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Complex and Connected Lives: Voices of "English Language Learners" in Middle School

Anny F. Case, *Gonzaga University*

Abstract

In addition to the typical ups and downs of middle school (MS), many English language learners (ELLs) in the middle grades also grapple with learning English, straddling multiple cultures, and adapting to the realities of immigration. While school systems tend to focus on linguistic and academic development, MS ELLs exercise agency, creativity, judgment, and resilience as they navigate hybrid identities, complex and context-specific social and cultural expectations, and home/school connections and disconnections. This article reports on an interview study of MS ELLs from a variety of backgrounds. Using self-selected artifacts representing their in-school and out-of-school lives, participants discussed their in- and out-of-school lives, social networks, impressions of school, and goals for the future. Themes of navigating complexity and forging connection point to a portrait of MS ELLs with initiative, purpose, and dimensionality that challenges the narrow focus on language often prominent in the professional discourse about ELLs.

Introduction

While navigating the expected ups and downs of middle school (MS) along with the developmental changes of adolescence, English language learners (ELLs) in the middle grades face the added challenges of learning English, straddling two or more cultures, and carrying the social burden of marked difference from their peers. For many, this constellation of demands proves to be overwhelming, even insurmountable, and research suggests that far too many MS ELLs are underachieving (Olsen, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Despite this urgency, researchers have paid relatively little attention to this important sub-group of ELLs. Instead, they are often clustered into the larger categories of elementary or secondary levels (e.g., Calderon & Slakk, 2018; Colombo, 2012; Lenski & Verbruggen, 2010), thus diminishing the unique needs and characteristics of early adolescence that is at the heart of the middle school movement (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010; Bishop & Harrison, 2021). For the most part, the existing research tends to be focused on classroom instruction and school structures that have proven helpful to simultaneously build English language proficiency and content knowledge (e.g., Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Buxton, 2013; Johnson, 2005; Zwiers, 2006).

In other words, the scholarly focus has largely been on measures of academic achievement and the learning effects of adult interventions and the decisions they make on behalf of their students. Critiquing the lack of student voices in educational research, Cook-Sather (2002) calls on researchers to "count students among those who have the knowledge and position to shape what counts as education" (p. 3). Yet very few studies have systematically inquired into the lived experiences of MS ELLs from the perspectives of the students themselves (Ardasheva et al., 2016; Braden et al., 2016; Brinegar, 2010). The emphasis on academic achievement from the perspective of adult educators, while certainly important, is also inadequate, and may unwittingly contribute to a deficit view that characterizes ELLs as primarily a language problem rather than seeing them as complex, diverse, aspirational individuals (Case, 2015; Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006). Indeed, it will be difficult for educators and school systems to adequately, equitably, and

ambitiously support middle level ELLs without having a clear sense of who these learners are, both in and out of school, and what they desire at and from school. **Responding to the literature's focus on** instructional strategies and the lack of student perspectives, I offer insights from the voices of six MS Ells forging complex and connected lives, and who are much **more than their "English Language Learner"** label is able to reveal.

MS ELLs

The term "English Language L**earner" is** commonly used to refer to students for whom English is an additional language and thus qualify for specialized instructional services designed to build English language proficiency along with grade level content. In this paper, I use this moniker because it is widely used, not because it is always **helpful. Indeed, the "one size fits all" label** may narrowly focus our attention on English language proficiency and obscure the tremendous diversity that exists within the ELL population. For example, the migration stories of ELLs and their families suggest different motives and circumstances for immigration and shape their reality in the new country (Fong, 2007; Gonzales et al., 2013). Diverse linguistic profiles also **directly impact ELLs' schooling with** English language proficiency influenced by many variables, including the age of arrival, prior exposure to English, length of time in the US, quality of instruction, and opportunities for social interaction (Carhill et al., 2008; Dixon et al., 2012). ELLs with prior schooling and first language literacy tend to benefit from these pre-existing academic resources upon entering English-dominant schools (Bunch & Walqui, 2019; Genesee et al., 2005). Unsurprisingly, school-level considerations play a critical role in the educational attainment of ELLs with the quality of the schools ELLs attend and the quality of classroom instruction they receive also contribute greatly (Ardasheva & Tretter, 2013; Fry, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

Regardless of individual and educational differences among ELLs, all confront cultural and linguistic differences. Often straddling multiple cultures, languages, and borders, ELLs tend to develop fluid, hybrid identities and linguistic repertoires (Davila, 2019; Duff, 2015) which can serve as both a resource and a challenge. On the one hand, many ELLs become adept at navigating multiple perspectives and ways of being in the world. This flexibility can open doors professionally, socially, and academically. Being bilingual and bicultural potentially includes many assets, including building maturity and a rich set of communication and collaboration skills (Chen & Padilla, 2019). On other hand, these hybrid identities can also be a source of a painful sense of difference as they may experience not fitting in with their peers and feeling like outsiders even in their own families and cultural communities (Harklau & Marino, 2019; Hayes & Endale, 2018). The challenge of navigating this crucial period of social and identity development – significant and turbulent for any early adolescent – is only heightened for ELLs.

For ELLs and non-ELLs, middle school can be a crucial period that sets the trajectory for future educational attainment and well-being due to linguistic, academic, social, and developmental considerations (NMSA, 2003). At the same time, ELLs may face unique challenges in the middle grades. For example, the division of the school day into multiple class periods produces social complexity that can be especially challenging for ELLs as it necessitates learning multiple sets of class norms and getting to know multiple teachers and peer contexts. Additionally, the content-specific curriculum tends to become more specialized and rigorous bringing an increased assumption of prior knowledge and academic language complexity (Yoon, 2021). If ELLs enter MS with gaps in content knowledge due to the circumstances of his/her prior educational experience, they may be unprepared to meet the demands of certain courses. These content gaps may be

due to interrupted formal education or because they effectively missed out on content learning due to language issues – perhaps they were present for content instruction but were unable to access it because they could not fully understand the language of instruction (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Consequently, too many ELLs find themselves in a double bind. Lack of full access to grade-level content instruction prevents them from gaining the content knowledge, academic language, and advanced literacy necessary to access the content and language needed to progress both academically and linguistically. As a result, they often get tracked into academic pathways that prevent ELLs from exercising their full potentials (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Umansky, 2016).

Despite the formidable obstacles many face, ELLs can be a remarkably resilient, motivated, and capable group of young people (Walqui & Bunch, 2019). They are **much more than a "language problem."** Rather, this very diverse group of youth represents a vibrant tapestry of multilingualism, culture, interests, family contexts, gifts, and aspirations (Baker, 2019; Yoon, 2021). However, ELLs too often become invisible or standardized by rigid instructional programming that may or may not be appropriate or engaging (Menken et al., 2012; Umansky, 2016). In order to provide quality education, this high-potential group of learners needs to be seen and heard in order to be known and taught. Although very important, developing English language proficiency is just one relevant aspect contributing to their success at school and beyond. Accordingly, this study attempts to provide a multidimensional portrait of MS ELLs that reveals youth actively pursuing hybrid identities within rich social networks crisscrossing multiple languages, cultures, and communities.

Theoretical Framework

Concerns for "achievement" (as constituted by measurable growth in English language proficiency, literacy, and academic learning) tend to dominate the literature on ELLs (i.e., Carhill et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2011; Echevarria et al., 2006) and a focus on **"development" is a prevailing theme in the** MS research (Balfanz, 2009; NMSA, 2003). While both achievement and development warrant careful attention by researchers and educators, this focus can also obscure other significant factors – such as identity, culture, migration, social context, and individual traits – that shape the trajectory of MS ELLs. Thus, this study assumes a broader view of learning and development. **Drawing on Kramsch's (2002) ecological** perspective on second language acquisition which acknowledges how learning and socialization occu**r "in relation to the** personal, situational, cultural, and societal factors that collectively shape the **production and evolution of language"** (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008, p. 18), this project takes a holistic view recognizing all elements (instructional and non-instructional) that support and/or impede **ELLs' learning and well**-being.

Methods

This article reports on the findings from a pilot study of seventh and eighth grade students who were classified as ELLs (see Table 1). Using phenomenological interview methodology (Seidman, 2013), participants were invited to describe their interests, activities, relationships, language use, and aspirations in and out of school. The purpose was not to derive generalizable findings, but to provide insight through portraits of six middle schoolers whose lived experiences extend beyond national borders, classroom walls, and their ELL labels. Participants were each interviewed twice for 20-45 minutes. Informed by **Halbritter and Lundquist's (2012)** methodological innovations using artifacts in interviewing, and roughly modeled after

Van Duinen's (2013) study, this research incorporated participant chosen artifacts in the interviewing process. For the first interview, participants brought three artifacts to represent who they are out of school and for the second, three artifacts that represent who they are in school. Because the purpose of phenomenological **interviewing is to explore the participant's** point of view and lived experience (as opposed to finding out information based **on the researcher's predetermined criteria),** the interviews were shaped, but not prescribed by scripted questions. Rather, the interviewer was guided by a general purpose for each interview and responsively followed the direction of the interviewee.

Participants came from one middle school located in the Pacific Northwest region of the US. The most commonly spoken languages of ELLs at this school are Marshallese, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Vietnamese. Test scores and other state-mandated metrics recently placed the school in the lowest 5% of the state and 85% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Participants were recruited primarily through the intermediate/advanced level ELD (English language development)

classes to ensure they had sufficient English proficiency to successfully participate in an interview in English. The consent forms were translated into the most commonly spoken languages. The study was approved **by the researcher's university IRB and by** the school district.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additional data sources included interview notes and researcher memos written within 48 hours of each interview. The transcripts were analyzed according to established practices in qualitative research as described by Seidman (2013). First, each interview was transcribed word for word. Next, recursive reading of the transcripts generated potential themes and categories for coding. The transcripts were read again – this time for the purpose of creating an illustrative profile of each student. The profiles and transcripts were analyzed again with attention focused on themes/categories that applied across multiple participants resulting in a final set of codes. After another round of transcript coding, excerpts were clustered according to category to facilitate further interpretation and synthesis.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	M/F	Age	Birthplace	Primary language spoken at home
Akram	Male	12	Libya (family is from Sudan)	Arabic
Snapshot	Left relatives in Sudan. Spends a lot of time playing and watching basketball. Wants to be an NBA player or a design engineer.			
Ali	Male	14	Iraq	Arabic
Snapshot	**Because of the war, his "official" birthday is incorrect.** On a club soccer team. Wants to graduate with a 3.5 GPA and go to college.			

Bobson	Male	12	United States	Marshallese
Snapshot	His parents left the Marshall Islands to get educated in the U.S. Attends church activities three days a week. Wants to be a realtor when he grows up.			
Carlos	Male	13	United States	Spanish
Snapshot	Has visited relatives in Mexico numerous times. Often serves as a companion for his grandpa. Wants to join the military.			
Daisy	Female	13	Tanzania (family is from Burundi)	Kirundi
Snapshot	As a girl, her **mother wasn't able to attend school because of her home responsibilities.** Uses YouTube to learn to draw. Wants to be a kindergarten teacher.			
Sofia	Female	12	Moldova	Romanian
Snapshot	When she was a child in Moldova, she had so much homework that she was lucky to go to bed before 11:00 at night. Loves to take photos of the sunrise. Wants to be a dentist, a photographer, or a lawyer.			

Navigating Complexity and Creating Connections

The interviews highlighted what we already know: MS ELLs are so much more than English learners. Their lives resemble tapestries with many colorful threads woven together into sophisticated patterns. Some of these threads are common to the immigrant experience with multiple languages and cultures influencing hybrid identities. Moreover, the youth in this study were active and proactive agents in constructing their own lives, and often were able to articulate a keen meta-awareness of how they were navigating complex social, linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts. Significantly, none of the participants described loneliness or isolation (which is to not imply they never experienced it). Rather, they chose to talk about close family connections, friends, community affiliations, and access to knowledge through technology.

Navigating Multiple Linguistic and Cultural Landscapes

Notwithstanding their official school designation as ELLs, each of the participants indicated that English was their most comfortable language. At home, however, all of the parents spoke a language other than English and according to the middle-schoolers, none of the parents was fully proficient in English. As the students became increasingly comfortable in English, they seemed to become increasingly less comfortable in their mother tongue. In this way, these young people experienced some degree of a language barrier whether they were at home, in the community, at church, or at school. Several of the middle-schoolers reported that they spoke English with other youth in their family such as siblings and cousins, but not with their parents. Ali, a 14-year-old boy from Iraq, explained it this way:

I used to be comfortable speaking Arabic, but now, like, when I speak it, it's kind of hard for me, so like English, I think. I don't watch any shows or anything that are Arabic. Kind of like gives me a headache, 'cause they're screaming.

At the same time, he explained that "my Mom is trying to make me have both languages, 'cause it's like **better.**" A similar storyline was expressed by Sofia, a 12-year-old girl from Moldova. She said they speak Romanian in their home "all the time," but when her cousins come over, they communicate with each other in English. "It's rare that we speak in my language, Romanian." Consequently, she feels that she's forgetting "a lot of words in Romanian," even though she knows her "mom doesn't want me to forget my own language." With the exception of Bobson, all the participants indicated that they spoke English with their friends. With students from over 20 different countries at their MS, the ELLs especially tend to have friends from a variety of linguistic backgrounds and English becomes the shared language. However, Marshallese is the most common language in the ELD program, which may explain why Bobson did not mention his first language atrophying.

Still, all the students reported spaces where they retain ties to their countries and languages of origin. Church was the most common place where their cultural communities gathered, creating a home-away-from-home. Daisy, who speaks Kirundi and comes from a Burundian family, described how she gathers with just four other families at a church after another congregation finishes their services on Sundays. There, the sermons and Bible reading take place in Kirundi. "We never get to speak English at church," she reported. Akram, a 12-year-old from Sudan, attends Islamic worship services that include schooling in Arabic. Although "it's not called Sunday School," he calls it that "because it's Sunday and it's kinda like school." The

purpose, he says, is "for learning more about my religion and write Arabic." Similarly, Bobson gathers with the Marshallese community three days a week at church.

Along with multiple languages, these middle-schoolers continually grapple with navigating multiple cultural expectations. Although young, some were remarkably articulate at describing these differences. For example, Sofia observed the difference in casual social interactions between people in Moldova and the US. In Moldova, she explained,

> *. . . when you don't know someone and they just say hi to you, they would be like 'what's wrong with that person. I don't know them. Why are they saying hi to me?' But here it's like a nice thing, you know.*

She also recognized that her parents were stricter than others, not allowing her to hang out with friends who were not from their cultural community. For now, at least, she was content with enjoying her friends only at school "because they love me because I'm their only child, you know. They would do almost anything for me. But my parents are pretty strict." Daisy articulated the individualistic nature of American culture in contrast to the communal culture she experienced in Africa. She said that when she gets a job, she intends to help the homeless people she "sees sleeping outside and I feel bad." "In America," she explains, "you have to find a place to build your own house but in Africa. . . we used to like build our own house. . . just getting help from your friends." In terms of educational differences, Daisy noted, "African math and American math are different." Ali, who occasionally experienced anti-Islamic discrimination, recognized the lack of religious literacy among many Americans. He said, "Like people think, here in America, like "you guys don't believe in Jesus. But, like it's written in our Bible.

There is Jesus in our Bible. . . 'Cause in our country, that's when Christianity was born."

Navigating Narratives of School

Another complexity expressed by the middle schoolers was not framed by them as a complexity, or even as a problem, but it was a tension that stood out to me. I was struck by the degree to which they seemed to buy into school-based systems, expectations, and narratives of academic success leading to college while they were seemingly stuck in ELD classes and earning mediocre grades. At this point in time, however, the middle schoolers offered very few complaints about school. They seemed to generally feel safe, liked enough of their teachers and classes, and were rewarded for their good natures. Akram noted that the teachers "really help you learn and like if you have a question about a subject, they will like stay with you after school to help you." When asked if they had any ideas to make school better, most expressed satisfaction with the status quo. For instance, when asked if there was anything else he wanted to tell me about his school, Bobson replied, "Not really. I think this school is perfect." Daisy complained that there was too much social "drama" at school, but overall, "it's just fun" and if she had a problem, "I can just tell any teacher, like, yeah, but I never get a problem since I got here. . ." Sofia explained that when she started middle school she did not want to go to school, "but now I, I don't want to be sick. I want to go to school, you know. I feel safe to go here. I know my friends are going to be here to support me."

Although these students all described experiencing some form of adversity in their lives, including the death of and separation from loved ones, bullying, parents' unemployment, poverty, and failing classes, they had a clear sense of a bright future. And they viewed school as the critical pathway to attaining this. Without being directly asked, all six participants talked about going to college, though Sofia's

mother was the only parent of the group who had graduated from college. Unsurprisingly, she was the one for whom college seemed the most concrete. "I try my best at everything," she said, "put school first. . . then later on, after school, I could have the time of my life after I get a good job and go to college and get a college degree . . . I think it would be very bad if I didn't go to college." To the others, college felt more like a vague, but good idea. Daisy said her parents want her to go to college and that her dad "does not want us to work before we graduate. . . maybe he think we are going to like money more than school." When I asked her why she wanted to go to college, she replied, "they say there are some different clubs. Like cooking club . . . and you get to choose what class you go in." Ali expressed a similar vague understanding of college:

> *My parents talked to me about it. So I just always had [college] in my mind. . .* **I don't know what it's like there . . .** *think it's like high school, just like periods, just like middle school, you just like pick them.*

Carlos summed up the logic of schooling this way:

> *I have to study - improve on my learning ability, improve on my skills and getting ready to go to high school* **or college. But that's when it hits and we're just getting ready and ready for** *life. After we finish school, we go live our own lives.*

Though these middle schoolers have clearly received the message about going to college, other responses delightfully revealed how they are exploring and envisioning all kinds of options. Daisy noted that when she grows up she might like to be a kindergarten teacher or work in a store "organizing stuff," or work in a zoo playing with baby tigers. Carlos reported that he was considering going to college, joining the military, or getting a job at Dairy Queen "cuz you're

gonna have to need a lot of ice cream when it gets summer." Ali and Bobson both had hopes to become professional athletes playing for FIFA and the NBA, respectfully. If not, Bobson said, he wanted to "be a real estate" and if it did not pan out to become a professional soccer player, Ali would settle for being a doctor or a dentist or an engineer or a pharmacist.

Connections

These MS ELLs were remarkably connected to rich social networks of support. These networks included peers, family, faith-based and other community organizations. Reflecting the linguistically and culturally diverse landscapes of their lives, these networks involved multiple languages, cultures, contexts, and purposes. Additionally, the participants proactively accessed technological resources for learning, entertainment, and communication. In other words, they were both socially and technologically connected.

Peer Connections

Unsurprisingly, peers mattered a great deal to these students, and they tended to have multiple groups of friends that match the various strands of their lives. Sometimes these friendships overlapped contexts and sometimes they did not. Sometimes their friends shared the same linguistic and cultural background and sometimes they did not. Like their non-ELL peers, they liked to hang out, were keenly aware of social drama, and wanted to be accepted. For example, Akram reported that he and his friends are all really into the NBA and that they talk about it "every single second." Similarly, Bobson and his friends love basketball and play it every chance they get. He plays at school with a group of his "Marshallese friends and other friends that lives around here" and at home with "my next-door neighbor that three siblings, they're all boys. . . They're Africans." Sofia has two best friends at school, a girl from Thailand and one from Nepal. She described

meeting them at lunch, "And then one day I just, I didn't have nobody to sit with at lunch and they invited me over. And I sat with them and then we just became friends. Best friends." Ali confessed that "talking . . .gets me in trouble a lot. Yeah. 'Cause I don't know when to stop talking. 'Cause I have a lot of friends, way too many friends in classes that I talk to."

In addition to positive peer interactions, the participants also talked about navigating social challenges. Carlos, for instance, described conflict between his group of friends and another and noted that other kids at school "called me a midget," but he ignored them. He said that in describing him his friends would say, "He's not mean to anybody. He plays along, he doesn't get mad." Daisy recounted playing volleyball with a group of friends at lunch and the accompanying trouble with a group of girls who interfered with their game:

> *. . . some girls . . .like we don't know, like we come first, we are the first to the gym and then we get volleyball and then we start playing. When they come, we never touch the ball anymore because they keep throwing it harder. . . One day I got hit by the volleyball in my ear and it was hurting and I got to go to the student office.*

Now, Daisy says, "when they come to play, we just leave the ball for them and we just go away." Ali, who has a wide circle of friends, got into trouble after hitting a boy who had taunted him:

> *I got suspended this year because somebody said something that I did not like. It was like racist. I was walking to the bathroom and he like said something. 'I'm not supposed to be in this country. I'm Arabic.' And stuff, and I just punched him, 'cause I was like mad. And then the officer came and just started yelling at me.*

When his parents learned what had happened, they told Ali, "You should have just ignored him and walked away." Upon further discussion about this incident, Ali said he thinks that boy was trying to say it as a joke. "'Cause a lot of people joke with Arabic people here about that stuff." He added:

> But I don't take it serious when you joke about it and you're laughing and the other guy is not getting mad, and laughing, too. . . But, like, if someone says that to me, I tell them not to say it. Like, if I'm joking about it, if I'm saying stuff about it and it's funny, then okay, but you can't just come up to me and then say it.

Like Carlos and Daisy, Ali was keenly observant of the social context and deliberately made choices about how to respond.

Family Connections

For all six participants, their families and extended families played a prominent role in their lives. They all spoke about their parents' influences with a tone of warmth, security, and respect. Consistent with a common theme in immigrant narratives, these students expressed awareness that their parents were sacrificing on their behalf, and that they had some obligation to make good on their sacrifices. Ali said that his mom was the most important person in his life. "I feel like womens care about their children more than men 'cause like they, they were pregnant and they went through stuff you know," he explained. "My Mom. . . She talks to me a lot, if I do something bad or something like that. And just tells me to watch out next time. . ." When asked what he thinks his mom expects from him, he immediately answered, "Good grades. . . she talks to me about it almost every day." Bobson was excited to show me a gift card he had purchased after patiently collecting small change from his parents. "Every time when like my parents go to store, when they have extra cents, like pennies and nickels and quarters, they give it to me." Like Ali, Bobson said his mother was the most important person in his life and he tried to do his part at home helping with chores, "'Cause she always needed my help and I always help her." Although Sofia wished her parents were not so strict, she acknowledged, "they love me because I'm their only child, you know. They would do almost anything for me."

In addition to expressing close connection with their parents and siblings, each of the students also described close connections to their extended families – cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. In some cases, the relatives lived nearby; in other cases, they were living halfway around the world. Through technology, they stayed in communication. Daisy, for instance, described Facetiming with her family in Tanzania. Her older sister had died, leaving her husband and two sons. Daisy explained that they "are trying to bring them here," but in the meantime, "sometimes we send them money for like food and clothes. Because in Africa some people are poor." She also spoke fondly of her "dad's grandma . . . And she's still alive. She is 100 or something. Yeah, when you ask her like 'how old are you?' she just says like '35' because she cannot remember her age." Carlos's 80-year-old grandpa lives with his family and Carlos has a special relationship with him. They pray together at night and "if he goes somewhere, I have to go with him," Carlos reported. "'Cause my parents don't trust him to be by himself." One of Carlos' jobs is to translate for him because "it's a bit hard for him to speak English, but he's really good at Spanish." Most days after school, Sofia goes to her grandma's house until one of her parents picks her up. Her aunt and her children live with the grandma. After eating food prepared by her grandma, Sofia plays with her two young cousins who "jumps over me and starts playing with me. And then I have to play with them." Sofia's best friend is another cousin, who is her same age.

Faith and Community Connections

As mentioned earlier, faith communities functioned as another important piece of **these students' social** networks, providing additional influential adults and peers and moral grounding. For instance, Bobson attended a youth group at the Marshallese church each Friday. About her church participation, Sofia said:

> *We do a lot of fun stuff. Like, almost every Sunday after church we go to a park. And we all bring foods and we have donuts or pizza and we hang out. Play volleyball and soccer and different bunch of games. A bunch of Moldovan games.*

Daisy reported attending church on both Saturday and Sunday. At the meetings, she said, **"We sing, we read Bibles and like we** pray. Like for some people, like they seek and need help with their problems. We **thank God for keeping us safe." Carlos** described being part of a large group of people who recently received First **Communion. "You have t**o wear something **fancy," he explained, and "we had to speak to the priest." Because his mom is unhappy** with some conflict in their congregation, Carlos said he and his family do not attend church as often as they used to. For Akram, Sunday services include learning to read and write in Arabic. In contrast to the other participants who said they attended communal worship services regularly, Ali said he had only been to the local mosque a couple times during Ramadan. But he and his family practice Islam in other ways, including daily prayer, and he is included in a small group of Muslim students who go to **the counselor's office to pray during the** school day.

These middle-schoolers also accessed community and school-based extracurricular activities and organizations. For example, Carlos participated in a principal-led book club and attended summer camp sponsored by the Salvation Army. Akram took part in AVID at school, a college-preparatory support program. Daisy sang in the school choir. Ali played soccer on a community soccer team and he had **gone on family vacations with his coach's** family. Bobson said he and his friends regularly go to the library after school, mostly to use the computers.

Technologically Connected

In addition to these rich human connections, these youth are also – unsurprisingly – connected in terms of technology. Like their peers, they play videogames and listen to music. Two other aspects of technology use featured across the interviews. First, for most of them, it appears that their technology use is regulated by their parents. And second, YouTube is an important teacher. Relating to parental oversight of technology, most of the youth had phones and described expectations for its use. For example, **Carlos, who had recently received an "LG plus data" said he uses his phone to make** calls, play games, and listen to music. But he is careful never to answer his phone at school because if he did his parents would take it away for a week. When I asked if that **had every happened, he responded, "No. And I don't want it to happen." Similarly,** Sofia said she was stuck with an old Samsung Galaxy S5 since her parents would not get her the new iphone she wanted. And **she's "not allowed to take it to school or anything like that." "I get it taken away a** lot," she confessed, "'Cause my Dad says I don**'t focus with it." Bobson, who loves** playing videogames has a time limit of two **hours on school days. "'**Cause my Mom tells me if I play a long time I'll, my eyes or head **might hurt."**

Daisy, Sofia, and Carlos all reported learning new skills and information on YouTube. For instance, Sofia described **learning to play the piano, "But I don'**t take piano lessons, I just go on YouTube and, yeah. I learn it,**" she said. "I learn the notes** through YouTube, and I listen to tutorials

and everything." Daisy said she wanted to show me her drawing book. "I'm just learning how to draw. Like some animes and animals and stuff like that . . . I just write 'how to draw step by step' on YouTube and they like bring it." For his part, Carlos was very intrigued by what he had learned on YouTube about joining the military – an option he was considering for himself. His knowledge gained from YouTube was admittedly questionable, but he did not seem to question its veracity. In discussing his military aspirations, he added, "But here's the part I don't like . . . They're gonna put some pepper spray in your eyes, so you gotta close them very tight for it doesn't go on you. And they're gonna have to taze your back." When I asked him who told him that, he replied, "I just learned it from YouTube."

Discussion & Implications

The glimpses into the lives of these six MS ELLs point to lived realities far richer and more complex than a narrow focus on English language proficiency implies. We see young people regularly and proactively negotiating complexity of all kinds: linguistic, academic, social. They inhabit multiple identities as they crisscross various home, school, community, and global contexts. While this complexity seems challenging – and certainly it can be – these six students did not act like it was particularly hard. Rather, in these interviews as least, they seemed to deftly negotiate multiple worlds with awareness and intentionality. Nested in an array of rich, social networks, the participants recognized that they were a part of multiple, distinct social circles with different expectations and assumptions depending on the group and context. As such, we see them pursuing goals and sensing obligation to their families, churches, and communities. For instance, Carlos felt responsibility for his grandfather and Sofia to her parents. Daisy expressed concern for people living in poverty and Bobson regularly helped his elderly neighbor. They also proactively figured out a way to obtain what they needed and to advocate for themselves. Ali, for example, mowed lawns to earn money for new soccer shoes. Carlos went to the principal when one of his friends was getting bullied. Determined to play the piano, Sofia taught herself with the help of YouTube. Perhaps in part due to navigating this complexity, these six students seemed to have acquired a remarkable sense of self-efficacy. The connectedness (both social and technological) described by these MS ELLs is probably inextricable from the complexity they navigate daily.

In many ways, these six young people seem extraordinary. However, their "ordinariness" as young adolescents is another significant part of the story. Similar to their non-ELL peers in middle school, they care about clothes, music, sports, and pop culture. They are keenly aware of the social landscape and how they fit in, or do not. They are aware of what is going on in the school, nuances of particular teachers, and practices the school system rewards or punishes. They are sensitive to perceived unfairness and have figured out when to push back and when to take it in stride. They embrace technology as a tool for information and connection. Even with all the complexity of their young lives, they are still 13-year-olds.

For many educators who work with MS ELLs, these snapshots of six youth would not be surprising. They know and appreciate their students as multidimensional humans. Yet the professional literature and discourse around ELLs tends to be dominated by a focused concern for closing the language and achievement gaps. The umbrella label "English Language Learner" is assumed to be a meaningful construct (and certainly it is relevant and useful to call out the unique linguistic needs of ELLs). In reality, however, with the exception of being multilingual, all the same categories of diversity that apply to non-ELLs apply to ELLs. The term itself may cause us to gaze at the lack of English proficiency at the expense of considering all the specific possibilities of what it could mean and look

like to be an "English Learner." This view is "often flawed, incomplete, or one-dimensional, making it harder to challenge static, problematic, and racialized views of the practices and promise of English Learners" (Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006). To avoid this sort of damaging over-simplification, it behooves educators and researchers to digress from the technical aspects of instructional strategies and other educational programming. Being curious about understanding the bigger picture – the whole "ecology" of students' lives – opens possibilities for school to be more ethical and humanizing. Embracing an ecological perspective offers

> A more complex and more challenging agenda, one that involves exploring the deep script of human interaction with the learning process, not in isolation, but within the broader context of students' concerns, attitudes and perceptions. . . [and] within the totality of the lives of the various participants involved. (Tudor, 2003, p. 10)

While the six students represented in this article hardly represent every, most, or even a meaningful sub-section of the larger population of ELLs walking middle school halls, their stories suggest useful possibilities. I will briefly address just five, framing these possibilities as "what-if" statements.

1. Ali and Sofia both recognized that they increasingly felt less comfortable using their first languages. What if schools were as concerned about ELLs losing their home languages as they were about them learning English?
2. When Carlos, Sofia, and Daisy wanted to develop new knowledge or skills, they independently learned via YouTube. What if schools more effectively utilized technology for learning purposes and assumed that ELLs were independently accessing

information in response to their own questions?
3. Each of the participants held important responsibilities in their families and communities. What if schools built on this leadership potential?
4. Daisy, Ali, and Carlos experienced mistreatment by their peers. What if we were as concerned about the social experience of ELLs as we were about the academic one?
5. All the participants described high levels of parent, family, and community support and connection. What if we re-imagined what we think parent and family support looks like?

The glimpses into the lives of Akram, Ali, Bobson, Carlos, Daisy, and Sofia serve as a reminder of the many facets and forces shaping the lived experiences of middle school youth we call "English Language Learners." Imagine the possibilities if education moved beyond deficit orientations toward ELLs and beyond a focus on the technical aspects of teaching them. This is not to diminish the significance of high-quality curriculum and instruction, but rather is an invitation to zoom out in order to see more than achievement gaps and language barriers. In describing why she often gets up early to take pictures of the sky at dawn, Sofia explained, "I just love how the colors melt together." Similarly delighting in the beautiful and ever-changing nuances of our multilingual students' lives seems like a promising idea.

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