization process of specific discursive regimes can open up the possibility for new subjectivities to emerge. One major example of agency that Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) comes back to often in her explorations of the performativity of gender is the idea of drag. She points out how drag performances have the potential to create a politics of parody that bring to the surface the performativity of all gender relations, thereby, denaturalizing them and exposing their constructed nature.

This idea of performativity has also been applied to the study of language and language use. Pennycook (2004) explicitly introduces Butler’s theory of performativity and argues that language is performative in the same way that gender is performative. Pennycook (2004) argues that we create “a language” through repetition and through the citation of language discourses and, in so doing, naturalize the language as if it existed prior to our repetition. Therefore, as with identity, language is also inherently fluid, dynamic, and complex, but our performance of it leads to its appearance as something static and unchanging. This conceptualization of language has taken on particular importance since the rise of nation-states and the ideal of 1 nation–1 language, wherein one of the expectations for full citizenship has become proficiency in a standardized language (Gal, 2006). This, in turn, leads to the normalizing of an idealized constructed monolingualism that serves to marginalize language minoritized populations, which we define here as speakers of nondominant languages as well as speakers of “nonstandard” varieties of English.

This unmasking of language norms as socially constructed has allowed for the reconceptualization of the language practices of language minoritized populations as dynamic, fluid, and innovative as opposed to deficient (García, 2009). Yet, this reconceptualization has not yet been

applied in the literature about LTELLs and is directly countered by the high-stakes testing discourse described above. In the narrative surrounding the construction of the LTELL category, the brunt of the academic underachievement is attributed to the students' failure to master academic literacy, due in large part to the subtractive schooling they have received (Menken & Kleyn, 2010) as well as a narrow view of the language of schooling. In this framing of the issue, their in-between status is seen as impeding them from knowing either of their languages well. This has brought forth terms such as *semilingual*, *clinically disfluent*, *non-nons*, and *languageless*, which have been critiqued by scholars in the field (i.e., Rosa, 2010; Veladez, MacSwan, & Martínez, 2002). The following is an example from this orientation:

Many of these students may become “dual nonnative speakers” because they are not fully proficient in either their L1 or their L2—English. Finally, while they may see themselves as native-English speakers because of their social and verbal skills, they are often less skilled in the academic skills necessary for college-level courses. (Singhal as cited in Menken, 2013)

In this quotation it appears that low academic language and literacy skills can strip students of native speaker status, even those who are U.S.-born (Menken, in press).

In his critique of the term *semilingual*, MacSwan (2000) argues that it not only sees students through a deficit lens but also privileges certain ways of using language as superior—namely, academic English. This construction does not explore the important question of what defines a proficient speaker of English, nor does it deconstruct the assumption of the mastery of academic discourse as a prerequisite for being considered a proficient user of English for certain populations, nor does it explore who or what defines what academic discourse is and who has mastered it.

For example, in the United States a monolingual English speaker who never mastered academic discourse would not be considered an ELL, and yet somebody who is bilingual must master academic discourse to be considered fully proficient in the language. Similarly, in the current framing of the LTELL label, students are also seen as deficient in their home language because of a failure to master its academic discourse, even though their proficiency or ownership of their language would likely not be contested in their home country. Furthermore, the students' languages are viewed in isolation, as independent entities. Yet if we look at their complete linguistic repertoire across languages and varieties, it is highly likely that they would possess an even larger language base than many of their monolingual peers. But as it stands, the current categorization of these students as LTELLs positions them as “languageless,” despite the fact that they would be considered proficient in either of their languages were they simply monolinguals (Rosa, 2010).

This position of deficiency stems from the “discourses of partiality” surrounding the construction of this category. Benesch (2008) identifies interconnected discourses of partiality that are manifested within the academic literature on generation 1.5, which she defines as “students born outside the United States who emigrated as children or adolescents, thus receiving the majority of their secondary, and in some cases primary, education in the United States” (p. 294). While U.S.-born LTELLs may not fit this definition, these same discourses of partiality are also prevalent in the LTELL research. One is the discourse of linguistic partiality, which constructs these students as lifelong learners of English because their in-between status leads to only a partial development of both their home language and English. Another discourse is one of academic partiality, which positions them as unprepared for academic work because of their limited

language skills. The high-stakes testing context in the United States today legitimizes and disseminates these discourses through testing data that is generally perceived to be scientific and neutral (Koyama & Menken, 2013). The result of the intertwining of these discourses is the creation of a population that is deficient because of their failure to be monocultural and monolingual. The logical extension of this construction is that their experiences are not valuable and they bring nothing to school that should be respected. We must acknowledge that our own earlier research about students labeled LTELLs focused our descriptions of the students on their academic needs and the prior schooling experiences that resulted in their later categorization as LTELLs, without critiquing the surrounding discourse of partiality, a discourse that we thus feel culpable in having perpetuated (e.g., Menken & Kleyn, 2009, 2010).

In this article, we hope to push the discourse of partiality even further and argue that it, in fact, can be understood as a racial project that serves to perpetuate White supremacy through the marginalization of the language practices of communities of color through a form of *epistemic racism* that situates the epistemology of privileged monolingual subjectivities as the unmarked societal norm. This, in turn, produces institutions such as school that by design privilege the unmarked monolingual White norm and marginalize the language practices of students of color. This then impacts the “micro level of everyday social encounters between people with differential access to symbolic and material resources” (Norton, 2000, p. 7). In the case of schools, teachers and students are continuously negotiating this epistemic racism, at some points reinforcing it and at other points countering it. We as researchers see ourselves in a similar situation of both reinforcing and resisting this epistemic racism. We reinforce it through our continued use of a term that is inevitably embedded within an idealized constructed monolingualism, yet we also hope to resist it by providing a counternarrative that paints a different view of this student population.

While the LTELL literature, inclusive of our own, tends to view this population of students through a deficit lens, a counternarrative describing other similarly situated transnational students is emerging in the literature. This line of research offers an opportunity to reexamine our understandings of LTELLs and to theorize student agency and possibility in new and innovative ways. Sanchez (2007) describes the complexity of 3 such students whom she terms transnational students. She argues that the 3 Latinas she researched have learned to “respond fluidly” to the different cultural communities they encounter in their lives. Bigelow (2011) arrives at a similar conclusion in her study of the literacy practices of Somali adolescent boys who have immigrated to the United States. She argues that these adolescents were able to utilize the many discursive realms they navigated to create a cultural third space that “help[s] them cope and thrive in the dynamic sociocultural and globalized contexts within and beyond schools” (p. 41). Rather than being constructed as deficient, these transnational populations are challenging the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism and opening up the possibility of a more fluid and hybrid future in which we are no longer confined to national borders and an idealized monolingual norm.

Unfortunately, few of the insights offered by this reframing of transnational populations have been applied to students categorized as LTELL, who continue to be seen as language deficient and in need of remediation. Below we attempt to fill this gap in the literature through an exploration of the voices of students classified as LTELLs in an attempt at seeing how they identify in their own words and how they negotiate the discourses of partiality and the larger epistemic racism that position them as linguistically deficient.

## METHODOLOGY

This study comes out of a comprehensive research project intended to offer a portrait of instructional practices and views of a biliteracy program implemented in New York City high schools to meet the academic needs of the LTELL population. The larger study used a mixed-methods approach, and the data presented in this article is drawn from the qualitative data set. The crux of the data presented in this article comes directly from the students themselves, via interviews and written artifacts. The student interviews comprised a series of questions about their background, educational experiences, views of schooling, (bi)literacy practices, and identity. The interviews followed a semistructured protocol to allow for comparison across students but also to leave spaces for flexibility of responses and follow-up questions. The artifacts were essays students were required to complete in their English or Spanish classes. Finally, classroom observations served as a secondary source of data to contextualize how students approached their classes. An observation protocol was used in order to describe the setting, students, and lesson focus. A potential limitation is that our original study was designed to address the students' need to develop academic literacy skills and thus was within the discourse of partiality and larger epistemic racism that we are now critiquing. In spite of this, we feel we gathered data that allows us to probe this issue further now, while seeing this as an area for additional research.

The original data analysis took place through an identification of that data that connected to students' social and academic identities. It was then coded for reoccurring themes across the 3 data sources. The themes with the highest prevalence are explored here. Taken together, these methods allow us to paint a picture of how students labeled as LTELLs view themselves within the context of schools (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996). We found that the more we examined our data the more uncomfortable we became with the entire framing of our study, which developed from a perspective that "situates the researcher as a kind of god who consciously knows what she/he is doing" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 64). We gradually realized that the very foundation of our project was rooted in the deficit perspective that we thought we were trying to critique and that we would have to reanalyze the data in ways that sought to avoid reducing the data to "determinancies of our meaning-making" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 73) by situating the data within the epistemic racism that we realized we were complicit in reproducing.

### Setting and Participants

The study took place within New York City, where a total of 13% of all the students who fall within the ELL category are LTELLs (New York City Department of Education, 2011). The students in the study were designated by the NYC school system as LTELLs because they continued to receive ELL services for over 6 years. The student participants spoke Spanish as a home language, came from families of Latin American and Caribbean descent, and were U.S. born, immigrants and transnational students, with a majority spending all or most of their academic careers in the United States.

Two secondary schools within close geographic proximity and with like student demographics volunteered to take part in the study. The students in School 1, a mid-sized school, were all in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, while those in School 2 came from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, as this was a small school.

Although the cohorts at each school changed throughout the course of the year due to attrition and administrative factors, a total of 28 students were included in our final sample: 13 at School 1 and 15 at School 2.

## FINDINGS

Within this section we examine the disjuncture between the epistemic racism and monolingual language ideologies that produce the LTELL category and students' perceived constructions of their multilingual and multicultural identities. Specifically, we consider the centrality of ethnicity as a determinant in how the students see themselves as well as the ways that the transnationalism of their ethnic identifications are *othered* within the monolingual ideals of school as manifested in the LTELL label. We then show the impact of this otherizing process on the development of their academic identities. Specifically, we examine the ways that static and idealized notions of language embedded within official school curricula pose barriers to students labeled LTELL in developing strong academic identities. Finally, we look to students for their perceptions of the LTELL label as a descriptor imposed upon them in the hopes of providing insights into ways of restructuring schools to build on, rather than pathologize, these students' fluid language practices. Each subsection of findings is grounded in the students' voices and words.

### "What Are You?" Ethnicity as Identity

As an initial attempt at unpacking the LTELL label we asked students to tell us how they would answer the question many minoritized people in the United States are confronted with on a regular basis, "What are you?" We did not specify whether we were looking for an answer that included race, ethnicity, nationality, or any other commonly known category. Nevertheless, all the students answered in terms of their ethnicity as it connected to their place of birth or that of their parents; that is, students all demonstrated strong affiliation with their country of origin and their ethnic identity. Yet at the same time their answers demonstrated the postnational identities of these students. Their responses also demonstrated the ways that these postnational identities were otherized by the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism, an otherizing process that (as will be demonstrated below) is only exacerbated by the LTELL label.

For 7 of the 18 students we spoke with, they saw themselves via their ethnicity, specifically as Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, or Honduran. For some it was because that was their country of birth, whereas for others who were born and primarily raised in the United States, there was a strong identification with their family's country of origin. The second generation U.S.-born students still identified solely by their parent's place of birth for a variety of reasons. For some students it was hard to present a rationale for their answer:

Lorenzo: I am Mexican.

Researcher: *Can you explain why that's your response. Like you were born here in the U.S. but you always say you're Mexican?*

[L]: I don't know, like, I've been saying that all my life.

(Lorenzo, LTELL student, School 1, interview transcript)

Some felt they needed to explain either where they or their family came from because they “look different,” meaning they do not fit into what is perceived as being “American” in the U.S. context. In other words, because for many the term has come to be associated with being White to the degree that being born in the country, speaking English, and growing up in the United States are often not seen as enough. As a result, the students are often externally, and even internally, perceived as having closer ties with other nations and cultures.

Another 7 students answered the question via hyphenated identities. Specifically, they saw themselves as Dominican-American, Mexican-American, or American-Salvadorian. All these students were born in the United States, but express a connection with their parent’s country of origin. William explains, “Well, I would say that I was born here and part of me is Mexican, ’cuz from my family, they were born there and I was born here . . . Mexican-American.” For other students the hyphenation serves as a way to answer people’s questions:

Because some people tell you, “um where were you born?” And then they tell you, “are you just from the United States?” So I just tell them that my parents are from DR [Dominican Republic] so they’ll tell me that I should know Spanish then. (Remo, LTELL student, School 1, interview transcript)

For some, a hyphenated identity may be a way to express their transnational realities, whereas for others it may be about making sense of being in a position where being American is not seen as inclusive of their cultures, languages, and (im)migration histories (Nieto, 2002). These types of inquiries are categorized as microaggressions, defined by Sue (2010) as “commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights or insults to people of color” (p. 29). In this case, the students are placed in a position of having to “explain themselves” because being “just American” is perceived as insufficient and does not correlate with their skin color and language(s) or the “in-between” status of their fluid cultural and linguistic practices. This hegemonic view places students labeled LTELL as “others,” even in schools where the majority of the student population comes from minoritized groups. Although students who do not fit within the “mainstream” are often marginalized, the LTELL group is in a slightly different position as compared to newly arrived emergent bilinguals and English monolinguals, who are also viewed as having mastered at least language. Thus, students with the LTELL label do not fit within either isolated linguistic paradigm and are subsequently viewed as problematic and partial.

Remo’s experience with the expectation of speaking Spanish is tied to the epistemic racism that brings forth an idealized view of an individual speaking the “nation’s language” in its pre-determined standardized form. This imposition serves to exclude students like Yulia who claim to speak “ghetto” Spanish (see full quote in next section), which she positions as inferior based on the strong messages about linguistic hierarchies that dominate national discourses. This limited acceptance of language varieties, and as an extension bilingualism, works to marginalize individuals like Yulia and Remo who are at different places in their bilingualism and may not speak the standardized form of one or both of their languages. The larger epistemic racism works in tandem with the day-to-day microaggressions emergent bilinguals experience to create systemic hierarchies via macroaggressions.

There were a small number of students who had yet another way to identify themselves. Two students identified as Hispanic or Latino. Jennifer says, “*Yo soy latina* [I am Latina]. Like Hispanic. ’Cause I’m not going to try to say something that I’m not. It’s part of who I am. And I feel like that’s good that I know both languages.” Jennifer and the other student who answered

this way are both U.S.-born and it may be for this reason that they identify with the larger pan-Latino group rather than a specific subgroup. However, the majority of the U.S.-born students did not choose to self-identify using the Latino label.

Only 1 student answered the questions with American. However, she felt the need to qualify it:

Because I was born here, even though I'm Spanish—half Dominican, half Puerto Rican—I was born here. I could say, “Yeah I'm Puerto Rican and Dominican” but I actually say “I'm American because I was born here.” (Yulia, LTELL student, School 2, interview transcript)

When students were asked whether they consider themselves to be American, most who were born here finally and sometimes hesitantly said yes. For Josefina, there was a long pause until she finally said, “I don't know. Like I'm trying to be something I'm not.” For Tamara, she further analyzes her dis/connection with being American, “Well, the only thing that like, I was born here, but no [I am not American], not really. Besides me being born here and being able to talk English, no.”

Whether the students identified themselves through their ethnicity or in a hyphenated manner, there was an overall sense of pride in their ethnicity. They expressed pride in knowing about and being a part of another country, its culture and the language. However, the sense of pride did not translate into the students' acceptance of their Spanish classes, a disconnection that could stem from the (de)valuation of different varieties of Spanish as well as how these classes may challenge the students' identities as Spanish speakers (see next section for description and additional analysis). Furthermore, the students showed a clear disconnection with the American label as they saw it as something that was out of their reach. This is facilitated through epistemic racism that produces daily microaggressions and larger systemic macroaggressions that work at institutional levels to discount students' sense of themselves as crossing nations, ethnicities, and languages and perpetuates them as “others.” Both language and ethnicity factor into students' academic experiences and identities in schools.

### LTELLs and the Continua of Biliteracy

The epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism conceptualizes bilingualism as the equivalent of idealized *double monolingualism*. However, the reality of bilingualism is far more dynamic and complex (García, 2009). The students in this study provide evidence of just how dynamic bilingualism can be as they traverse the continua of biliteracy (Hornberger, 2003) associated with the many cultural contexts they confront on a daily basis. Despite the fact that they are officially labeled ELLs these students utilize a vast and flexible linguistic repertoire that allows them to negotiate many different cultural spaces and create fluid identities. Unfortunately, this was an untapped resource within the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism that these students confronted on a daily basis in school, a phenomenon that is only exacerbated by the LTELL label.

Most of the students interviewed self-report being orally bilingual but more comfortable reading and writing in English. In other words, their social identities are bilingual while their academic identities are more oriented toward English. This division is characterized by Yulia:

Yulia: [I]n my house I speak English too even though my mom knows Spanish and English, but because all of my friends speak Spanish and I have friends that speak English too. But I only speak more English, but I speak Spanish to my cousins and stuff, aunts and stuff.

Researcher: *Do you feel more comfortable reading and writing in English or Spanish, or both equally?*

[Y]: English. 'Cuz like I am used to reading in English, like there are some words in Spanish like even though I know Spanish and I have my family speaks Spanish in my house but it's not like proper Spanish. I speak our language in Spanish . . . like ghetto 'cuz in proper Spanish they talk in big words. (Yulia, LTELL student, School 2, interview transcript)

While Yulia reports feeling comfortable using both languages orally, depending on the situation, she feels much less comfortable reading and writing in Spanish. She attributes this to her “ghetto Spanish,” which she views as disconnected from the “proper Spanish” of schooling. In short, Yulia does not see a connection between her fluid language practices outside of school and the rigidly defined academic Spanish expected in school, with its roots in epistemic racism and idealized monolingualism. On the contrary, she reproduces the same epistemic racism by positioning her ability to negotiate different cultural spaces in her oral use of Spanish as inferior to the “proper” Spanish more often found and valued in schools; that is, Yulia has internalized discourses surrounding her language practices that position them as inferior to the idealized norm.

While most of the students reported reading and writing *academically* in English, indicating an academic identity defined by English, their literacy practices outside of school were much more fluid. For example, the students reported using both languages in nonacademic reading and writing, through such media as e-mail, social networking websites, and text messages. Students reported mixing the 2 when interacting with other bilinguals, and using English or Spanish when interacting with people who have a preference for one or the other. Celia provides an example of this fluidity of language use:

Researcher: *Do you text, email, visit internet sites, or IM in English or Spanish?*

Celia: Both.

[R]: *How much of each?*

[C]: English more. English more on everything . . .

[R]: *Are there times when you mix English and Spanish?*

[C]: On Myspace and AIM . . .

[R]: *Why is that?*

[C]: Because sometimes it just comes out.

[R]: *That's just how it happens?*

[C]: Yeah. (Celia, LTELL student, School 2, interview transcript)

Adding to this, most LTELL students interviewed also reported watching television in both English and Spanish. Yesenia describes how this works for her: “In English I just watch the news or sometimes when I am bored I look at the cartoons, and in Spanish my mom likes to see the *novelas* so I like to see them too” (Yesenia, LTELL student, School 1, interview transcript).

For these students and their peers there is no clear differentiation between their English and Spanish use in their performance of their social identities. We see the online mixing of the two

happens without conscious effort. In addition, in Yesenia's statement she uses the term "*novela*" as opposed to the English word "soap opera" as the one she associates with that genre of television program. These fluid language practices shape the social identities of students labeled as LTELLs, who similarly to other bilingual students, encounter the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism and the discourse of partiality that positions their language practices as inferior to an unmarked norm.

### The Mismatch Between Linguistically Fluid Social Identity and Static Academic Identity

Because of the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism, the fluid bilingual use of language reported by these students does not translate into academic success. While on one hand Spanish was typically only a peripheral part of the overall schooling experiences of these primarily U.S.-educated students, when Spanish was used in instruction it was a static construction of academic Spanish stemming from an epistemic racism that does not resonate with the students' fluid language practices. After years of schooling that emphasized English, students have come to see little value in the role of their Spanish language usage within the academic world of school. Nuria provides the most extreme example of the consequences of this English-only schooling in her response to whether knowing Spanish was important:

I don't really know if it's important because like nobody has told me. Like I live in the United States and for me it's just that the important language over here is English. So I don't really know if it's important. I don't know if Spanish is important. (Nuria, LTELL student, School 1, interview transcript)

Nuria was ambivalent to the importance of Spanish because of the fact that society (including her school) had failed to validate her fluid linguistic repertoire. Policies and programs push for an English-only approach and if there is an inclusion of Spanish all too often it disregards or devalues students' varieties of the language over that which is deemed "academic."

While Nuria provides an extreme example in that the other 17 of the 18 students interviewed explicitly stated the importance of knowing how to read, write, and speak in Spanish, ambivalence toward Spanish for academic purposes was expressed by most of the students. For example, none of the students provided an academic justification for bilingualism but rather saw the advantage of being bilingual in terms of its communicative utility. Seven of the students mentioned knowing Spanish as an asset in finding jobs because they would be able to communicate with more clients. In addition, 5 of the students saw Spanish as important in communicating with family members who did not speak English. The remaining students gave vague answers related to the idea of Spanish as a communicative tool.

Laura provides an example of this notion when asked if she thought knowing how to read and write in Spanish was important:

Well at some point, yeah because you gonna need it in the future 'cuz it's a good, I don't know, it's a good language. You have to speak it 'cuz you know in the future you're gonna need it also. Like, you know, when somebody have problem speaking English, you gonna help them. And same thing Spanish, if someone has problems Spanish you could help them. (Laura, LTELL student, School 1, interview transcript)

For Laura, as for many of her peers, there is this sense that Spanish is something that they should know so that they can communicate with people and possibly help them. Yet, while Laura was asked the importance of being able to read and write in Spanish, her example discusses knowing how to speak the language. This implies that while she believes spoken Spanish will be useful for her future, the same may not be true of knowing to read and write it. This emphasis on oral Spanish, even when asked directly about reading and writing in Spanish, was a common theme arising in interviews with student participants in our study. We connect the focus on oral Spanish to the predominant way students labeled LTELL have had access to their home language, as for many it was denied in their formal U.S. schooling (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). The focus on oral Spanish may also be a way for students positioned as LTELL to legitimize their home language practices and resist the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism that views these language practices from a deficit perspective. In short, the Spanish they value is the Spanish that they use on a daily basis, not the idealized Spanish the school wants them to use.

Students' acknowledgement of the value of their home language practices does not necessarily transfer to appreciation of an academic Spanish course focused on reading and writing. While 13 students expressed positive feelings toward taking the course in interviews, the positive feelings are not indicative of student engagement in the course, as demonstrated in the following field notes taken during observations of Spanish class:

There are 11 students and the majority of them are working. There are about 2 boys that are constantly talking and make the classroom loud.

Jay: (who has talked the whole time) I haven't talked to my mom in two days and so I haven't spoken any Spanish.

Student: I need paper. I need a sharpener.

Two more students walk in to class. One girl wants some cream and the boys are laughing.

The teacher is waiting.

(Mr. R., Spanish Native Language Arts class, School 2, observation notes)

This disengagement, which was a daily phenomenon in the classroom, could be understood as passive resistance to the imposition of a Spanish class that felt foreign to the students. In other words, a class that had been developed with the goal of empowering students labeled LTELL was not a class that they experienced as empowering, but was rather one that they wanted to avoid because it devalued their home language practices.

This disempowerment was manifested by a sense of learned helplessness where the students accepted their positioning as illegitimate users of the idealized Spanish the class required and relied heavily on the teacher to "correct" their Spanish. For example, during an observation in Mr. R.'s class students were working on writing a Spanish composition or a newspaper article based on their prior reading of a short story. After providing instructions, students were given time to work independently, yet many "go up to him [Mr. R.] and ask for help. If he doesn't help them they sit down and wait for him to come over and help them" (Mr. R., Spanish Native Language Arts class, School 2, observation notes).

These 2 examples of what was continuously observed in the Spanish classes at both schools were confirmed by teachers in interviews who noted that this was a regular occurrence (Menken, Funk, & Kleyn, 2011). These excerpts illustrate how students labeled as LTELLs resisted the idealized Spanish embedded in epistemic racism. Their rejection of the idealized Spanish of school happened in conjunction with their positioning as students who needed to be taught Spanish,

rather than as students who already know Spanish. As mentioned above, this was an unintended consequence of a Spanish class that was originally intended to empower these students and improve their academic achievement. This demonstrates how deeply the epistemic racism that marginalizes these students' language practices permeates schooling, and indicates the need for a radical reconceptualization of language education programs for them.

While there was a great deal of resistance to the idealized Spanish of school and the development of academic bilingualism amongst the students we interviewed, connecting the Spanish use in school with Spanish use in the community offers one possibility in bridging this gap. Tamara provides an example of how such a connection might look, when asked about her attitude toward taking a Spanish class:

I felt like it was good. I thought that I was actually learning more about my original language that I have at home, and I think it was very helpful because I had to do some speech in church, so actually working in this class actually helped me with that speech. It was good. (Tamara, LTELL student, School 2, interview transcript)

For Tamara, having a Spanish class had a direct relationship to involvement in her community. This connection to her life outside of school allowed her to develop more appreciation for the course as the language performances of her social identity and academic identity merged. This was a moment at which Tamara's fluid home language practices connected to her school language practices. Unfortunately, these connections were rare and highlight a missed opportunity for meeting the needs of students designated LTELLs.

For students labeled LTELL, inclusion of their full linguistic repertoire in school is not just about including a class in their home language, especially if that class is taught through a variety of the language that differs from the one the students use. The students can only experience authentic inclusion and validation of their linguistic repertoire when they are viewed holistically and seen as bilinguals who bring a range of linguistic resources with them to school.

### Conflicting Academic Identities

By the time students get to high school, they have been in school for over 9 years and have developed a sense of themselves as students. These academic identities stem from their experiences in school with adults and peers, as well as the surrounding discourses that dictate how students should act, speak, and achieve. We posit that a discourse of partiality embedded within a larger epistemic racism prevalent within schools and society marginalizes students designated LTELLs and impedes upon their development of an academic identity. Therefore, they embrace the more social facets of schooling, which are in line with the discourses they utilize outside of academic settings, where they are viewed through the holistic lens of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In short, one way of resisting the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism is to refuse to participate in it. This refusal to participate is manifested through academic disengagement in favor of social engagement.

The data for this section comes from essays students wrote at the conclusion of the academic year. They were asked to respond to the following prompt: Think about your 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. How has your high school experience been similar and different to middle school? Think about your favorite or most positive high school memory as well as an area that was

challenging/difficult/hard for you. In this section we use representative excerpts from the students' essays and present the selected quotes exactly as they were written. We do this to embrace their written voices and views and take a stance against the positioning of the students' writing as partial.

*Positive associations with socializing in schools.* For many teenagers, social aspects of schooling hold a high level of importance in their lives. Yet for students labeled LTELLs, their experiences with peers account for the vast majority of the joys, successes, and highlights of their academic lives. Specifically, instances of making new friends, dating, joining sports teams, and school trips dominate students' answers about their most positive high school experiences.

These excerpts show the areas students reflect upon fondly when considering their first or second year in high school: "My high school positive memory was when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I came to this school when I saw my friend from middle school that I have not seen him since mad long like a year or 2" (Ben, LTELL student, School 2, written artifact), and "I joined softball and drama club this year . . . I never knew how much I was going to enjoy softball" (Tamara, LTELL student, School 2, written artifact). While many youth feel that their social ties are central aspects of their schooling, the students in our study identified socializing and the social aspects of extra-curricular activities as their primary and sometimes only positive experience in school. We believe this could be because their social identities directly contradict the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism of the educational system that privileges only certain ways of being and speaking, and that typically fails to connect with students' social-selves. Unlike the overwhelmingly positive focus on social aspects of schooling, descriptions of the challenging aspects of school in the writing samples centered around academics.

*Disengagement and negativity: Views of schooling and coursework.* When students were asked to write about the most challenging aspects of their year, or those they perceived to be negative, overwhelmingly they discussed the difficulties they experienced with academic work, such that a sense of deflation and disengagement prevailed in their essays. Alexandra summed up the views of many students when she wrote, "High school is very hard, boring and challenging." One student specifically addressed a teacher-centered instructional approach that may have contributed to her disengagement from school: "My challenges this year was staying in school for 9 periods. For me that's a challenging thing to do because sometimes you get tired and bored of teachers talking and talking. You feel like going home and sleeping all day" (Laura, LTELL student, School 1, written artifact).

This overall sense of disengagement and disconnection from school and academics, which is particularly prevalent amongst LTELL designated students, leads some students to develop negative feelings and defiant behaviors towards school.

Below Armando reflects on his disengagement from the curricula as a way to refuse the epistemic racism that position him as inferior:

A challenging and difficult memory that I have is passing my classes. This was hard for me because I would always get distracted and go cutting. If not I would go to class and if I didn't understand I would just behave bad. Then when I would be ready to do my work I wouldn't understand none of the work. (Armando, LTELL student, School 1, written artifact)

This excerpt highlights how a reactionary stance to schooling is fueled by the schools' positioning of LTELL students, which stands in the way of the students' development of an academic identity. Their resistance feeds into the larger view of them as deficient, which, cyclically, perpetuates and is perpetuated through the discourse of partiality. Ironically, students' resistance to the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism serves in many ways to reinforce it.

*Hard work and perseverance.* Although the students were often critical of their schooling experiences, they had a unified view that what they needed to do to be better students was work hard and persevere. This view places the onus of responsibility on the students, overlooking larger systemic structures and the epistemic racism that is culpable for their deficit positioning. This indicates that while the students may be resisting their deficit positioning in many ways, they are also reinforcing and perpetuating it. Below Lorenzo lays out his plans to experience a different outcome in the future:

I'm almost failing half of my classes. I did almost screwed my grades. But I know what I got to do, I have to do all of my classwork, pay all my attention to the teacher, stay focus in class. I think I might stay in the same grade. But maybe is a lesson for me, maybe is to work harder. (LTELL student, School 1, writing artifact)

Lorenzo has internalized his lack of effort as the key factor to blame for his academic failures. He fully buys into the idea that hard work will lead to better outcomes as he simultaneously absolves the school of any role or responsibility in providing him with an education that builds off his fluid language practices. Furthermore, there is an assumption that hard work will suffice, yet the inability of schools to build on Lorenzo's linguistic repertoire suggests that far more is needed than simply an increased effort on the student's part.

Tamara exhibits a similar sense of perseverance here: "As I get older I realize how school is important and I know how to act more. I look for a better futur for me and my futur family so that means go to school and do my best . . . I won't give up" (LTELL student, School 2, writing artifact). The students are clearly well-versed when it comes to putting forth the "right" language, echoing what they are told by society and schools that academic success entails. However, our observations from the larger multiphase study show that many students designated as LTELLs have already developed habits that mirror the discourse of partiality and the larger epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism through which they are typically viewed.

Taken a step further, the treatment of students labeled LTELL pushes them to see themselves as culpable for their academic outcomes, while completely discounting the role of schools and society. Yet it is the larger institutions and ideologies that have deemed these students problematic because of their inability to fit within the rigid language constructions that schools uncritically impart as part of the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism. As the students have learned the language necessary to describe what they should do in schools, schools have not followed suit in learning more about these students and building on their cultural and linguistic practices as a way to bridge social and academic realms. They have yet to offer students labeled LTELLs the opportunity to create "third spaces" (Bhabha, 1994) where all their languages, and their varieties, are valued and embedded into academic ways of being and learning.

### Students Take On the LTELL Label

While all of the data analysis above demonstrates the impact of the LTELL label on students in our study, in this section we seek to examine the perceptions of students themselves about the merit (or lack thereof) of the label. Unsurprisingly there was unanimous rejection of this label by the students who not only found it offensive but as simply inaccurate in describing their fluid language use and transnational identities. We began this article with a quote from Armando, an emergent bilingual student who took great offense to the LTELL label upon learning its meaning and how it applied to him. Our response to his “you just made me feel stupid” comment was “maybe it’s the label that’s stupid.” We found other students expressed similar sentiments during a focus group we held at School 2. First, we broached the ELL label with the students:

*Interviewer:* You are called English Language Learners, or ELLS, according to this definition by the New York State Department of Education . . . Do you feel like you are English Language Learners? Why or why not?

-long pause-

Marcela: You said English Language . . .

*Interviewer:* Learners

Marcela: I don’t feel that way.

*Interviewer:* So why?

Marcela: Because we live in the USA and because we have to know [English].

Guillermo: I don’t feel that way. Sorry.

Kevin: I agree.

Claudia: Same here.

Candido: Ya, I agree with all of them. We already know English and all that stuff.

Claudia: For most of us, it’s like our first language, I mean our main language.

Yamile: ’Cuz they think we don’t know much English, but we do. Just ’cuz we know another language.

For these students, living in the United States and already speaking English (often as their primary language) put them on the offensive towards being categorized as ELLs. But not only do students feel this category is unjust because English is a language they already know, they also feel that they are being unfairly judged simply for knowing another language, or being bilingual. This reaction was prior to them being asked how they felt about being labeled LTELLs, a term none of the students had ever heard before or associated with themselves. Our next step was to ask them for alternatives:

*Interviewer:* Is there a better label to describe who you are. What label would you describe yourself as?

Guillermo: Guillermo

-Students all laugh-

Ultimately, the students just want to be viewed as individuals. And, as they state in prior sections, they also identify across ethnic and community lines. Therefore, it is important for educators to see students labeled as LTELLs in the ways they see themselves. Specifically, as youth who are speakers of English and Spanish (or a different language) and as bilinguals who identify with

different countries and move across languages, cultures, and identities in ways that are much more fluid than our rigid labels and systems allow.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of these students in school points to a level of complexity that must be recognized and addressed through more-responsive schooling. They are not students lacking language, but (emergent) bilinguals with a repertoire that allows them to maneuver multiple languages and contexts in ways that are complex and dynamic. They are also students with strong ties to their family's country of origin, yet who have transnational sensibilities that can be simultaneously developed. They have to be seen through the strengths they bring to school, and those must be overtly valued and embedded into classroom instruction. Furthermore, there needs to be a direct connection between students' language practices and fluid ethnolinguistic identities and the classes that are meant to further develop their languages. For example, the inclusion of popular literature that reflects the fluid bilingual practices of students is one way to allow students to see their backgrounds as a part of the school curriculum and allow them to be embraced, rather than chastised, for not fitting within a specific mold. Likewise, García (2009) advocates a heteroglossic approach to education that encourages *translanguaging* practices in classrooms, which create spaces for the students' fluid movements between English and Spanish to be used in instruction and extended for academic purposes. Treating students' fluid language practices as a legitimate tool for meaning-making can allow for the development of linguistic third spaces that transcend the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism and support the development of new identities beyond national borders (Flores & García, 2013).

Yet, this can only be possible if we bring down the pervading epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism that only allows for static conceptions of language (Standard Academic English and Standard Academic Spanish). A necessary component of this must be a reconceptualization of assessment in ways that transcend monolingual norms. So long as we have assessments that are based in monolingualism, we will have bilingual students who are marginalized (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). As Shohamy (2011) argues, "We should shift to content-based tests in which students may react in any means they find appropriate, but language should not be the main focus" (p. 428). In short, the most effective way to challenge the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism is through the development of dynamic bilingual assessments that challenge monolingual views of bilingualism by allowing students to use their entire linguistic repertoires to demonstrate their knowledge.

Moving forward, we need to consider Weedon's (1987) claim that, "if language is the site where meaningful experience is constituted, then language also determines how we perceive possibilities of change" (p. 86). We view the LTELL label as one that has done more harm than good. It has pathologized students through normalizing a racist system that privileges speakers of one variety of a language and discounts students' full linguistic repertoire and its place in schools. The label has become "the new semilingual," further disadvantaging students who fall within it, while failing to challenge the epistemic racism of idealized monolingualism that has made the label possible.

We conclude with a call for researchers and educators to continue to look more deeply at the complexities and fluidity that are a part of the everyday lives of students officially designated as

LTELLs. We not only need to be better equipped to create programs and pedagogies that meet their needs, but to build upon more nuanced understandings of them that move beyond the narrow and damaging lens of partiality.

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