

DRIVEN TO LEARN: A STUDY ON WHY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENTS

LOSE LITERACY MOTIVATION, AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

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### **Abstract**

Research suggests that ELL students, as they become more proficient in English, paradoxically become less motivated. This study sought to discover, through observation, artifacts, and teacher interviews, why ELLs' motivation for literacy learning drops in the middle school grades and what parents and teachers can do to improve their students' motivation. This qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) focuses on the interviews and teachings of a seventh-grade English as a Second Language teacher at a rural/suburban middle school in central Texas. Data from observations and interviews were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) to identify themes: use of technology, selection of appropriate texts, and the influence of culture, family, and peers. Although further research is needed on student perspectives on motivation, this study recommends that teachers can engage ELL students through using new literacies (technology), selecting texts related to student identity, and integrating students' cultural strengths.

## Introduction

Middle school, with its plethora of new experiences, often presents students with a new and perhaps intimidating world as they make the transition from elementary school. Not only do students experience new challenges in the academic environment, such as a shift from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn, but also they are also undergoing physical changes as well as experiencing new social patterns and norms. With the added challenges that English language learners (ELLs)<sup>1</sup> face, frustration levels can be further compounded.

English language learners make up more than 15 percent of the K-12 public school population in Texas (TEA Student Assessment Division, 2009). ELLs, according to TEA, have lower graduation rates and performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS.

During middle school, as ELLs' proficiency in English increases, their motivation for literacy learning often paradoxically decreases (Sturtevant & Kim, 2010); teachers and parents alike share in the frustration of their students' lack of engagement. The middle school years represent a key stage in academic achievement, as they are when tracking often begins. Given their lower English language proficiency, it is no surprise that ELL students are consistently placed on lower tracks and have lower achievement scores. With the nation's rapidly increasing Latino/a population, this achievement gap is affecting an increasingly larger section of society. This stark difference in Latino/a achievement is especially true in Texas, where persons of Hispanic or Latino/a origin make up 36.9%, over one-third of the population, a percentage that has been steadily increasing over the

past several decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Although no longitudinal long-term study exists to support the best method for increasing motivation and thereby improving literacy and academic achievement for ELLs, Sturtevant and Kim did, however, conduct a study on motivation in ELL students.

Building on the work of Sturtevant and Kim, this study examines instructional and contextual factors that may affect motivation levels for literacy instruction for ELLs, as students gain proficiency in English, and offers suggestions for teachers and parents to create a successful literacy-learning environment for adolescent ELL students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Effective Instruction for ELLs**

ELL instruction continues to be a controversial topic in the United States. Given the political backdrop of public education, there is much back-and-forth argument on proper educational techniques, to the disadvantage of ELL students. While the debate goes on, more and more ELL students are being placed on lower learning tracks, receiving inadequate literacy instruction, and falling through the cracks. The Hispanic population continues to boom in the United States and especially in Texas, pushing ELL instruction to the forefront of political debate. According to the research of Slavin and Cheung (2005), "American society cannot achieve equal opportunity for all if its schools do not succeed with the children of immigrants" (p. 248).

Linguistic research shows that there are two large domains in English language learning (Cummins, 1979). The first, Basic Interpersonal Communication

Skills, or BICS, denotes conversational and interpersonal skills, such as the ability to ask for directions or order at a restaurant. Students typically develop this skill rather quickly, and become proficient in it within one to three years in the new language. To be able to learn and understand academic content, however, students need also CALP, or, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1979). CALP usually requires seven to ten years for proficiency, but ELL students in the middle grades are expected to learn and understand content in English far more quickly.

A multitude of studies over time have consistently shown that bilingual education is the most effective way for ELLs to become proficient in English (Krashen, 1991). Bilingual education in the state of Texas can be defined as the practice of developing reading proficiency in a student's native language first, and then transitioning the student into English reading instruction during the middle elementary grades. Despite many sound studies favoring this approach, the recent political tide has turned to favor the practice of full English language immersion as opposed to bilingual education.

On top of this already difficult situation comes the added pressure of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) exit exams. While in some states exit exams are based on oral proficiency, in many others standardized tests with "overly stringent [requirements]" (Callahan, p. 306) are required, which can inadvertently result in a class of ELL students being stuck in LEP programs. In U.S. schools, if students do not exit the LEP program within five years of enrollment, they are placed in long-term English learner programs - programs with modified instruction, non-challenging

academic requirements, and poor teacher-student relationships; i.e., the low-track. Slavin and Cheung warn against the dangers of confusing academic readiness with English language proficiency. A student who is otherwise academically proficient may not be proficient enough in English to pass the LEP exit exam, but that certainly does not mean that he or she should be placed on a lower learning track.

Unfortunately, that is precisely what happens time after time.

Many arguments against bilingual education are rooted in a fear of confusing children by teaching them literacy in a language that is not used predominantly in schools or mainstream society, especially because English is not even introduced until basic reading skills in the native language are established. Evidence shows, however, that if phonics, sound blending, decoding, and comprehension are first established in a child's native language, then languages that share the same phonetic orthographies (such as English, Spanish, and French) make for a smooth transition from one language to another. In other words, strong foundations in one's native language often serves as a helpful segue from one language to another. Furthermore, reading proficiency in a child's native language is almost always a strong predictor of what his or her English reading performance will be. Teaching students to read in a language unfamiliar to them is akin to building a house before laying the foundation. The double challenge of learning literacy skills while at the same time learning another language can lead to frustration and yield ongoing struggles in literacy. The research of Slavin and Cheung supports the evidence that trying to teach a child oral English concurrently with reading English often results in a failed experience (p. 249).

The alternative to bilingual education is immersion, a practice in which children who are considered “ready” to be mainstreamed are immersed into classrooms that use exclusively English texts. The standards by which mainstream readiness is judged are weak and often yield inaccurate results, leading students to be immersed into English-only classrooms when much language acquisition scaffolding is still needed. Immersion can be a de-motivator, since the jump from the comforts of instruction in a child’s native language to English-only instruction would be intimidating and stressful for even the most proficient of ELL students. According to state-mandated test scores regarding bilingual education versus immersion instruction, ELL students scored significantly higher than those in immersion classes. Also, not one of 17 qualitative studies observing several different types of bilingual and immersion practices presented in Slavin and Cheung’s meta-analysis favored immersion, while 12 of the 17 found favorable outcomes to bilingual education. The aforementioned research on bilingual education only scratches the surface of the countless others that exist, and so the debate for immersion is difficult to understand, until one considers that policy often favors societal mores over scientific data; “ideology has often trumped evidence on both sides of the debate” (p. 248).

### **Motivation and Adolescent ELLs**

Ford (1992) states that motivation is the “psychological foundation for the development of human competence in everyday life” (p. 244). In a 2010 study, Sturtevant and Kim sought to investigate the added challenge for ELL middle schoolers who are becoming proficient in English as a second language while



simultaneously learning to cope with a new, more challenging middle school curriculum. Sturtevant and Kim found that as students' English language proficiency increased into the middle school years, their motivation and their valuing of literacy decreased. In this sense, ELL students are at a critical point in their pedagogical makeup for both their academic and everyday success; this is the time where students' attitudes towards literacy may fundamentally determine their very future. De facto tracking, if you will, begins. During these middle school years, the combined efforts of student, teacher, and family can provide the encouragement and scaffolding that is crucial to ELL students' success in literacy.

While much current research exists regarding young, newly immigrated ELLs, the same attention towards older students has not been exerted. According to Snow (2008), "Practitioners are desperate for information on how to best serve older immigrant students... A much greater focus on post primary second-language learners is needed to provide a research base for improved practice" (p. 288). Sturtevant and Kim offer insight into creating a successful literary environment for ELL adolescent learners; their work represents an initiative into much-needed continued and longitudinal research.

In 1996, Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni created the *Motivation to Read Profile* (MRP), a tool designed for elementary teachers' assessment of their students' self-concept as a reader and the value they place on reading. The MRP does this through the use of a reading questionnaire and conversation-based interview. Ten years later, in 2007, Pitcher et al. revised the survey to become the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* (AMRP), to make the survey more

appropriately geared towards students in the middle grades. Pitcher et al. suggests using the survey at the start of the school year to establish a baseline of the students' levels of motivation, as well as periodically throughout the school year to assess progress. The survey is central in some research on ELL motivation because self-concept and value of reading are directly related to student motivation and thus, proficiency. Sturtevant and Kim's work puts into practice the AMRP survey data and then seeks to define the implications that come from this practical application.

The research of Sturtevant and Kim is a mixed-methods study, with a survey as well as semi-structured interviews used to quantify and qualify data. It seeks to answer specific questions regarding the value of reading as well as self-concept of reading for fifty teacher-selected middle school ESOL<sup>2</sup> students identified as either beginning, intermediate, or advanced in English proficiency. The data from the surveys is quantified using ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) to create value scores and discrepancies between proficiency levels. The interview data is qualified using letter coding based on consistent themes and answers to the questions.

In the study, all fifty students surveyed unanimously believed that reading was very important; this conviction, however, did not match with the same students' perceptions of themselves as strong readers nor their perceived values of the importance of reading in school (Sturtevant & Kim, 2010). Students often judge their perception of their academic standing based on language proficiency versus actual academic achievement (Callahan, 2005, p. 324).

The problem is clear: adolescent ELLs seem to lack motivation in literacy largely due to a lack of self-confidence as readers, combined with not fully understanding the value of academic literacy; sadly, research on how to fix the problem is severely lacking.

The root of the problem is also easily defined. Motivation in middle school students is a struggle for both teachers and students without the added stressor of English language learning. In-class reading time significantly decreases in middle school from the time devoted to it in elementary school; the instruction of reading and comprehension shifts from learning reading for its own inherent value into an assumed skill that students must now use to understand higher-level texts that are information-heavy. Literacy activities at this level often do not appropriately meet learners' foremost needs, and thus do not provide the necessary motivation to continue to advance this skill set. Literacy instruction that is not seen by students as relevant to their lives quickly becomes frustrating and not worth the effort. Pitcher et al. (2007) assert that students who "judge reading and literacy activities to be unrewarding [or] too difficult... may become nonreaders, or alliterate adolescents... capable of reading but choosing not to do so" (p. 379).

ELLs' literacy interest out of school varies dramatically from in school. Sturtevant and Kim found an astonishingly high use of multiliteracies outside the classroom. Moreover they found students did not consider that this high use of out-of-school literacy practices was literacy at all. A complete disconnect existed between what students considered to be "real reading" versus the multiliteracies they were engaging in at home, such as reading magazines or the internet for

pleasure, translating important documents such as passports and exam reviews for parents, teaching younger siblings to read, and writing emails or in daily journals. To these students, literacy was not, and could not be, synonymous with pleasure and/or relevance.

### **Middle School Motivation**

In the 2007 Pitcher et al. study entitled *Assessing Adolescents' Motivation to Read*, the researchers delve more deeply into the AMRP and its implications. It stresses the importance of differentiating between the AMRP and its predecessor, the MRP, noting that they are far from interchangeable and that for the AMRP to be effective, the teacher presenting it must keep this in mind, ensuring he or she asks the students questions that are specifically geared towards adolescent learners. As suggested by the lack of research in adolescent literacy motivation, the learning styles and needs of this age group are in an entirely different class than the needs of elementary learners; Pitcher et al.'s study, which debunks the conventional wisdom that elementary and middle school teaching and learning practices are one in the same, serves as evidence to support Sturtevant and Kim's assertion that research on middle school learning is lacking.

The responses given by AMRP participants furthermore support Sturtevant and Kim's research on the disconnect between in- and out-of-school texts. Middle schools traditionally use "print-based, content-area texts" (p. 379) that middle school students consider dull. Utilizing such textbooks often results in comprehension difficulties among the average middle school student, much less an ELL student. The New London Group (1996) defines these traditional texts as "page-

bound, official, standard forms of the national language” (p. 61), or in other words, formal English language documents whose unfamiliar words and phrases would be baffling to an ELL student, a summation of comprehension out of the picture. So, not only would such texts be difficult and frustrating for ELL students in their own right, but even worse be considered unimportant and irrelevant to their lives.

The implications of this seemingly minor factor are in fact great. These “traditional texts” fail to utilize mediums that students are much more familiar and proficient with, including electronic messaging or games, visual images, media-text, and electronic text. Furthermore, a lack of student interest not only suppresses motivation for each student individually, but also inhibits participation in the classroom; in effect, when one student suffers, all do. Adolescents have a heightened sense of the importance and influence of their peers, and when class discussion is flat or nonexistent, a golden learning opportunity with lively debate and interaction is lost. Lastly the impact of using texts that are not valued by students widens the chasm between academic readings versus pleasure reading; as long as they are considered by students to be two separate activities, academic reading will continue to be considered incapable of being pleasurable, student motivation will continue to be dampened, and an interest in reading will continue to exclude academic texts.

In addition to the useful information students provided on multiliteracies, they also share openly about the power of the teacher’s role and the impact it can have. The study notes the “powerful influence of teacher talk and modeling about books and authors... teachers’ enthusiasm can have a tremendous impact on students’ reading habits and attitudes” (p. 398). Much research has been

performed concerning teacher enthusiasm, instructional strategies and skills, dedication to the profession and students, and competency, and it is important not to overlook the large influence these factors have on student motivation, or lack thereof. If a teacher is unenthusiastic about the subject matter, then the students almost certainly will be as well. It is vital that no teacher ever underestimates his or her influence on students' attitudes towards reading.

The Pitcher et al. study not only emphasizes the importance of use of the AMRP, but it also puts the survey into action and discusses the resulting student responses. For example, a 2008/2009 study conducted by Heather K. Casey tests the arguments made by Pitcher et al. as well as Sturtevant and Kim by applying them via the use of "Learning Clubs." The concept of a learning club can take on many styles and creative names, such as Reader's Workshop or a book club, but they all have the same essential qualities of using active reading and writing activities to create a collaborative learning environment that engages student interest and learning (p. 284). In Casey's variation of the club, students stay after school two-to-three days per week, bring their own self-selected books, engage in conversation about their books and others, and receive from the teacher and their peers further reading recommendations.

In effect, Casey's (2008/2009) reading club encompasses all of the recommendations of the aforementioned research: student-selected reading materials that are developmentally appropriate to their needs, peer interaction and collaboration, and teacher facilitation and scaffolding to assess and promote literacy learning. The reading club is proven to be a successful motivational tool by the fact

that the after school meetings are optional, and nearly every one of Casey's students attends at least once a week. The recipe for motivational success seems simple enough, but Casey asserts that the "conceptual framework" is anything but: "adolescents' literacy development is related to the unique social communities that they inhabit" (Casey, 2008/2009, p. 285). In other words, so many different variables go into just one meeting of one group of people, that it would be relatively impossible to restrict each reading club to a specific set of adopted principles or rules. Herein lies the teacher's true opportunity: every student will bring a different perspective, a different opinion, different background knowledge and a different learning style. Rather than be intimidated by this potentially unlimited combination of factors, Casey contends that a teacher should take advantage of the benefits to be gained from such diversity. A teacher can greatly enhance student learning by recognizing the underlying influences and beliefs of the community at large and then adapt instruction to specific student needs and interests.

### **Methodology**

This study seeks to discover, through observation, artifacts, and teacher interviews, why ELLs' motivation for literacy learning drops in middle school and what parents and teachers can do to improve their students' motivation. This study was conceived as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) that can be used to illustrate an issue at large. Working with one teacher, I define the boundaries of the case by the single teacher membership at Clarke Middle School (a pseudonym).

### **Participant Selection**

The participant is one middle school English language arts and English as a Second Language teacher, Mrs. Burke (pseudonym), who works in grades 6-8 at Clarke Middle School (CMS) in a rural/suburban school district 20 miles outside of a large central Texas city. The participant was specifically selected because she works with many students who are English Language Learners, at a variety of levels of proficiency. She is an experienced teacher, in her twenty-third year as an ESL teacher.

### **Description of Clarke Middle School**

Clarke Middle School sits in the middle of a growing rural community surrounded by newly built houses and older ranch-style homes. Clarke Middle School has approximately 750 test-identified students, 35% of which are considered economically disadvantaged. Nearly half the students that attend CMS are Spanish dominant and self-identified as Mexican-American, and 15% are classified in Limited English Proficiency, or LEP. In the district in which Clarke Middle School is located, 28.9% are identified as Hispanic, and 4.5% are identified as Limited English Proficiency (LEP). 32.4% of students are considered economically disadvantaged, and 30.2% are high-risk.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through two individual semi-structured interviews. (Questions for the interviews are included in Appendices A and B.) These interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. The participant was also observed while teaching students (for a total of 10 times, for 120 minutes each time). During these observations, the researcher noted the participant's



interactions with students, as well as instructional decision-making. Following the observations, the participant was interviewed again and allowed to reflect on her teaching. This triangulation of data (Dey, 1993), collecting overlapping data from different modes, helps strengthen the rigor of qualitative research.

### **Data Analysis**

I used constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) to identify commonalities and themes across the interviews as well as observations. Using a coding scheme, I identified these in the raw data, and then used the data for follow-up questions and clarifications. The use of both interviews and observations served to help strengthen the rigor of research.

### **Findings and Discussion**

During the initial interview, many of Mrs. Burke's observations and reflections of her own teachings of ELL students aligned with the research of Sturtevant and Kim, while others did not. Two large themes stood out among the rest, those being technology and appropriate texts, while three others were identified but not as strong, with one even conflicting.

### **Technology**

While Casey's research (2008/2009) puts into practice reading clubs to increase her students' motivation, Mrs. Burke has similarly designed an ongoing project with the use of iPods. Two years ago, she wrote a grant, which was approved by the state, to provide each ESL student with an iPod touch, each of which (after much research and time commitment by Mrs. Burke) has over 100 developmentally appropriate apps, consisting of Spanish-English learning games, as well as learning

games from other subjects, communication tools, and literacy apps. Every novel each student reads in school is on the iPod for them to read along while listening to a proficient English reader, and the students can also record themselves reading to later play back and identify their reading fluency and accuracy strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned in the Sturtevant and Kim study (2010), students are most responsive to multiple-media texts as well as literacies considered relevant to their lives. In this way the iPod project directly connects out-of-school texts to in-school texts; it provides students with a media source they are familiar with and enjoy, and it motivates them to practice their literacy skills in English as well as other subjects (The New London Group, 1996). The iPods furthermore give students something they are responsible for, an important tool that they value for both its entertainment and social standing value and its impact on their learning. With the iPods, students have some of the same technological advantages as their peers, and using them as a tool for learning is “cool.” Students who may be embarrassed to carry a book proudly sport their iPods and are quick to tell anyone how much they love it and how much they learn from it. It is one of the few instances in which ELL students are proud of their learning and unafraid of showing it.

### **Texts**

In addition to and in conjunction with the iPod project are the texts Mrs. Burke chooses for her students to read. Mrs. Burke emphasizes the importance of finding texts that connect students’ commonalities, both within their own culture and among adolescent students as a whole. Students in the middle grades, regardless of heritage, respond strongly to texts relating to their identity, including

stories of love, family, conflicts, and friends. Certain phrases used commonly by young adolescent readers appear throughout several such novels created specifically for the age group. Texts such as these, that are dialogue-heavy and thus use language similar to that they would use with their peers, demonstrate comprehensible input and are strongly recommended for adolescent students at large but especially ELL students (Krashen, 1981). The recurrence of common and well-known phrases helps ELL students to feel comfortable with the text and therefore allows them to quickly and accurately translate it. Otherwise, Mrs. Burke notes, with less familiar words and phrases typically found in the print-based content-area texts, as referred to by Sturtevant and Kim, students must translate the English to Spanish in order to understand it, and then translate their interpretation of the text back to English in order to communicate their response. “You can imagine the energy it takes to go through that process, and to have to do it all day,” Mrs. Burke says.

Thus, popular young adult novels with the common aforementioned themes lessen this arduous process, at least a little bit. To further ease the process and build literacy confidence, Mrs. Burke recommends Latino stories that relate to the students’ culture, such as the short story collection *Out of the Valley* (Carroll, 2006), written by native Texans from the Valley. Students love “being the teacher” and explaining to the teacher and their peers the cultural background and traditions of such stories. Even while reading the young adult novel *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000) as a class, one short passage in Spanish snapped the students straight to attention. They were talking over each other to explain to Mrs. Burke what the passage meant, and

as simply as that the novel became personal and relevant to them. In that moment they were the ones with the knowledge, and were explaining something to someone else.

### **Culture**

Mrs. Burke asserts that parents are absolutely vital in getting their students to realize their potential, and that in turn, teachers are responsible for urging parents to recognize their child's potential and set expectations accordingly. And in order to reach parents in this way, the teacher must earn the parents' unequivocal trust - as a professional, as a human being, and as someone that truly cares for their children. Such trust must be earned, and Mrs. Burke references several occasions and examples in which she reached out to parents, and how she worked relentlessly to gain their belief in her.

Mrs. Burke once held a dinner for all the parents of her ESL students, and several minutes past the dinner time she began to worry that no one was coming when suddenly, a large group of parents all entered at once. She says it was in that instance that she realized what a big risk parents are taking by even meeting the teacher or attending such a dinner. The parents, although arriving to the dinner at different times, had all waited until the other parents had arrived to walk into the dinner. Mrs. Burke realized that they had to step outside of their comfort zone, go to an unfamiliar area of town, and fear judgment for a lack of English fluency as well as other factors. Mrs. Burke explains that the dinner was, in the end, a huge success, and once her students' parents slowly began seeing her passion for their children and their success, that common thread of trust that is so necessary for progress was

established. At that point parents can feel comfortable accepting the teachers' vision of their child's potential; they can begin to see that college is a possibility, that a C can and should be an A.

A teacher's involvement in their child's education and with the school, as well as the involvement of the community at large, is vitally important, Mrs. Burke claims. She makes a conscious effort to shop in the local grocery stores, visit local parks, and co-mingle regularly with the families of her students. Mrs. Burke says that she considers bringing the community into the schools, and bringing the schools into the community, are vitally important, to draw upon the strengths of the community, which are known by researchers as funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanati, Neff, Gonzalez, 1992).

### **Family**

Mrs. Burke identified a difference between different groups of ELL students. She suggested that Latino/a students who are first generation immigrants from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries tend to have high expectations for learning, instilled in them by their parents. She also believed that the higher the parents' expectations, the greater the student will be motivated to learn and achieve. Therefore, she concluded that the second and third generation immigrants might not always have as much of a high expectation from parents.

Mrs. Burke commented that these students, who do not know a life outside of the U.S. and thus have nothing to compare their current education to, sometimes take English instruction and the state's educational system for granted. In her perception, the ELL students who have moved to Texas more recently, on the other

hand, have parents who are typically very involved in their child's education and who expect hard work and a dedication to learning from their children, as it is often one of the most important factors in the family's decision to move to the United States.

She noted that this level of expectation and involvement can manifest itself in several ways, including regular communication via phone calls or email between the parent and teacher, frequent parent-teacher conferences, and decisive action from the student when a parent is contacted; in other words, it is obvious, to her, from student behavior and participation the day after contacting a parent that the parent influenced the student's actions.

Mrs. Burke's discussions on student confidence and success further reiterate the claims of Sturtevant and Kim. She further comments that ELL students are especially slow to gain academic confidence, often regardless of their educational success or interest. Often ELL students, especially first generation immigrants, do not expect to excel; their families are "survivors," people who have faced relentless difficulties in life and who consider simply keeping their heads above water to be success. In other words, grades of Cs or Ds are passing, staying afloat, and are considered successful grades simply because they are not failing. This is certainly not to say that the students are not capable of achieving As and Bs or even that they do not want to, but rather that they, and their families, lack the confidence to consider such high achievement to even be within the realm of possibility.

Further compelling this myth is that many students' parents did not advance past the third and fourth grade, and so for their child to even be in middle school is a

success in and of itself. Already their child has a higher education than they and thus more opportunities already are available in their lives. Mrs. Burke shares that often parents are stunned, and extremely apprehensive and doubtful, when she tells them what she is doing to prepare their child for college.

As an example, Mrs. Burke references two of her ELL students that are sisters, Jimena and Maria, who moved to the United States when they were in third and fourth grade and are now in seventh and eighth grade, respectively. In Mexico they had received basic language skill instruction in Spanish and were not far behind their peers in academic areas other than English language skills. Within the next couple of years both were fluent in English and doing very well in school. Their parents also had high expectations for their children, although, as mentioned, high expectations to the parents may mean something entirely different than it does to us. Jimena and Maria's parents wanted their girls to work hard in school and to graduate from high school. Mrs. Burke has been working with both students since they came to middle school, and only this year, she shares, has she been able to get either of them to take a pre-AP class. She says both students are completely capable of being in all pre-AP, but that they are still hindered by a lack of academic confidence and a belief that they are incapable of being in pre-AP classes, or that they even belong there.

While Mrs. Burke's observation of this discrepancy between generations is certainly compelling and indeed may be true, I was not officially able to confirm the data. I did notice a discrepancy among different students in their different levels of

interest and motivation, but since I did not personally know which students are first generation immigrants and which are second, this theme remains unconfirmed.

### **Peers**

Although the data analysis demonstrated that the influence of peers might be mixed, there is evidence that peer influence may be an impediment to ELLs' high achievement. Peers trap many Hispanic students in the stereotypical belief that education and academic achievement are for "white people," a belief drilled into them daily. Receiving a high grade is often embarrassing, and is seen by their peers as rejecting their cultural heritage and social mores.

For example, the students at Clarke Middle School recently received their TAKS writing assignments, and as a class they all went over their writings, what they would have added or done differently, what they liked about their writing, and what grade they expected to receive. One student, whose paper was rather well written and insightful, gave himself a 1 (out of a possible 4—1 is a failing grade). Mrs. Burke disagreed with his assessment and told the student that he probably in fact scored a 3, much to the student's embarrassment. With his peers' eyes on him, the student loudly proclaimed, "Man, I feel white. I used too many big words and now I look stupid. A 3 isn't cool."

This incident vividly demonstrates the impact of peer expectations, which translates into lower motivation. Much in the same way that the Pitcher et al. (2007) study demonstrates the importance of teacher influence, low expectations driven by others almost certainly lead to low expectations from the students themselves.

### **Limitations**



The main limitation of this study is its independent nature of having only one participant. While in many regards this serves as a strength because it allows an added level of depth and insight, the lack of further participants does limit viewpoints and ideas to one participant. The same can be said for the limitation in there being a finite number of students to observe. Mrs. Burke's ESL students total 39, which does provide a sound amount of unique student personalities, but is also too small to find specific commonalities over a larger group.

### **Implications**

With student and parental trust and involvement, literature that is personal to students' lives in a medium of interest to them (iPods), and with culturally and developmentally appropriate texts, motivating ELL students to better their achievement and literacy can produce rewarding results for all involved. To paint the picture of a classroom in which motivation for learning and literacy improvement are taking place, one need only imagine a classroom rich in these recommendations: the incorporation of technology, an enthusiastic and caring teacher, texts relevant to students' lives, and strong parent-teacher relationships. Doing so will require commitment from parents and teachers. All parties involved must realize and accept the significance of their roles in ELL students' learning.

For teachers, an understanding of their students' perceptions of themselves as learners is vital. Adolescent students are very forthcoming about what they enjoy and do not enjoy in school, what they are and are not interested in, which activities are fun and engaging and which are not. By using the AMRP survey at the start of the year, teachers can gain valuable insights into where students believe they stand and

what would ignite their interests. Recognizing and utilizing developmentally appropriate materials and planning accordingly is crucial. Above all, however, what matters the most is the teacher's attitude. If the teacher does not fully believe in his or her students' success, neither will the students. "Students who *believe* they are capable and competent... are much more likely to outperform those who do not hold such beliefs" (Gambrell et al. 1996, p. 518).

Parents' attitudes are equally important. Unlike student responses to the AMRP conversation on in-school learning (which elicited less than enthusiastic feedback), students considered their literacy at home to be of utmost importance. At the root of such attitudes towards literacy is the family. Students' self-concept as a reader is largely based upon the value placed on literacy in the home. Students expressed true joy in helping family members with literacy, and benefited greatly from parental enthusiasm and support. Students even unintentionally exhibited the use of reading strategies at home as well, such as asking a family member for help with a reading assignment. The tools are in place and ready to be used.

Although the way forward seems clear enough, putting new and challenging (thus sometimes intimidating) practices into place in the classroom and at home requires willingness and commitment from students, parents and teachers. Given the statistics on ELLs lack of motivation, and with the gap between success and failure widening daily, the need for action is urgent. Sturtevant and Kim (2010) sharpen the focus of this critical dilemma: "Middle school students who choose not to read beyond the barest minimums required by the school are not likely to develop the advanced literary skills necessary for success in high school and beyond" (p. 69).

Research on ELLs as a whole concludes that motivation is the key in preventing this from happening. Basic daily reading instruction in school, without student ambition, demonstrated teacher confidence in student ability, and family involvement, is not enough. The inadequacy of middle school curriculum may result in students being trapped on a low-track course that is nearly impossible to break out of.

Armed with this extensive suite of knowledge, teachers can create literacy clubs in which students are “active constructors of meaning as opposed to passive recipients of information” (Casey, 2008/2009, p. 289). In such a scenario one would find all students actively contributing to the conversation, led by student choice and interest, while the teacher acts as a facilitator of discussion. Casey furthermore emphasizes the process of learning over the product; the students’ literature discussion is far more important than their conclusions. This formula in turn works well for increasing student motivation in that students are the leaders of their own learning; they are not being force-fed content but are rather actively seeking meaning in literature that is relevant and important to them. In a picture opposite this, one would find students acting inappropriately with frequent outbursts and ultimately disengagement. As mentioned earlier, these catastrophic effects are such because the middle school years are so critical in establishing student tracking. If ELL students have reached a point of such frustration that they are disengaged and shutting down (which could have been prevented with an idea as straightforward as Casey’s literature club), then they are at risk of continually being placed on the lower tracks, and the achievement gap between ELL students and native English speakers will continue to widen.

For further research I would propose directly interviewing students to gain insights to their perspectives. My research, as far as student perspective goes, comes solely from an observational standpoint, and so I believe that for a more holistic understanding of ELL motivation, student input is a necessary component. What is required from here is also a significant expansion in the study of out-of-school literacies, student perception and stimulus, and above all, the practical *application* of such research.

Every English language learner has incredible potential for growth, in both literacy learning and academic content, and it is of utmost importance that educators recognize this potential and create these conditions in their classroom to lay the foundation for their students' life-long success.

<sup>1</sup>English language learners (also known as English as a Second Language students, or ESLs , as well as Limited-English-proficiency students, or LEPs) is currently the recognized term referring to students for whom English was not their first language.

<sup>2</sup>ESOL, English for Speakers of other Languages, is the term Sturtevant and Kim use to refer to ELLs.

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## Appendix A

## Thesis Participant Interview Questions- Pre-Observation

1. Thinking about the students that are English language learners in your classroom, do you notice a difference in interest in literacy as compared to native English speaking students? If so, what types of differences? Give a specific example if possible.
2. Do you notice any sort of connection between literacy level and overall achievement level of your ELL students? If so, what?
3. Similarly, do you notice any sort of connection between literacy level and motivation or interest level of your ELL students? If so, what?
4. Have you ever created a lesson plan or introduced a specific text that ELLs responded to positively? If so, what was it? Why do you think they liked it?
5. What are some ways that you adapt your lesson plans to appeal to the interests of, and/or to better reach, ELL students?
6. What role, in your opinion, should parents play in their students' learning? Do you think that ELL students' parents play a specific role? How so?
7. What are some things that you think parents could do to help increase motivation levels in their ELL children?
8. Similarly, what are some things that you think the community and the school at large could do to help increase motivation levels in ELL students?

## Appendix B

## Thesis Participant Interview Questions- Post-Observation

1. Comparing English proficiency and academic proficiency, is there often a large discrepancy among students? Which do you think is a greater hindrance to academic achievement? Why?
2. Regarding the previous question, what is one thing you would have done differently for your ELL students this year? How do you think you could have made the year even more successful?
3. Reflecting on the year, how do you feel your ELL students have progressed? Do you think they have made enough gains in their language proficiency to be on level with native English speakers? Why or why not?
4. In the initial interview we discussed a lesson plan that students responded positively to. Adversely, is there a lesson students have responded negatively to? What was their reaction, and why do you think it was negative?
5. In the previous interview you mentioned, and I have observed, a strong student response to culturally relevant pedagogy and texts. Which texts have you found to be the effective?
6. Similarly, do you think the influence of parents is generally positive or negative? How so? Give an example of both if possible.
7. Do you think there is a certain expectation for ELL students of their peers? Is it positive or negative? How so?