

## Spotlight on “Long-Term English Language Learners”: Characteristics and Prior Schooling Experiences of an Invisible Population

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This article presents qualitative research findings about the characteristics and prior schooling experiences of “long-term English language learners” (LTELLs), who have attended U.S. schools for 7 years or more, and about whom there is little empirical research, despite their significant numbers. Findings indicate that these students are orally bilingual for social purposes, yet have limited academic literacy skills in English and their native languages as a result of subtractive prior schooling experiences. Two main groups of LTELLs are identified: (a) students with inconsistent U.S. schooling, who have shifted between bilingual education, English as a second language, and mainstream classrooms with no language support programming, and (b) transnational students, who have moved back and forth between the United States and their family’s country of origin. It is argued that programming for LTELLs in high school must be distinctive, and recommendations for policy and practice are outlined.

Keywords: emergent bilinguals, English language learners, Generation 1.5, long-term English language learners, secondary school

“Emergent bilingual”<sup>1</sup> students are currently the fastest growing student population in the United States, and the greatest growth has occurred at the secondary level (E. E. García & Cuellar, 2006; Kindler, 2002). Over the last 2 decades, the field has generated seminal studies that have documented the schooling experiences of secondary emergent bilingual students (i.e., Fu, 1995; Olsen, 1997; Valdéz, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). However, this group has been deemed “overlooked and underserved” because research about emergent bilinguals in the United States typically focuses on elementary students (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). There is an urgent need for greater attention to emergent bilinguals in high school, as these students are disproportionately represented in national rates of dropout and grade retention (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Menken, 2008; Ruiz de Velasco, 2005; Valencia & Villarreal, 2005). Particularly pressing is the need to better understand the diversity of the secondary emergent bilingual population and the reality that these students have differing educational needs; instead, this group is often misperceived as monolithic both in scholarship and in school settings.

Emergent bilingual students who take longer than average to exit their English language learner (ELL) status have, until now, largely remained invisible in research and practice nationally. These students, known as “long-term English language learners” (LTELLs)<sup>2</sup>, are defined in this study as students who have attended school in the United States for 7 years<sup>3</sup> or more, and continue to require language support services in school. Despite the reality that large numbers of such students currently attend U.S. schools, there has been practically no research conducted about them to date, nor do specialized educational programs exist to meet their needs. For instance, LTELLs in the New York City public schools now comprise approximately one-third of all secondary emergent bilinguals (New York City Department of Education, 2008). However, when we began our research about this student population, there were no programs in city schools specifically designed with these students in mind. Likewise, LTELLs comprise approximately one-third of secondary emergent bilinguals in Chicago (Chicago Public Schools administrator, personal communication, November 12, 2010), 23% in Colorado, and—most dramatically—59% in 40 school districts of California (Olsen, 2010). Yet, despite these striking national statistics, Californians Together noted that LTELLs remain “an invisible group” who are placed in school programs that “do not recognize the distinct needs of the Long-Term English Learner” (p. 1).

As detailed in this manuscript, an identifying characteristic of LTELLs is that they are orally bilingual for social purposes, yet have limited academic oral or literacy skills in English and

<sup>1</sup>“Emergent bilinguals” are typically termed “English language learners” (ELLs) in the United States. However, as O. García, Kleifgen & Falchi, (2008) explained, “English language learners are in fact *emergent bilinguals*. That is, through school and through acquiring English, these children become *bilingual*, able to continue to function in their home language as well as in English, their new language and that of school” (p. 6). In recognition of the students’ linguistic resources, we use the term emergent bilingual here. When referring to terminology in official documents, however, we use the term ELL.

<sup>2</sup>“Long-term English language learner” (LTELL) is the administrative term used by the New York City Department of Education and elsewhere. We find the term problematic, as we realize that the LTELL label may frame students as deficient. It results from English language proficiency testing, which, when coupled with deficit views of emergent bilinguals students, makes for a potentially dangerous and incomplete label. Within this article, we use this term not only because it is the widely adopted and recognized administrative term, but also because we see it as descriptive of the students’ inadequate experiences in school; we do not intend it to propagate a negative perception of the students themselves. Elsewhere, we consider additional data to unravel the LTELL label through explorations of the school and home identities of students, as expressed through their own voices and viewpoints (Kleyn, Flores, & Menken, (under review); Menken et al., 2009).

<sup>3</sup>The number of years is inclusive of the current academic year in which the student is enrolled.

their native language. As a group, LTELLs are more likely than their peers to experience educational failure. The dilemma for these students is that the typical high school English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education program is not designed to meet their specific needs (Y. Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). As we argue later, the needs of LTELLs in high school are different from those of other emergent bilinguals, and programming for them must, therefore, be distinctive.

Given the tremendous need from the field for guidance about how to best serve LTELLs, we conducted a mixed methods research study from January 2007 to November 2009 in New York City high schools to determine the characteristics of these students; the findings presented in this manuscript derive from qualitative research conducted in three New York City high schools during our first phase of research. Specifically, we gathered descriptive information about the students' language usage and educational backgrounds, about the types of services LTELLs are currently receiving, and about their educational needs in secondary school. Our primary interest was in constructing a portrait of this student population as a starting point for future program design. Based on our findings, we determined two main categories of LTELLs that are described in this article. In our conclusion, we examine how the needs of these students are different from other emergent bilinguals and outline the implications of our research for appropriate program design and policy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) and Y. Freeman et al. (2002), there are three main groups of emergent bilinguals at the secondary level:

1. Newly arrived with adequate schooling.
2. Newly arrived with limited/interrupted formal schooling (also known as "students with interrupted formal education [SIFE]).
3. LTELLs.

The first group, "newly arrived with adequate schooling," are emergent bilinguals who have been in the United States for 5 years or fewer and are typically literate in their native language because of the schooling they received in their country of origin. As a result, however, these students often receive poor grades and low scores on standardized tests administered in English at the outset, and they are usually able to acquire academic English and enter mainstream classrooms in a relatively short period of time (Callahan, 2006). The second group, new arrivals with limited or interrupted formal schooling, have limited or non-existent literacy in their native language, causing their academic achievement to be far below grade level (Y. Freeman et al., 2002; Klein & Martohardjono, 2008; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000).

LTELLs, the third type of secondary emergent bilinguals, are the focus of this study. These students stand apart from the two other groups because they are not new arrivals but, rather, have been in the United States for 7 or more years, and many are in fact U.S.-born (Y. Freeman et al., 2002; Y. Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2007; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). As a result, they are usually orally proficient in English and often sound like native speakers (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). Despite their oral proficiency in English, these students are characterized by low levels of academic literacy in both English and their home

language (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). As such, their reading and writing is below grade level in both languages, and they often experience poor overall academic performance and high course failure rates due to their inability to meet the literacy demands across content areas (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Olsen, 2010; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). These students are frequently misperceived as “failures” of ESL and bilingual programs.

There is some overlap between LTELLs and students termed “Generation 1.5” in the literature, a population of mainly U.S.-educated emergent bilinguals that has received attention, particularly in studies of higher education ESL.<sup>4</sup> As Harklau (2003) noted, Generation 1.5 students immigrated to the United States as of school age, or they were born in the United States, but speak a language other than English at home, and have different learning needs from other emergent bilinguals because they are familiar with U.S. culture and schools, yet “they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing” (p. 1). Roberge (2002) offered an expansive definition appropriate for our purposes, which includes transnational children who migrate with their families back and forth between the United States and their country of origin. Although Generation 1.5 research highlights the differences between these students and other emergent bilinguals in helpful ways, researchers in this area have primarily focused on college writing, rather than the needs of these students in high school (Harklau, 2003; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Roberge, 2002; Thonus, 2003; for exceptions, see Forrest, 2006; Yi, 2007).

Y. Freeman et al. (2002) conducted one of the only formal studies to date of LTELLs, examining a small sample of secondary students. They found that these students often received inconsistent programming, “in and out of various English as a Second Language or bilingual programs without ever having benefited from any kind of consistent program support” (p. 5). Another study of LTELLs produced by the Dallas Public Schools shows that the overall academic performance of these students does not continue to improve, and that there is a ceiling in the students’ levels of academic English attainment over time (Yang, Urrabazo, & Murray, 2001).

Most recently, Olsen (2010) produced a report for Californians Together seeking to spotlight LTELLs in California, drawing on a survey the organization conducted of 40 districts in the state. Many of the findings corroborate ours reported in this article, despite the differences in research design. For instance, they found that LTELLs struggle academically, that their prior schooling has been characterized by inconsistent and inappropriate language programming, and that “few districts have designated programs or formal approaches for [LTELLs]” (Olsen, 2010, p. 2). Their report also argued that it is possible to avoid emergent bilinguals becoming LTELLs through improved policy and language programming. Olsen (2010) problematized that there are any LTELLs at all:

*Reparable Harm* is a wake up call to California educators and policymakers to recognize the large number of English Learner students amassing in California secondary schools who despite many years in our schools and despite being close to the age at which they should be able to graduate, are still not English proficient and have incurred major academic deficits—the “Long Term English Learners.” (p. 1)

<sup>4</sup>It is important to clarify the distinction between terms; only those “Generation 1.5” students in the United States for 7 years or more and still classified as “English language learners” (ELLs) by the schools they attend would be considered “long-term ELLs.”

What is implied in this paragraph and stated directly elsewhere in the report is that the large numbers of LTELLs entering California secondary schools symbolize failure on the part of California schools to educate emergent bilinguals well.

Ensuring the development of academic literacy skills is particularly important in serving emergent bilinguals well. The reality is that emergent bilinguals in secondary schools arrive with a wide range of literacy practices and skills both in English and their native language, uneven content-area backgrounds, and vastly different family and schooling experiences (Abedi, 2004; Y. Freeman et al., 2002; Ruiz de Velasco, 2005). Literacy is, therefore, a major concern in the education of all high school emergent bilinguals, as academic literacy skills are essential for achievement, particularly within the high-stakes testing climate (Menken, 2008). In fact, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) highlighted the need for increased attention to what they termed the emergent bilingual “academic literacy crisis.” Although important for all emergent bilinguals, the need for academic literacy development in instruction is particularly necessary for LTELLs.

Elsewhere, Menken and Kleyn (2010) documented how the experiences of LTELLs in U.S. elementary and middle schools have been subtractive, and thereby contributed to their limited academic literacy skills, which, in turn, negatively impact their overall academic performance. In that article, we argued that the subtractive prior schooling these students have received has been a contributing factor to their becoming LTELLs over time, and that developmental bilingual programs in kindergarten through eighth grade would likely reduce the numbers of emergent bilinguals arriving to high schools with limited literacy skills in English and their native languages. We use the term *subtractive schooling* as defined in Valenzuela’s (1999) research, which describes how schools fail to build on the native language resources students bring with them to school, developing only English instead. As a result, schools do not provide the opportunity for emergent bilinguals to develop strong native language literacy skills, which would transfer to English with the appropriate support (Cummins, 2000).

Exacerbating this problem, the typical high school ESL or bilingual program is not designed to meet the needs of emergent bilinguals with limited native language literacy skills, such as LTELLs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). Most high school programs were designed to meet the needs of emergent bilinguals who arrive in U.S. high schools with adequate prior schooling and native language literacy skills (Y. Freeman et al., 2002; O. García, 1999). Because such programs assume literacy, they are typically not prepared to explicitly teach students the literacy skills across content areas that are necessary to navigate the secondary curriculum (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Callahan, 2006). Moreover, although SIFE students have begun to receive greater attention in the literature in recent years (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Klein & Martohardjono, 2008; Short, Boyson, & Coltrane, 2003), the same cannot be said for LTELLs, about whom there remains a dearth of existing research and specialized programming in schools.

## METHOD

We conducted a descriptive, qualitative study to provide information about the academic and social characteristics of LTELLs, which was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of LTELLs in New York City high schools (e.g., country of origin, languages spoken at home, school performance, etc.)?

RQ2: What social and educational factors discussed by participants contribute to an emergent bilingual becoming an LTELL (e.g., prior schooling experiences, ELL programming received, etc.)?

To answer these research questions, a research team from the Research Institute for the Study of Language in an Urban Society of the City University of New York gathered data over a 6-month period in three New York City high schools. This research team was comprised of Menken (principal investigator), Kleyn (co-investigator), and three graduate assistants including Chae. This research was part of a larger mixed-methods research study about this student population conducted from January, 2007 to November, 2009.<sup>5</sup>

A purposeful sample of three schools was selected for inclusion in this component of the larger project. Although all of the schools that participated serve significant numbers of LTELLs, each school is different in size, structure, and location. In these schools, as elsewhere in the city, LTELLs receive the same supports as all other emergent bilinguals, with no services specifically tailored to their needs; they are, therefore, in classes with new arrivals as well. The first school is a medium-sized vocational high school located in the Bronx, where many of the 200 emergent bilinguals are long term. In that school, the majority of LTELLs interviewed were receiving ESL instruction. The second school included in this study is a small high school in Manhattan where all of the students are emergent bilinguals. In New York City, small, specialized high schools where all of the students are classified as ELLs have a longstanding history of success (as in the International High Schools, as cited in Anness, 2003; Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007); however, LTELLs are typically unable to benefit from such schools because they are not new arrivals and, thus, do not meet admissions criteria. Although the second school states on paper that it admits only new arrivals, in fact, several of its students are actually LTELLs. At this school, students receive bilingual education in a program where biliteracy development is emphasized across content-area subjects. The third site for our research is a large, traditional high school located in Queens where a culturally and linguistically diverse emergent bilingual population receives bilingual education or ESL. In addition, native language arts courses are available in a variety of languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and Bengali. Taken together, these schools exemplify the range of services currently being provided to LTELLs in New York City high schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of each school.

TABLE 1  
School Characteristics

<i>School</i>	<i>Size and Type</i>	<i>Language Programming</i>	<i>Location</i>
School 1	Medium, vocational	English as a second language	Bronx
School 2	Small, specialized	Bilingual and biliteracy development across content areas	Manhattan
School 3	Large, traditional	English as a second language or bilingual native language arts available	Queens

<sup>5</sup>This study was funded by the New York City Department of Education's Office of English Language Learners.



To answer the research questions, we interviewed LTELL students in depth using semi-structured interviews; the interview protocol can be seen in Appendix A. School administrators identified LTELL students to interview through a purposive sample based on the number of years in U.S. schools; of those, participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to meet with a researcher during or after school. We also interviewed teachers of different content areas who work with LTELLs to better understand how the students fare academically across subjects. At each school site, we also interviewed one or two administrators to gain further information to answer our research questions (as per the protocol in Appendix B).

For this phase of research, the following data were collected and analyzed:

- In-depth interviews with 29 LTELL students.<sup>6</sup>
- Interviews with nine educators across school sites, including five administrators and four teachers.
- Document analysis of academic performance data available in school records.

Student interviews were the primary source of data for this study, and these were contextualized by school performance data. We examined students' academic records, which included transcripts, report cards, test scores, birth certificates, home language identification surveys, or bilingual counseling progress reports. We recorded interviews using digital audio-recorders and then transcribed them, and analyzed the qualitative data by hand-coding according to themes that arose repeatedly; the findings reported in this manuscript indicate the most frequent themes (as per LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The 29 LTELLs who participated in this study were in Grades 9 through 12, ranged in age from 15 to 19 years old, and had been in the United States for 7 to 18 years. The vast majority of our student participants (90%) speak Spanish, which is reflective of overall demographics for emergent bilinguals citywide<sup>7</sup>; Spanish speakers in our sample primarily come from the Dominican Republic (DR), whereas others come from Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, and Venezuela. The sample also included speakers of Twi, Chinese, and Garífuna.

## FINDINGS: CHARACTERISTICS OF LTELL STUDENTS

The educational experiences of the majority of LTELLs are characterized by inconsistency and transience across programs, schools, and countries. Based on themes that arose in our interviews with teachers and students, we have identified two main categories of LTELLs<sup>8</sup>: (a) students

<sup>6</sup>The findings presented here are supported by interviews with an additional 18 "long-term English language learner" students, which were conducted in our second phase of research for this project, although data from the second phase is not included here (for second-phase findings, see Menken et al., 2009).

<sup>7</sup>Within the New York City school system, which is comprised of 1.1 million students, approximately 14% are "emergent bilinguals" (New York City Department of Education, 2010). The majority speaks Spanish (67.4%), followed by Chinese (11.4%), with the remaining students speaking Bengali, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Urdu, and Russian (each represent 2%–3% of the overall emergent bilingual population; New York City Department of Education, 2009). Therefore, our student sample is representative of the Spanish-speaking majority, as well as the overall linguistic diversity, present within city schools.

<sup>8</sup>It is worth noting here that the second phase of this study revealed a third category of "long-term English language learner" (LTELL) students, whom we refer to as those with "consistent subtractive schooling." These students were enrolled in subtractive models of bilingual education or "English as a second language" classes in the United States

with inconsistent U.S. schooling, whereby the system has shifted them between bilingual education, ESL programs, and mainstream classrooms with no language support programming; and (b) transnational students, who have moved back and forth between the United States and their families' countries of origin.

These findings indicate that LTELLs lack stability in their schooling experiences, compounding the already difficult task of learning languages for academic use; and, we find that the students' overall educational experiences have been linguistically subtractive, as detailed later. Further complicating the situation, one-half of the students fit into both of the aforementioned categories. These categorizations of LTELLs shed light on the students' prior educational experiences, which can, in turn, be used to develop more effective educational programs for them. For example, many students we interviewed—particularly those in the transnational category—have a native language foundation that can be further developed through native language classes in secondary schools, yet we found that this resource was entirely overlooked in the schools these students attended. What follows is a more detailed description of each category, with specific examples drawn from our data.

### Inconsistent U.S. Schooling

The first category of LTELLs we identified addresses inconsistency within schools and programs in the United States, and is striking because it impacts such a large number of students in our sample. The four sub-categories are (a) students who change from bilingual to ESL programming or vice versa, when moving from one school to the next, depending on each school's language policy; (b) students who have received inconsistent programming within the same school, being moved from ESL to bilingual classes, or vice versa, each year, due to incoherent school-based language policies; (c) the absence of ESL/bilingual programming altogether; or (d) students who attend multiple schools, beyond the typical three-school sequence in the United States of elementary–middle–high school. Twenty out of the 29 LTELL students interviewed fell into the category of inconsistent U.S. schooling.

### Programming Differences From School to School

Six LTELLs in our sample experienced inconsistent programming when making a customary transition from school to school, due to differences in each school's language policies. For instance, Aggie began with English-only classes in elementary school and then shifted into bilingual programming in middle and high school. Academic literacy is a primary focus of elementary schooling, and because Aggie's elementary schooling was only in English she did not have the opportunity to develop literacy skills in Spanish. She then moved into a middle school where Spanish literacy skills were expected.

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throughout their educational careers, which failed to build a strong foundation in English or their native languages. As these data were gathered in the later phase of our research, we only identified this third category of students after sending this manuscript for review, so students with consistent subtractive schooling in the United States are not examined here. To learn more about this third category of LTELL students, please see Menken et al. (2009).



Similarly, a few students at School 2 entered into its bilingual program at the secondary level having received only ESL instruction in the past. When these students entered School 2, they experienced Spanish instruction for the first time. This creates a double language-learning situation; students and their teachers note how challenging this can be for students, as students entering a bilingual program are expected to have literacy skills in their native language that match their oral skills. Not surprisingly, such mismatches in programming lengthen the time an emergent bilingual student maintains their ELL status.

### Inconsistent School-Based Language Policies

Included within the category of inconsistencies in U.S. schooling are students who have failed to receive consistent language support programming due to shifts in their school's language policy or uneven implementation of that policy in classrooms. In the ideal, a school will have in place a clear and cohesive school-wide language policy that is implemented in all classrooms accordingly (Corson, 1999; R. Freeman, 2004). Therefore, for example, if the school offers a Chinese/English bilingual program, then the school will provide that program from year to year in all subjects, and decisions about language distribution will be carefully planned and followed in each classroom of the school.

However, inconsistent school-based language policies are a major challenge, affecting at least six of the students in our sample, particularly in middle school. This is highlighted in the following:

Interviewer: So when did you have the history teacher that taught in Spanish?

Tatiana: That talked Spanish? When I was in sixth grade. But in seventh grade I used to have it at the first but then they changed it to another teacher, she only speak in English.

Interviewer: .. And then what about math when you went to sixth grade?

Tatiana: Math when I went to sixth grade it was in English. It was the teacher talked in English. Everything was in English.

Interviewer: English only?

Tatiana: Yeah. But then they change it. I don't know, they did a lot of change. They put another teacher that she talked Spanish, everything was in Spanish.

Interviewer: What grade was that?

Tatiana: In sixth—they switched.

Interviewer: And what about seventh grade?

Tatiana: Seventh grade I had everything in English. (Tatiana, Grade 10, LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

In this excerpt, Tatiana explains how her language programming in middle school changed from year to year in a haphazard way. In history class, she received bilingual instruction in sixth grade but English-only instruction for that same subject in seventh grade. In math, the instruction she received in sixth grade was in English for part of the year, bilingual for the remainder of that year, and then English-only again in seventh grade. As mentioned later, Tatiana is also a transnational student, making her particularly sensitive to changes in language of instruction and vulnerable to the ways such inconsistencies will impact her academic performance.

### Absence of Language Support Programming

A total of 15 LTELLs, over one-half of the total sample size, had a significant gap in their ESL/Bilingual services for a period of time while in the United States. These students received English-only programming in mainstream classrooms for a period of 1 to 3 years, without ESL or native language supports. Reasons for such gaps widely vary, but included in our sample are students born in the United States who were initially not identified as ELLs, students mistakenly exited from ELL programming by their schools, students attending a private school or a school outside of the city that did not offer ELL services, and parental choice. The following is an example of a newly arrived student who skipped several grades, yet had to wait 2 years before receiving language programming:

Liu came to the U.S. from China without English proficiency after completing grade three. In Queens, he was placed in fifth grade at a middle school where he ended up skipping a grade and for the first two years, fifth and sixth grades, did not receive any ESL services. (Liu, Grade 10, LTELL, School 3, interview notes)

The absence of ESL or bilingual programming, as experienced by the majority of students in this study, can prolong the length of time it takes to acquire an additional language.

In addition to experiencing inconsistencies in U.S. schooling, eight LTELLs are simultaneously in our category of transnational students. This combination creates instability across countries, schools and programs, compounding their challenges to learning. When students are constantly in movement and placed into differing programs, the end result is subtractive, whereby neither language is fully developed in the academic context. Although the global movement of students and their families is something over which educators in the United States have little control, as elaborated in our later discussion, increasing the consistency that these students experience while in the United States is an area where school districts may wish to devote their energies.

### Attending Multiple Schools

Six students in the study reported frequent changes in schools. Shirley, a senior at School 2, attended seven schools over the span of her life. She recalled: "I move almost every year." She went to five schools in the United States, as well as two schools in Puerto Rico (which also makes her a transnational student). Two of the U.S. elementary schools she attended were in New York City and two were in Pennsylvania, where she experienced an interruption in ESL services. She returned to Puerto Rico for middle school and came back to New York City to attend School 2, where she has remained throughout high school. While she changed schools, she also changed programs, moving from bilingual education to English-only programming to predominantly Spanish classes in Puerto Rico, and finally ending up in School 2 where she initially received bilingual programming and then transitioned into instruction entirely in English.

Another student who has frequently changed schools is Jimmy, a U.S.-born LTELL who has never attended school in another country. He attended three different elementary schools with radically divergent approaches toward language, until settling down to one middle and high school. He reflected on his experiences in the following passage:

Jimmy: My teachers [at the first elementary school] were Spanish and most of the time they spoke Spanish. And they taught us how to read in Spanish. Instead of showing us how to read and write English, they taught us in Spanish.

Interviewer: So it was really more Spanish. . . . OK, so then what happened in third grade?

Jimmy: In third grade I switched schools, and you know they just spoke English to us. But you know the teachers just taught us in English. English, English, English. And most of the kids in my class were Spanish, but the teacher only taught us in English. (Jimmy, Grade 9, LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

As Jimmy explained, when he moved from one school to another, he switched from a bilingual program that offered instruction mainly in Spanish to a monolingual English program; this change has likely impacted his acquisition of both English and Spanish, particularly with regard to academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

### Transnational Students

Twelve out of the 29 students interviewed fall into our second category of LTELL students, those who are transnational due to their movements between the United States and their family's country of origin. Time periods spent in the country of origin lasted longer than just a vacation or summer trip, typically spanning at least one academic year and possibly extending to 7 or 8 years, with students attending school there. International moves often occur repeatedly in the educational history of LTELLs, creating a cycle of adjustment and readjustment to a different country, language, school and family living situation.

Research about secondary emergent bilinguals, in general, and LTELLs, in particular, highlights large numbers of students who are, in fact, U.S.-born and yet still receive language support services. For example, one estimate is that one-third of all secondary emergent bilinguals are U.S.-born (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000), and another is that the majority are U.S.-born (approximately 70% in Dallas, according to Yang et al., 2001). Our findings offer a different explanation for such statistics. We found that the majority of U.S.-born students in our sample have actually moved back and forth to their family's country of origin for sustained periods of time throughout their educational careers. Although they were indeed born in the United States and are primarily U.S.-educated, they have not been here continuously, which accounts for their ongoing need to acquire academic English in high school.

A typical example is Luca, a high school junior. He was born and raised in the United States through first grade, completed second and third grades in the Dominican Republic, fourth and fifth grades in New York City, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the Dominican Republic, and from ninth grade onward has attended School 2 in New York City. His experiences are highlighted in the following quotation:

It was kind of hard, it was difficult. I mean, some things are in Spanish but I mean that's what I hate about my situation, that I went to DR and forgot English. Not entirely, but most of the basic stuff. But yeah, it was difficult. (Luca, Grade 11, LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

In this passage, Luca reports a feeling shared by other transnational students, that their international moves have affected their language development.

Due to frequent back and forth experiences from a very young age, transnational students often have such a complicated history that even answering straightforward questions about their lives becomes challenging:

Interviewer: Where were you born?

David: I was born in Dominican Republic.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

David: Not really. I was born here, but I was raised in the Dominican Republic.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were born in New York City. And then you were raised in the DR. So when did you go to the DR?

David: Was actually kind of a crazy experience. I studied one year here, I went back to the DR for a year, then I came back again for one year, and I went again for eight years. I came back here when I was a freshman. (David, Grade 12, LTELL, School 3, interview transcript)

In most cases, students do not receive English medium instruction when attending schools in the family's country of origin, although they occasionally report taking English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. However, EFL usually occurs for only a small portion of the school day, and focuses on language in isolation from academic content and literacy learning; thus, EFL instruction is mismatched to the levels of oral English proficiency possessed by students who have spent sustained periods of time in U.S. schools. Moreover, estimates of the length of time it takes emergent bilinguals to acquire English assume consistency in the students' schooling, an academic assumption that fails to account for the lived experiences of transnational students in an increasingly globalized world.

Transnational schooling experiences also have an impact on content learning, as one student explained in her discussion of Regents exams (New York's high school exit exams):

The changes that I been going back and forth like being in DR, then coming over here, I'm getting used to class being all in English then I go back over there and it all in Spanish. . . . It's that like since I been going back and forth and studying here and studying over there. Like the History Regents it's difficult 'cuz my mind with the history over there I know it more than here. And then I come here I'm studying the history but I don't get everything, you know? Like there's my head, crazy sometimes. I was telling my teacher I wish the Regents was about DR, that way I would pass it [laughs]. (Tatiana, Grade 10, LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

In this excerpt, Tatiana explains that she is more knowledgeable about the history of the DR than that of the United States, due to her prior educational experiences. Her frustration with the history curriculum is associated with differences in language, content, and perspective. These differences across contexts, coupled with interruptions in language learning, can significantly extend the length of time needed to become proficient in English because neither English nor the home language is consistently learned.

### Gaps in Schooling

Although transnational LTELLs generally complete all grade levels sequentially, several have had significant gaps in their schooling as a result of their international movements between school systems. When arriving in a different country or when returning to the United States, a wide range

of factors, such as age appropriateness and a student's proficiency in the language of instruction, impact a receiving school system's decisions about grade level and program placement.

Marisol's experiences in New York City and Mexico illustrate how inconsistencies and interruptions in schooling can occur. Marisol was born in the United States and attended school here through fifth grade. Her start was a difficult one as she had to repeat a grade early on, when she was mistakenly placed in a mainstream classroom; she only began receiving ESL services in the third grade. Toward the end of fifth grade, Marisol relocated to Mexico. She was unable to read or write in Spanish when she arrived in Mexico because her elementary schooling had been in English only. Therefore, she was required to repeat the fifth grade twice more in Mexico, and spent a total of 3 years in fifth grade due to her transnational move. Following her 3 years in Mexico, where she ultimately completed the fifth and sixth grades, she returned to New York City and was placed in the ninth grade. Therefore, she completely missed the seventh- and eighth-grade curricula, in either language. Currently, Marisol is 19 years old and in tenth grade at School 3. She has a low cumulative grade point average of 59.27%, and will likely be retained in tenth grade again.

Jose Miguel, now in tenth grade at School 3, is another transnational student who had his schooling interrupted. He attended two elementary schools in the United States, and then during his second-grade year moved to Mexico, where he stayed for 2 years. Jose Miguel did not attend school while he was in Mexico. However, when he returned to New York City he was placed into fourth grade due to his age, although he had missed most of second grade and all of third grade. Although such gaps in schooling most commonly affect transnational students, it is worth noting that this experience is, at times, shared by new arrivals. For example, Liu, who is now a tenth-grade LTELL at School 3, arrived in the United States after completing third grade in China, and was placed into fifth grade.

Such placement practices create a difficult situation for students and their teachers, as the students are unprepared for the new and cumulative content. The principal from School 1 explained the severity of this issue for LTELLs, as well as others, in the following passage:

You have kids who start middle school here and . . . the kid goes home to the DR. Then they come back and go to a placement center, and are placed in high school. I have 93 kids like that, 93 did not meet eighth grade promotional criteria that came here. (Mr. C, principal, School 1, interview transcript)

It is clear that major gaps in schooling will prolong the amount of time an emergent bilingual needs to acquire English and academic content to graduate from high school.

### Language Usage and School Performance

The students in our sample come from homes where only their native language is spoken, or where their native language is spoken in addition to English, and self-report that they are able to speak both languages well. Yet, despite their oral bilingualism, the students and their teachers overwhelmingly identify literacy in English as the greatest challenge LTELL students face in school. Interestingly, this is even true of transnational students; although these students typically receive more native language instruction than LTELLs solely educated in the United States, all of the students in our sample are primarily U.S.-educated. Thus, the students have come to prefer

TABLE 2  
Average Grade of Long-Term English  
Language Learners by School

<i>School</i>	<i>Average</i>
School 1	66.85%
School 2	75.17%
School 3	65.72%
Average of all long-term English language learners	69.20%

reading and writing in English over their native language because they feel their prior schooling has primarily emphasized English acquisition rather than native language maintenance and development. Yet, their limited literacy in both English and their native language proves to be a primary barrier to their academic success (for further discussion, see Menken & Kleyn, 2010).

The overall performance of the students in this study is extremely low, highlighting the need for schools to further support LTELLs. The average of all of the students is 69.2%, or a D+.<sup>9</sup> Table 2 shows a breakdown of average grade by school.

Sustained poor performance throughout their schooling has been found to be associated with lowered personal expectations or inaccurate perceptions of their own performance among LTELLs (a point supported by the findings of Y. Freeman et al., 2002). Although many of the students in this study self-report that they are doing well in school, their gauge for what “doing well” means is subjective:

The only two classes that I’m failing is math and English, but other than that I think I’m really doing good. (Jemina, Grade 10, LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

The students’ grades reflect the reality that they are not in fact “doing well,” and that they are performing on average at the C and D level. Of the 29 students in this study, six have F averages.

Standardized tests are another obstacle LTELLs face in school. All high school students in New York are required to pass a set of five Regents exams to graduate from high school.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, the English Regents exam is a great challenge for LTELLs. The majority of LTELLs have also failed the Global History exam, and many students have taken the test numerous times. The Math A Regents exam has proven to be difficult for the participants as well; only about one-half of those who have taken the exam have passed.

Poor academic performance leads to grade retention for LTELLs, and many students in our sample have been retained in grade—some repeatedly. This, in turn, contributes to loss of confidence and motivation, as exemplified in the following quotation:

<sup>9</sup>In the United States, students receive grades on a scale from A to F (with F being a failing mark). A “D+” average is marginal, indicating that the students are barely passing.

<sup>10</sup>To receive a high school diploma, students in New York must pass the English Regents exam, one Math Regents exam (usually students take Math A, a test of basic algebra and geometry), two social studies exams, and one Science Regents exam.



Um, I wanna tell you that I don't belong in 10th grade as you can see 'cause I just hit 18. I'm supposed to be in 12th and I had got left back in seventh and eighth, so like sometimes I feel embarrassed to be in a class you know that I don't supposed to be in. (Gaby, Grade 10, LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

Gaby reports that her experiences as an overage LTELL cause her to withdraw in the classroom. As Gaby explains, failure often leads to further failure in school, as students lose confidence in their abilities.

As LTELLs underperform, an understanding of the unique obstacles they face can shed light on ways that schools can adapt and modify curricula, as well as provide additional supports to give these students the assistance they need to succeed. It is noteworthy that the average at School 2 is about 10 percentage points higher than in the other schools. Because the number of students in this study is small, we cannot yet draw conclusions as to why this is the case; however, it does raise questions that can and should be addressed in future studies. Consideration should be made to the school's curricular framework, student demographics, school culture, and other factors that may support or curtail student success. School 2 is a small bilingual school specifically designed for Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals, where the curriculum focuses on native language literacy development alongside English literacy in all content areas. The success of high schools intended solely for emergent bilinguals, such as the International High Schools in New York City, suggests that a focused curriculum and a school-wide commitment to this student population contributes to the overall academic success of the students (Fine et al., 2007).

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this study worth explicitly acknowledging. First, because school records do not have complete information about students' past language programming in all the schools they attended, we rely on students' self-reporting, and this can cause certain inaccuracies. Second, within two of the three schools we studied, school data were imprecise regarding the length of time students have been classified ELLs, which limited our sample size.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the questions this study raised has guided our subsequent research and, despite its limitations, we feel the data provide a story worth telling at this time, offering new and important understandings to better serve this student population.

## IMPLICATIONS

Our findings highlight how educational inconsistency within our sample of students is an overwhelmingly common characteristic of LTELLs and a contributing factor to an emergent bilingual becoming an LTELL over time. In other words, our findings indicate that consistency is an integral part of successfully educating emergent bilingual students. What is more, programming that

<sup>11</sup>For instance, we came across students who were labeled "long-term English language learners", but had already tested out of their "English language learner" status by passing the state's English proficiency test. Others had been in the United States for only a few years, as school records only show date of arrival and do not indicate whether a student has left the United States and returned later.

fosters the development of bilingualism and biliteracy would be helpful in curtailing how many emergent bilinguals fall into the long-term group when they move into high school.

In particular, we recommend that movement by emergent bilinguals in and out of bilingual education programs, ESL programs, and mainstream classrooms be discouraged. We also recommend that schools adopt and adhere to clear, coherent school-wide language policies, so they are able to provide emergent bilinguals with consistent and constant programming; in their research, Corson (1999) and R. Freeman (2004) described how to create and implement school language policies. Coupled with our findings published elsewhere showing how the prior schooling of LTELLs has been linguistically subtractive (Menken & Kleyn, 2010), not only must the schooling that these students receive be consistent, emergent bilinguals must also be offered the opportunities in school to fully develop academic literacy skills in the languages they speak.

Interestingly, the findings from our second phase of research indicate how simply increasing awareness about this student population among educators seems to positively impact educational outcomes for LTELLs (for elaboration of this point, see Menken, Funk, & Kleyn, 2011). In an effort to increase understandings of LTELLs and develop programming targeted to their needs, educators and education officials must be prepared to identify LTELLs. We offer in Appendix C an intake template we designed that has been adopted by the New York City Department of Education and used to determine whether a new arrival to a school is an LTELL. This template gathers information about each year of prior schooling, including languages of instruction and how many years a student attended a given school. The use of this template will pinpoint any inconsistencies students may have previously experienced in their schooling.

In addition to improving consistency, it is equally important that high schools change their programming and practices to address the needs of large numbers of LTELLs in high school who have limited literacy skills in either of the languages they speak. Because LTELLs already have strong oral language for social purposes, but need to work on developing academic literacy, their needs are different from those of new arrivals. We have noted how LTELLs are characterized by low levels of academic literacy in English and their native language, and typically do not perform well in high school, regardless of the content-area subject. The vast majority of the students we studied have experienced educational failure (a point further supported by Olsen, 2010), making LTELLs a particularly high risk population for grade retention and dropout. Thus, high schools can no longer *assume* prior literacy ability among their ELL students, but instead must be prepared to *teach* literacy in explicit ways. This means that academic language and literacy instruction must be infused into all subject areas, including math, science, and social studies in addition to English.

Building on the findings we present here, in the second phase of our research study we developed and implemented a program for Spanish-speaking LTELLs in two New York City high schools. This program focused on biliteracy development in English and Spanish, and on the implementation of explicit academic language and literacy instruction across all subject areas. Our findings to date indicate that this programming is promising in meeting the needs of LTELLs because it builds on their linguistic resources to help them develop academic literacy skills (for further information, see our most recent report—Menken et al., 2009—and the project Web site).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Our “long-term English language learner” (LTELL) Web site is <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/Linguistics/rislus/projects/LTELL/index.html>

Although research has shown that most emergent bilinguals acquire sufficient academic English to enter a mainstream classroom within 5 to 7 years (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997) or even 10 years (Shohamy, 2006), it is often policy, and not research, that dictates what is too long a period of time for emergent bilinguals to learn English (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). For example, in states that have passed anti-bilingual education legislation in recent years, such as California and Arizona, policy only requires that emergent bilinguals receive 1 year of language support services (Gándara & Baca, 2008; Linton, 2009). Likewise, federal education legislation in the United States, entitled *No Child Left Behind*, dictates Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives and pressures schools to show growth of emergent bilinguals as they work to quickly exit them from their ELL status and services; such policy places schools under great pressure to exit emergent bilinguals from language support programs within 3 years (Menken, 2008).

Beyond programmatic changes, educational policies must also be adjusted to account for LTELLs. English acquisition takes even longer than the deemed average for LTELLs. Thus, it is essential that policies which impact schools, educators, and emergent bilingual students acknowledge that language learning is a process that takes time.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Interview Protocol

- 1) Where were you born?/What is your country of origin?
  - a) What language(s) do you speak at home?
  - b) Which language is used most at home—[home language (L1)] or English?
  - c) What language(s) do you speak with your friends?

- 2) When did you first come to the United States?
  - a) How long have you been in this country?
- 3) Did you attend school in your country of origin?
  - a) Did you know how to read in [L1] when you came to the U.S.?
  - b) Did you know how to write in [L1] when you came to the U.S.?
  - c) Have you ever returned to [country of origin] and attended school there? If so, when?
  - d) Did you ever miss school for a long period? If so, when? For how long?
- 4) What schools have you attended since the first time you arrived to the U.S?
  - a) What is the name of each school?
  - b) How long did you attend each school?
  - c) At those schools did you receive English as a Second Language (ESL) and/or bilingual education (were classes taught in English and [L1])?
  - d) [For each school]: At [school name], in what language(s) were your classes (Math, Science, Social Studies, etc.)? What percent of each language did your teachers use?
- 5) Do you feel more comfortable speaking in English or [home language], or both equally?
  - a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?
- 6) Do you feel more comfortable reading and writing in English or [L1], or both equally?
  - a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?
- 7) In the schools you have attended, have you learned reading and writing more in English or [L1]?
  - a) Have you had the opportunity to read or write in [L1] in the schools you have attended?
  - b) Do you read books in [L1]? If so, can you give examples of books you have read?
- 8) Which of your schools, programs or teachers have helped you achieve and learn the most in school?
  - a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?
- 9) Which schools or programs didn't help? Why?
- 10) What do you think has stood in your way from learning English more quickly?
- 11) *[For students who have attended many schools]:* Why do you think you've attended so many schools?
- 12) What do you think are your strengths and weaknesses in school?
  - a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe your strengths? And to describe your weaknesses?
  - b) How are you doing in school (grades, etc.)?
  - c) Do you recall ever learning about your own background (country, ethnicity, etc)? If yes, how did you feel about it?
  - d) What were the most meaningful topics you've learned about in school? Why?
  - e) What were the least meaningful topics you've learned about in school? Why?



## APPENDIX B

## Teacher/Administrator Interview Protocol

- 1) How many long-term ELLs do you serve?
- 2) What educational program(s) do they receive (e.g., bilingual education, ESL, etc.)?
  - a) How is the program structured?
  - b) Do these students receive the same services as other ELLs?
- 3) What do you see are the strengths and challenges for long-term ELL students in school?
  - a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe this?
  - b) What do you think are the needs of long-term ELLs in school?
  - c) How are their needs the same or different from other ELL students?
- 4) What methods or teaching approaches have you tried that you think are effective with these students?
  - a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe this?
  - b) Are there certain approaches you think don't work for these students that might work for other ELLs?
- 5) What assessment data have you collected about the long-term ELL students at this school?
  - a) What scores have they received on the English Regents? Other Regents?
  - b) What scores have they received on the New York State ESL Achievement Test?
  - c) What grades have they received in their classes?
  - d) What do their portfolios/ classroom-based assessments/ attendance records indicate about their school performance?

APPENDIX C

Long-Term English Language Learner Intake Template

In order to get a more complete picture of emergent bilinguals' schooling experiences, and to identify students who are LTELLs, we recommend that schools interview students in order to fill out the table below. We advise schools to use this template whenever they receive a new emergent bilingual student, even if the student has a file already and has previously attended school in the United States.

Grade	Academic Year	School Name/ Number	Location (Borough/City, State, Country)	ELL Services Received (Check as many as apply)			Language(s) of Instruction	Additional Information
				ESL	Transitional Bilingual	Dual Language		
K								
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								
12								
Daycare								
Pre-K								