

## What Does ESL Mean to Her? An Analysis of Women of Color Recounting Their Attempts to Exit EL Instructional Services

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*A portion of EL-identified youth want to exit the EL instructional services to which they are legally entitled. Moreover, institutionalized adultism within EL policy does not provide youths a role in decision-making about these services. As a result, little is known about how individuals who attempt unsanctioned exits conceptualize EL instructional services. This study uses an intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens to analyze the retrospective interviews of 35 women of color who attempted to exit EL instructional services during their K–12 schooling. The findings highlight three dominant themes in participants' conceptualizations of EL instructional services: they were academically limiting, socially isolating, and that placement in these services was a product of racism. Moreover, this detailed analysis evidenced how schooling transitions impacted participants' conceptualization of EL instructional services. These findings have implications for how research, policy, and practice can center EL-identified youths' decision-making and disrupt their experiences of marginalization.*

**Keywords:** *adultism, bilingual/bicultural, decision making, educational policy, EL policy, EL services, English language learners, equity, in-depth interviewing, instructional practices, learning environments, qualitative research, reclassification, youth voice*

Youths identified as English learners (ELs) within the United States school system are legally entitled to receive specialized instructional services (e.g., English as a second language [ESL] classes and bilingual education programming) that facilitate their academic and English language development (Lhamon & Gupta, 2015). The existence of the legal requirement for EL instructional services reflects hard-won battles for educational justice (Powers, 2014). Despite their stated relevance to equity and access, some EL-identified youths want to exit EL instructional services. Among other reasons, research documents youths' desire to exit EL instructional services because they view them as low quality or fail to recognize youths' English proficiency (e.g., Abril-Gonzalez & Shannon, 2021; Karam et al., 2021; Malsbary, 2014).

While youths may want to exit EL instructional services, there is no policy mechanism to facilitate their decision-making, capture their perspectives, or act upon their desires. Their volition and perspectives are not systemically considered in decision-making about the instructional services with which they are provided. There is not even a policy mandate to share with youth that they are receiving EL services. U.S. EL policy has only given adults, specifically legal guardians/parents and school officials, the systemic power to decide instructional services (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; No Child Left Behind, 2002). Policy-focused research about when students should be exited from

receiving EL instructional services does not often incorporate student perspectives. It tends to focus on identifying the best configuration of standardized measures to demonstrate sufficient English proficiency and how adults interpret coinciding policies (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Reyes & Domina, 2019; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016).

The absence of sanctioned pathways for youths to exit themselves from EL instructional services does not mean they do not attempt to do so. Among other strategies, they have sought to exit EL instructional services by asking their parents for assistance or petitioning school-affiliated adults for class changes (e.g., Brooks, 2019; McKay & Wong, 1996; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). However, minimal research that extends across ethnoracial groups and U.S. states focuses on the meaning-making of individuals who have engaged in these unsanctioned exit attempts. This study contributes to this lacuna in research. It examines how 35 women of color who self-identified as being misclassified as learning English and attempted to exit EL instructional services during their K–12 educational trajectories conceptualized these services. I investigated three research questions: How did participants conceptualize EL instructional services in their recounts of their exit attempts? What role did schooling transitions play in these conceptualizations? How did participants describe the role of raciolinguistic ideologies in their conceptualizations of EL instructional services?



The findings highlight three dominant themes in how participants conceptualized EL instructional services in their descriptions of exit attempts. They conceptualized EL instructional services as academically limiting, socially isolating, and that placement in these services was a product of racism. Together, these three themes emphasize that participants' attempts to exit EL instructional services were tied to finding a just and appropriate learning environment. They highlight how schooling transitions impacted participants' understanding of EL instructional services. Finally, they underscore how racism was integral to participants' understandings of how EL instructional services function. These findings have implications for how research, policy, and practice can center EL-identified youths' decision-making, thereby challenging the marginalizing and homogenizing nature of their EL instructional experiences.

### **The Erasure of Youth Decision-Making**

Writing and researching about the topic of EL-identified youths who want to exit EL instructional services is tricky because their legally required rights and resources are consistently under attack (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Gandara & Orfield, 2012; Sampson, 2019). Shining a light on discontent within the student population can give ammunition to those who believe that additional resources to support EL-identified youth are unnecessary. However, these types of orchestrated attacks have been underway despite the limited research on this topic. Moreover, existing youth-focused research indicates that this topic is worthy of further attention. Youths have highlighted the stigma of the EL label, poorly designed EL instructional services, and misidentification of English-speaking students as learners of English (Abril-Gonzalez & Shannon, 2021; Catalano et al., 2020; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Karam et al., 2021; Malsbary, 2014). This study contributes where other research has stopped short. It systematically investigates the meaning-making of those who have attempted to exit.

Understanding the meaning-making of people who have attempted to exit EL instructional services is necessary because the current set-up of EL policy in the United States does not provide a systemic way for EL-identified youth to exercise decision-making. This absence reflects a normative position of youth in U.S. policy and law, particularly youth from marginalized groups, in which they are acted upon by adults (Fordyce, 2017; Lee, 2017). I contend that EL policy has been constructed on the erasure of youth decision-making. This study represents a challenge to the normative positioning of youth in EL policy.

Existing research has described the exclusion of youth participation in EL identification and decisions emerging from EL identification as institutionalized adultism (Brooks, 2022). Institutionalized adultism names how policies and practices are infused with adultism, which "refers to

behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement" (Bell, 2010, p. 540). Institutionalized adultism is particularly salient regarding the systemic erasure of EL-identified youths' decision-making on instructional services because it allows two groups of adults to make decisions about EL instructional services. School-affiliated adults make initial decisions about program selection; parents/guardians can affirm or reject the decisions of school-affiliated adults (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). While certain schools, counselors, EL administrators, or parents/guardians may consider youths' desires (e.g., Thompson & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2023), no formal policy gives youths the power of educational decision-making, or even allows for their input.

In stating the power of parents/guardians to make choices about educational pathways for their children, it is essential to recognize the disproportionate power of school officials. While adultism may provide space for parents/guardians to have a voice, the racism, xenophobia, and heterosexism that impact youth also impact their parents/guardians. Parents of EL-identified youths can be presented with inaccurate representations of instructional options, be unaware of their authority to challenge the school's decisions, or be overruled by school officials (e.g., Cioê-Peña, 2020a, 2020b; Kanno & Kangas, 2014). In this sense, adult school officials can control which services EL-identified youth receive more than parents/guardians. While the actual institutional power of parents/guardians is debatable, there is no mechanism for youth decision-making in policy about EL instructional services.

### **Creating a Space for Youth Voice**

The conceptual lens of this study pushes back against the previously described erasure of youth decision-making because it is centered on anti-adultism. Anti-adultism recognizes the importance of youth agency in multiple contexts. Notably, the power of agentive youth is not limited to those who take up an anti-adultism perspective (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2021; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Karam et al., 2021; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). However, this paper uses anti-adultism to focus on youths participating in educational decision-making related to EL instructional services. This research's conceptual lens affirms the rights of youths to know about and participate in decision-making that impacts their individual educational trajectory (Bertrand et al., 2020; Brooks, 2022). This affirmation of youth's perspectives in teaching and learning is central to Poza's (2021) applied perspective on dignity frames in educational contexts. The reliance on adult participants in this study does not prevent the use of a conceptual lens centered on anti-adultism. All the adults interviewed for this study wanted greater attention to youth's understandings and their decision-making power. This study provided a forum to share understandings and

ideas that were frequently ignored when the participants were minors.

Exclusive attention to combatting age bias is insufficient for a study involving women of color whose lives are shaped by various marginalized social identities. For instance, focusing solely on age overlooks the roles of gender, perceived national origin, and skin color. A narrow focus on age bias would render the possible existence of raciolinguistic ideologies invisible. Raciolinguistic ideologies “conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 150). The power of raciolinguistic ideologies in the lives of linguistically and racially minoritized individuals has been documented in research and practice (Ascenzi-Moreno & Seltzer, 2021; Flores & Lewis, 2022; Smith, 2022). To avoid this erasure, I include intersectional theoretical principles (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Robert & Yu, 2018) in my theorization of anti-adultism. Therefore, this study uses an intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens to recognize that the institutionalized biases that limit youth from fully exercising agency are impacted by more than age, and to reject the resulting practices that diminish the capabilities of youth.

Building upon the work of other scholars who use Black and other Women of Color feminist perspectives to inform qualitative research (Burkhard & Deiri, 2021; Player, 2021; Toliver, 2020), this study’s intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens and its focus on the meaning-making of women of color via retrospective interviews is uniquely relevant. First, it highlights the significance of knowledge that is developed by the experience of marginalization. Specifically, it recognizes that dominant lenses can overlook these distinctive understandings of social processes. This perspective is critical within systems governed by institutionalized adultism. It represents a direct challenge to how EL instructional services have been used to restrict youth without their consent (Abril-Gonzales & Shannon, 2021; Cabral, 2022; Kangas & Kanno, 2020). Second, it allows for the possibility—which has been documented in other research (Brooks, 2022; Johnson, 2019; Valdés, 2020)—that seemingly mundane bureaucratic practices in EL education can serve to limit academic opportunity and erase youths’ multifaceted identities. Finally, it uses this knowledge as a starting ground for transforming educational systems. In sum, it centers the voices and experiences of women/girls of color as the basis for educational reform. This perspective is critical because this group is at the intersection of multiple and often overlooked social oppressions.

## **Methods**

### *Study Participants*

The participants were selected from a larger sample of 104 adults who responded to Twitter, Facebook, or email recruitment to participate in an in-depth retrospective

interview about being misclassified as learning English in the United States. Retrospective interviews of adults meant that the interviews covered their entire K–12 experience and facilitated the recruitment of ethn racially diverse participants with varied life experiences who were educated in different parts of the United States. This analysis focuses on the interviews of the 35 women of color who reported that they attempted to exit EL instructional services during K–12 schooling in the United States.

An exit attempt was defined as engaging in action to exit ESL, bilingual program, or other EL instructional service. Action included asking adults (i.e., family member or school official) to be removed from services, or refusing to participate in services (e.g., missing class or refusing to complete classwork). Twenty-three were Latinas of varying racial backgrounds, seven were Asian American or Pacific Islander, four were Black with ties to recent immigration from Africa and the Middle East, and one participant was Pacific Islander and White. In all, 80% of participants (28) had only lived and been educated in the United States. Thirty-one participants graduated from high school during the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) or No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act; four graduated before the enactment of NCLB.

### *Data Collection*

*Modalities for Qualitative Interviews.* The interviews were conducted prior to and during the initial summer of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were four modalities through which the interviews were conducted: audio-recorded in-person interviews, audio-recorded online video interviews, audio-recorded online audio interviews, and audio-recorded telephone interviews. Participants elected their preferred modality.

*Content of Interviews.* I conducted one 60–90-minute semi-structured in-depth interview with each participant. The interviews provided a forum for adults to recount their lived experience of exit attempts, which was an act that had previously been denied to most participants. The intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens shaped how the interviews were designed and conducted. In recognizing the EL system’s institutionalized adultism, the interview questions were constructed to position participants as the most knowledgeable about their language abilities and life experiences. The interview protocol included asking participants to describe their personal and familial linguistic and educational histories. Then, participants were asked to describe and interpret their experiences and responses to being misidentified as learning English. The interview closed by exploring participants’ understandings of how schools should best serve linguistically diverse youth.

*Researcher Positionality and Interviewing.* I am a non-Latina Black and Asian woman with no personal experience of being misidentified as an EL by school systems. I could

TABLE 1  
*Definition and Distribution of Themes Across Interviews*

Theme	Definition	% of Participants	Number of Participants
EL instructional services means limited educational opportunity.	Participants conceptualize EL instructional services as preventing them from accessing educational resources to which schoolmates had access.	63	22
EL instructional services means social isolation.	Participants conceptualize EL instructional services as socially isolating because of their language abilities exclusively or in addition to their cultural background.	34	12
Placement in EL instructional services is a product of racism.	Participants conceptualize their placement in EL services as being a result of raciolinguistic ideologies (i.e., their ethnoracial background marking them as being “deficient” in English).	3	1

not create the personal shared experiences that others have identified in qualitative research (Burkhard, 2019). However, I affirmed their recounted experiences with discrimination and other “-isms” rather than trying to justify how and why schools operate in this manner. This type of solidarity creation during interviewing emerges from shared experiences of gendered racism, familial experiences of linguistic misidentification, and this paper’s conceptual lens. My lived experiences and research knowledge helped develop a sense of solidarity as women of color.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis for this research project was conducted in three phases aligned with each research question. The latter two research questions were informed by the initial analysis of the primary research questions.

*First Analytic Phase.* The first research question motivated my initial analysis: How did participants conceptualize EL instructional services in their recounts of their exit attempts? To examine this research question, I used the a priori code *reasoning* to tag section(s) of each interview where the participants discussed why they decided to attempt to exit EL instructional services. Then, I reread each transcript and used emergent descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2021) to describe each participant’s primary reasoning. Three factors determined primary reasoning: repetition, explicit verbal cues of significance, and the time participants discussed reasoning. After two rounds of descriptive coding were completed, the codes were merged into three themes about the conceptualizations of EL services that undergirded participants’ stated reasoning for exiting EL instructional services (See Table 1). These three themes were informed by means/is statements found in Saldaña (2020).

I wrote analytic memos about each interview during this initial coding and theming process. In addition to focusing on topics relating directly to codes and themes, I noted that although racism did not factor into the primary reasoning

youth gave for attempting to exit EL services, it was frequently mentioned across interviews. Participants discussed how racism was evidenced through raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In addition, I noted that schooling transitions (e.g., participants were placed in a new school) preceded participants’ decision to attempt to exit EL instructional services. Therefore, I designed two additional research questions: What role did schooling transitions play in these conceptualizations? How did participants describe the role of raciolinguistic ideologies in their conceptualizations of EL instructional services? To examine these research questions, the following analysis phase involved rereading interview transcripts, continued analytic memoing, and multiple rounds of coding.

*Second Analytic Phase.* I began the analysis of the second research question with three a priori codes based on analytic memos. Initially, I used the code *schooling transition* to identify where participants’ described schooling transitions in their educational trajectory before their exit attempts. Schooling transitions always co-occurred with the first two themes. Then, I coded for *sudden* and *quotidian* transitions (see Table 2 for a typology of transitions). Then, I used analytic memoing to surface patterns within smaller sections of data that were informed by the specific life histories of participants (e.g., previous schooling and immigration histories).

*Third Analytic Phase.* In the first analytic phase, only one participant spoke to racism in the form of raciolinguistic ideologies as the primary reasoning for her exit attempt. However, the analytic memos evidenced that participants discussed how their actual or perceived ethnoracial identity, skin color, immigration history, or nationality shaped perceptions about their language ability. To answer the third research question, I coded for any mention of raciolinguistic ideologies related to EL instructional services in the remaining 34 participants’ interview transcripts. Finally, I used analytic memoing to surface patterns within how participants’

TABLE 2  
*Typologies of Schooling Transitions*

Types of Schooling Transition	Definition of Schooling Transitions
Sudden	Sudden schooling transitions that were fueled by major life course changes such as transnational migration, moving between districts, re-organization of curriculum, and promotion between grade levels.
Quotidian	Quotidian schooling transitions that were small everyday transitions through which participants witnessed or participated in non-EL instructional environments.

experiences of raciolinguistic ideologies informed their conceptualizations of EL instructional services in their exit narratives.

### Participants Perspectives on EL Instructional Services

The 35 participants attempted to exit a range of EL instructional services including: ESL pull-out classes in elementary school, Spanish–English bilingual education classes, sheltered content area classes, and ESL courses in middle and high school. Below, I discuss the three themes that underscored how participants conceptualized EL services in their recounts of exit attempts:

1. EL instructional services means limited educational opportunity.
2. EL instructional services means social isolation.
3. Placement in EL instructional services is a product of racism.

The first two themes characterized the primary conceptualizations of EL instructional services in 22 and 12 interviews, respectively (see Table 1). Below, I examine the first two themes through the lens of schooling transitions because sudden and quotidian transitions preceded each of these participant’s attempts to exit (see Table 2 for a typology of transitions). Then, I explicate the third theme that characterized the primary conceptualization of EL services in one interview and was the predominant secondary conceptualization in 24 other interviews. To illustrate the range of geographical backgrounds of the participants, the initial mention of each participant is accompanied by the state in which they first attempted to exit EL instructional services.

#### *Theme 1: EL Instructional Services Means Limited Educational Opportunity*

Schooling transitions were a uniting experience among the 22 participants who conceptualized EL instructional services as limiting their educational opportunities. Participants experienced sudden (e.g., transnational immigration) and quotidian transitions (e.g., pull-out ESL classes). Despite the differences in scale, both types of transitions signaled to participants that the school saw them as “learning English” and

called attention to what participants’ identified as lesser educational opportunities afforded to students with the EL label. Participants’ experiences of schooling transition were fundamental to their conceptualization of EL instructional services as academically limiting.

*Sudden Transitions and Limited Educational Opportunity.* Sudden schooling transitions preceded the exit attempts of 10 participants who conceptualized EL services as limiting their educational opportunities. These transitions were fueled by significant life course changes such as transnational migration, moving between districts, reorganization of curricular pathways, and promotion between grade levels. Prior to the sudden schooling transition that preceded their attempt to exit EL instructional services, all 10 participants described feeling supported and challenged in their previous educational experiences. They recognized their post-sudden schooling transition experience of EL instructional services as educationally limiting because they knew what schooling could offer. While all 10 participants experienced sudden schooling transitions, they did not all share similar educational histories. There were two distinct trajectories: Two had immigrated to the United States in high school with a robust formal education, and eight had successful educational histories learning through English in the United States and Canada. Below, I illustrate the intersection between conceptualizing EL instructional services as limiting educational opportunity, sudden schooling transition, and educational history.

*The Formally Schooled Immigrant.* Two participants who conceptualized EL instructional services as academically limiting were adolescent immigrants with robust secondary educational experiences in their respective countries of origin, where English was not the dominant societal language. The sudden schooling transitions created a bureaucratic environment in which they were placed into classes that both participants viewed as subpar. They both talked about how their introduction to the U.S. school system was a shock because of their placement into academically unchallenging courses with other students identified as ELs. They felt that their previous educational background was not considered and that EL instructional services trapped them in an inferior education.

TABLE 3

*Post-Sudden Schooling Transition: Late Entry Into EL Instructional Services*

Participant Name	Grade First Enrolled in School (K–12)	Initial Entry to EL Instructional Services	State of First Exit Attempt
Laksmi	Kindergarten (US)	Fifth Grade	Illinois
Alice	Kindergarten (US)	Fifth Grade	California
Yahira	Kindergarten (US)	Fifth Grade	Florida
Carina	Kindergarten (US)	Sixth Grade	Illinois
Marie	Kindergarten (CAN)	Seventh Grade	New York

While Cho-Hee (New York) was frustrated about all her courses, the situation in math was particularly degrading. She recounted:

So, I was with, like, all this, like, other immigrant students, uh, but then also the math was, like al-algebra, like really low-level. Um, whereas, you know, in Korea, the math learning is pretty advanced. So that was my, like, middle school or even upper elementary school level math. I was sitting there, I'm like, "What are we learning?" . . . So, um, I think they put me in those classes just because I didn't speak English, right? Well, they didn't realize or they didn't even think to ask me what I learned previously in Korea.

In addition to being tracked into unchallenging academic classes, Fatima (Massachusetts) described what she saw as the racial and class stratification in her high school. She articulated how white non-immigrant students were provided with distinct educational opportunities through social networks and teacher bias: "Parents used to come and talk to those teachers just to give their parents—uh, just to—just to give their sons and daughters certain approvals to get into these classes." Fatima described how being a Black, immigrant, Muslim, girl who was also identified as an EL positioned her outside the robust educational opportunities in the United States. While both Cho-Hee and Fatima conceptualized EL instructional services as educationally limiting, their ethnoracial identities also shaped how they experienced this marginalization.

*Successful Educational Experiences in English.* Eight participants who had experienced sudden schooling transitions and conceptualized EL instructional services as educationally limiting had been previously provided with robust instructional opportunities in English. Akin to Cho-Hee and Fatima, these eight participants' sudden schooling transitions created a bureaucratic environment in which they were entered or re-entered into EL instructional services. This sudden transition resulted in five participants' first experience with EL instructional services after being educated in English in the United States or Canada for all or most of elementary school (see Table 3). This sudden transition for the remaining three participants—Rahel (California), Melissa (California), and Vanessa (California)—meant that they were returned to EL instructional services from which they were previously exited.

Regardless of whether it was the first time or a return to EL instructional services, all eight youths conceptualized EL instructional services as academically limiting. For instance, Yahira described her experience of ESL in Florida in this manner:

I felt like that hindered my learning 'cause, obviously, we had to stop a lot to explain things. It was explaining things that I already understood and that I didn't need clarified. It wasn't in an academic way, just the language stuff. Things that I had already understood, we were having to stop and explain it to kids. My learning was being hindered.

Since they had already experienced success learning through English, like Yahira, each of the other seven participants knew that their previous non-EL educational opportunities were more expansive. For youth like Rahel, Melissa, and Vanessa, who were returned to EL services in secondary school, these conceptualizations of limitations in EL instructional services included specific concerns for their post-secondary futures. As Rahel shared about her placement in a ninth-grade ESL course for recent immigrants:

Like, it was—I felt like I was, like, student teaching at some point. Like—And that's when I was, like, okay, yeah, this is, this is—what's the point? Like, I'm not—and I'm thinking, like, for college. So, I'm like, "What—what is this gonna do for me when I'm looking—you know, when I'm looking into applying senior year?"

Rahel felt that the limitations of EL instructional services were slowly constricting her possibilities for success. All eight participants used their non-EL instructional experiences learning through English to inform their conceptualization of EL instructional services as limiting educational opportunities.

*Quotidian Transitions and Limited Educational Opportunity.* Of the 22 participants who conceptualized EL services as limiting their educational opportunities, 12 drew upon their experiences of quotidian schooling transitions. Quotidian schooling transitions are small everyday transitions where participants witnessed or participated in non-EL instructional environments. For many EL-identified youth, they are part and parcel of the ongoing instructional program. All youth

identified some variation of ESL instructional model as being evidence for their understanding of limited educational opportunity that EL instructional services offered. One participant, Jackie (Texas), referred to a high school ESL class; 11 participants referred to pull-out ESL during elementary school. In this instructional model, small groups of EL-identified students are removed from their primary class to receive a specific period of ESL instruction. Below, I examine how quotidian schooling transitions were embedded within the pull-out ESL model that characterized the elementary schooling of the 11 participants who conceptualized EL instructional services as limiting their educational opportunities.

The participants' perceptions of the differences in caliber of the two instructional spaces within the pull-out ESL model influenced their conceptualization of EL instructional services as limiting. Amanda (Illinois), Daisy (Louisiana), Anabel (Arizona), and Lena (Illinois) sought to exit EL instructional services in early elementary school. Notably, all women described English as one of their primary languages and the language they favored for formal schooling. Anabel's (Arizona) discussion of her experience of pull-out ESL instruction reflects the types of critiques that were common to participants who began formal schooling as experienced bilinguals:

When I would go for my regular class, we would just be doing, like, regular studies. Everyone was taught the same thing. Um, it felt like I was going back to, um, like, a preschool level of education when I was going to the ESL class. And it was so—[laughter] I just felt dumb in that class because everything was so simple. And if—if they wanted to teach me English, if that was, like, the point, then they really didn't—do much of a good because it just felt like I was being taught colors and, um, stuff, basically, like, "What is a pencil?" And it—it—it wasn't really that intriguing.

They were quickly frustrated by what they felt were the academic limitations of pull-out ESL because of the mismatch between how they and the school assessed their English abilities and their recognition of the greater academic opportunity in the primary classroom.

For other participants, their exit attempts occurred later in elementary school because they were well-served by pull-out ESL classes. Over the years, Cai (Nevada), Frankie (Utah), Iliana (Indiana), Leticia (Washington), Maria (Oregon), Noemi (Oregon), and Olga (California) became frustrated by the pull-out ESL instruction because it made evident the type of learning that they were missing when they left the primary classroom. For most of these participants, fourth and fifth grade was when the limitations of being "pulled out" became apparent. In describing why she was upset that her request not to attend ESL pull-out instruction was denied, Leticia shared how the structure limited her learning of history:

They said that it was part of my class schedule and I had to go, and—and I remember, like, being upset about it because it was, um,

it was during a time when we were doing our history lesson. And I—and there was no other time where I could actually get to get that time back to learn that—or—or we wouldn't be learning history in the ESL class. It was more basic. Like, these are your numbers. This is the alphabet, how to pronounce this, even though I already knew all of that.

Participants witnessed and experienced differences in educational opportunities by being "pulled out." There was no need for a sudden schooling transition to facilitate participants' recognition of the limitations of EL instructional services. The daily evidence of opportunity withheld, combined with their self-assessment of their English proficiency, informed their conceptualizations of EL instructional academic services as limiting.

### *Theme 2: EL Instructional Services Means Social Isolation*

Sudden schooling transitions were a unifying experience among the 12 participants who conceptualized EL instructional services as socially isolating. However, they were not the result of a single transnational move to the United States. The impetus for these sudden schooling transitions included: switching districts, grade promotion, initial school enrollment, and/or restructuring of curricular pathways. Six participants' sudden schooling transition resulted in their first experience of EL instructional services. For the remaining six participants, post-sudden schooling transition was a new instantiation of EL instructional services. In both circumstances, participants conceptualized EL instructional services as socially isolating because of the linguistic—or a combination of linguistic and cultural—differences between themselves and their classmates. This social isolation of EL instructional services was painted against a backdrop of previous schooling experiences or concurrent non-EL instructional opportunities that were seen as more inclusive. Participants' experiences of sudden schooling transitions were fundamental to their conceptualization of EL instructional services as socially isolating.

*Linguistic Differences.* Nine participants discussed how their English expertise created an environment of social isolation in EL instructional services. The participants' knowledge of English positioned them as outsiders in classes where languages other than English were used for instruction (e.g., English-Spanish bilingual programs) and ESL instructional settings. For example, Norma (Texas) exemplified how she was socially isolated in her bilingual classroom:

I didn't talk to anybody, 'cause they spoke in Spanish, and I couldn't communicate with them, since I mainly speak English. And so, like, even with my parents, I speak to them in English, and they speak to me in Spanish. So, I was always, kind of, feeling weird. So, I was always, kind of, like, the outside kid.

Norma's experience of being enrolled in a bilingual kindergarten program in which Spanish was the predominant language used was a sudden and drastic transition from a home environment where she spoke English and heard Spanish and English daily. The isolation of not being able to use English while being asked to do school in Spanish was reinforced by Perla (Illinois) and Diana (Texas). Similarly, English expertise also became an axis of disconnection for Patty (California), Maricruz (California), Mayra (Florida), Betty (California), Hannah (Utah), and Swati (Arizona), who were educated in ESL settings. They described a disconnect with their new-to-English classmates. Maricruz, who upon transition to a new middle school ended up being placed in ESL, described her experience in the following way:

Then I got put into an ESL class, and I was like, "What?" Like, [laughs] I mainly speak English, and I thought I was fluent in it. And then I got put into the class, and then the class was, like—none of the kids really even spoke, like, English. Like, some of them did, but, like, there was a few that were, like, already, like, fluent in English and already—like, you weren't supposed to be in there.

For these nine participants, language was the axis upon which they experienced and thus conceptualized EL instructional services as a space of social isolation.

*Linguistic and Cultural Differences.* While all participants recognized linguistic differences between themselves and their classmates, three integrated an explicit discussion of culture and language. Juanita (California), Lian (Texas), and Tiffany (Oregon) discussed how cultural differences could expand upon linguistic differences to exacerbate the social isolation of EL instructional services. Lian, who is of Chinese and Indian ancestry, was the only one of the three participants who was a numerical ethnoracial minority in her classroom. Both Juanita and Tiffany shared a Mexican ethnoracial identity with most of their classmates.

The teaching of culture as part of the curriculum within EL instructional services facilitated Lian and Tiffany's experience of social isolation. They described the teaching of a narrow construction of Mexican culture with which they did not identify as reinforcing the linguistic disconnect. For instance, Lian had long questioned her placement in EL instructional services but accepted her mother's explanation that they were just a form of "extra tutoring" and not a judgment on her English abilities. Transferring to a new elementary school in which she no longer participated in pull-out ESL, but was in an EL-sheltered class all day long with no access to non-EL peers created a different dynamic:

I realized at some point, like, these teachers only talk about, like, Mexican culture, specifically, not any, like, South American culture, or anything, like, just Mexican culture, and I'm like, I am not Mexican, and is this what class [is] supposed to be, like, for English

learning? And I don't—this doesn't cater to everyone, including me. So I don't really belong here, is what I realized.

This experience of a sheltered EL classroom heightened the linguistic differences between herself and new classmates that were reinforced by a curriculum that exclusively highlighted Mexican culture.

Juanita and Tiffany shared a Mexican ethnoracial identity with their classmates. Nevertheless, they integrated culture and language into their narratives of social isolation. For example, Juanita had been educated in English within the same California district since kindergarten; however, in seventh grade her middle school thrust her into a recently created newcomer ESL class. The teacher required Juanita to serve as an unpaid ESL paraeducator. These additional teaching responsibilities amplified her challenging experience in middle school by making her "resented by fellow students." She shared that her role as an unpaid ESL paraeducator exacerbated the differences between her being a "tomboy" who was the child of Mexican immigrants and overtly feminine Mexican adolescent newcomers:

Especially with the girls in the class who, you know, we're, like, seventh and eighth graders, so these girls that come to school in dresses, and makeup, and heels, and [inaudible], you know, I was nothing like that at all. So, it just made it even more socially awkward—uh, to be the one in there telling them, "No, that's not how you pronounce it, and this is what you have to do." And, you know, it was just, um, it was incredibly uncomfortable.

This sudden schooling transition pushed Juanita into EL instructional services that could appear to facilitate inclusion because of shared ethnoracial identities. However, Juanita's language background, how the teacher used her English expertise, her distinct relationship to immigration, and her differing gendered presentation, meant that EL instructional services were socially isolating.

### *Theme 3: EL Instructional Services Are Evidence of Raciolinguistic Ideologies*

Rebecca (Virginia) was the sole student whose attempt to exit EL instructional services was not preceded by a transition. During her 7th year at a K–6 elementary school, Rebecca recognized the ethnoracial backgrounds and immigration histories of her classmates:

It wasn't really until sixth grade when I kinda noticed, um, I was kinda being placed with, like, students who, like, didn't speak English proficiently. Um, so, I was actually in a class full time with a lot of, like, immigrants. Um, and so, my school was predominantly white. I would say, like, at least 92%—it was, like, a, a number in the 90s—um, were white. But everyone [in the] class was, like, an immigrant. Like, no one was white. So, that kinda—I don't know. That's, like, when I started paying closer attention to it.



It was through recognizing the broader positioning of her class in the school's social structure that Rebecca realized that she had been placed in EL instructional services because she was the Black child of immigrants from Egypt and Sudan. She was the only participant to name racism as primary to her conceptualization of EL services. Rebecca recognized raciolinguistic ideologies in action. She articulated how her course placement resulted from school officials' beliefs about her linguistic ability that were shaped by her race and perceived country of origin.

While Rebecca was the only participant who identified raciolinguistic ideologies as the primary reason for her exit attempt, 71% of participants discussed raciolinguistic ideologies in their conceptualization of how placement in EL instructional services functioned. They discussed how they witnessed and/or experienced the role of race, ethnicity, skin color, and/or perceived (or actual) country of origin functioning in EL instructional services. However, it was not the primary reason for their exit attempt. For instance, Daisy, a simultaneous English-Vietnamese bilingual and one of the few Asian people in her elementary school, attributed her placement in EL instructional services to her racial background:

It was kind of like, I am different, I guess. Like, when I was younger, I was just, like—I was like, “Why am I going to these classes?” And, like, you know, like, “Oh is it ‘cause I’m, like, Asian or whatever?”

Unlike Rebecca, this recognition is not what shaped Daisy's primary conceptualization of EL instructional services. It was limited educational opportunity. The narrow content and focus of EL instructional services made her doubt her English ability:

It made me, like, try and think, like, “Oh, maybe I’m really bad at English or not good, like—speaking-wise.” I don’t know. I felt like I was a good student, but, like, I guess, like, some spellings, I just wasn’t good at spelling, in general. Especially when test-taking, I was just nervous, so.

Recognizing how raciolinguistic ideologies functioned in placement in EL instructional services did not erase the doubt about her linguistic abilities; yet, it provided nuance to her primary reasonings for wanting to exit EL instruction.

In addition to articulating the function of raciolinguistic ideologies through connecting minoritized background with linguistic deficiency, participants articulated how whiteness served (or should have served) to prevent their placement in EL instructional services. While Iliana primarily constructed EL instructional services as a space of limited educational opportunity, she also articulated the relationship between skin color, beliefs about linguistic proficiency, and placement. She noted:

All the kids who would go to ENL were mostly the Brown kids and the Black kids. But it was mostly us brown kids ‘cause, you know, they assumed that we never ever spoke English. And so, pretty much

it was, like, us Brown kids from kindergarten to sixth grade. And, like, we were pretty much put in the same exact ENL classes. And I don’t know, it’s just really weird ‘cause it’s like you never really saw the white kids, being in ENL, even though a lot of them did struggle with, you know, English and, like, writing and reading, like, out loud in class, and in their grades.

Iliana discussed how this pattern in which brownness and blackness in and of itself became evidence of lack of linguistic knowledge—and thus facilitated the need for placement in EL instructional services—did not apply to white students, regardless of literacy ability.

While Iliana talked about whiteness as a protective factor in general, the skin color–language ability connection was explicitly mentioned by three participants in discussing their placement in EL instructional services. Lian, who is Chinese and Indian, shared: “It’s just kind of annoying, ‘cause I’m like—I know if I was white, or at least white-passing, I probably wouldn’t have, like, I wouldn’t have been placed in that class.” At the other end of the spectrum, Lena, who is of Puerto Rican and Polish ancestry, recounted with surprise that her whiteness did not prevent placement in EL instructional services. Moreover, participants discussed how the impact of skin color led to differential experiences within their families. Leticia, who describes herself as a Mexican American with “darker skin, uh, really dark, curly hair,” and Lian discussed how their siblings’ whiteness allowed them to avoid EL instructional services.

Raciolinguistic ideologies were reflected in the understanding among most participants that their placement in EL instructional services was related to their racialized identities and not to their linguistic abilities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many participants did not critique how raciolinguistic ideologies functioned as a whole. They sought to extricate themselves from the grasp of a racist system. For instance, Rebecca described how raciolinguistic ideologies resulted in her misplacement in EL instructional services but did not question her classmates’ placement. Lena wondered why her whiteness was not sufficient to avoid ESL placement while her brother’s was. Lena did not critique the relationship between whiteness and English proficiency, but it was a critique of the failure to include her whiteness. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the focus on the self among the participants could reflect the focus of the interview design on participants’ individual trajectories; nevertheless, it is a pattern that should be documented and interrogated.

## **Discussion**

The participants conceptualized EL instructional services as academically limiting, socially isolating, and that placement in these services was a product of racism. These same themes are prevalent across the research literature in the education of students identified as ELs (e.g., Cooper, 2020;

Flores & Lewis, 2022; Umansky et al., 2021). These findings contribute to a broader spectrum of research that calls attention to how EL practices and policies that are seemingly benign can cause harm (e.g., Cabral, 2022; Johnson, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Valdés, 2020). More specifically, they call attention to incorporating youths identified as ELs and adult former ELs in research, policy, and practice about how and when youths are exited from EL instructional services.

The intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens was necessary to create a study that recognized participants' intersectional ways of being and their implications for how they conceptualized EL instructional services. This research documented how most participants discussed the role of racism in placement in EL instructional services. Participants articulated how their perceived or actual ethnoracial identities, immigration histories, and/or skin colors shaped how the school evaluated and interpreted their English abilities. Looking at the EL policy solely through the lens of anti-adultism would have limited this study's ability to recognize how participants identified the role of raciolinguistic ideologies in EL placement. It would have erased how the experience of EL instructional services is racialized.

This lens created a space for participants to share how gender impacted the various conceptualizations of EL instructional services. As evidenced through the themes, the participants rarely brought gender into the conversation in isolation. However, certain participants explicitly talked about how it influenced their experiences in combination with other identities. For example, Juanita's social isolation in her experience of EL instruction was exacerbated by her differing gendered presentation. In other words, it was the differing gendered expectations and acceptability of what counts as feminine for Mexican adolescent newcomers that added to her experience of cultural distinctiveness and thus social isolation. The intersectional lens was necessary to understand how the different social forces within participants' lives worked together.

This intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens also highlighted how participants' prior schooling experiences shaped how they interpreted EL instructional services. When they had previously experienced or were concurrently experiencing enriching instructional environments in non-EL instructional services, they saw that schooling did not have to be what was offered to EL-identified students and that there was a possibility for something more. The evidence of instructional opportunities that could better meet their needs was fundamental to their desire to exit, and to their experience of these services as educationally limiting. Similarly, their description of the social isolation of EL instructional services was painted against a backdrop of previous schooling experiences or concurrent non-EL instructional opportunities that were seen as more inclusive. Schooling transitions served as a wake-up call regarding how EL instructional

services facilitate marginalization and homogenization. Identifying schooling transition as a life experience that shapes how youth conceptualize EL instructional services contextualizes how some are seemingly unaware of their EL classification and the services they receive (Brooks, 2022; Kim, 2017) and others, like those in this study, are hyperaware.

### Implications

Policy-focused research on exiting students from EL services has centered on standardized measures and coinciding policies are interpreted by adults (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Reyes & Domina, 2019; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016). Complementing this type of research, this study highlights that adult-driven, test-based decision-making misses youths' experience of schooling, which is fundamental to assessing equity, and thus overall effectiveness, of an instructional program. Nevertheless, moving beyond merely including youth or adults previously classified as ELs in future research about exit from EL instructional services is necessary. Future research requires a sociopolitical commitment to youth. Within this study, this commitment is reflected in the intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens because it builds upon the conceptualization that youth knowledge and decision-making are necessary for equitable education. Whether or not future endeavors use this specific terminology is less important than the commitment of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to the principles. The intersectional anti-adultism conceptual lens and these findings have implications for research, policy, and practice.

While schooling transitions may be unavoidable, creating structures through which youth can be involved in educational decision-making is achievable in policy and practice. While the women in this study created a space for their voice through their exit attempts, they were not provided with a pathway that included decision-making. They were dependent on the willingness of adults to listen and act. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to assume that merely amending a local process to include student perspectives or choices would result in substantial change. Even when backed by federal policy, research shows us how other social power dynamics influence how the decision-making of parents of ELs from marginalized backgrounds are often dismissed (e.g., Cioè-Peña, 2020a, 2020b; Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Similarly, Thompson and Rodriguez-Mojica (2023) illustrate how focus on compliance can also drown out genuine attempts to incorporate the voices of youth. Creating a space for student decision-making requires systems in which school officials can support youth and their families.

This environment requires a shift in how youth are engaged within the EL system overall. As we push for a role for youth in federal EL policy, other actionable steps must be

taken on other levels of educational systems. Regardless of the requirements of U.S. federal policy, there is a need for more research on communicating with EL-identified youth. This type of research is necessary to serve as the base for determining the structures that best facilitate collaborative decision-making. In addition, school- and district-based reform efforts can create systemically more just opportunities for youth decision-making. At the level of school leadership, this requires that administrators, counselors, and educators collaborate to create and identify multiple enriching curricular pathways for ELs. This must include the option for youth and their families not to be forced into EL instructional services that they do not want. In middle and high school, this type of collaboration requires attention to the student-to-counselor ratio and counselor professional education. It is difficult for counselors to create an environment where youth are empowered if they do not understand bilingualism or have the time to work with youth to consider their various options. Regardless of the grade level, the course selection and placement process for students cannot just happen routinely and automatically.

Lastly, these findings about participants' conceptualizations of racism in EL instructional placement speak to the need for equity-focused EL research, policy, and practice that address racism and its sister, colorism. The EL system is not neutral and devoid of the other -isms that impact schooling (Cabral, 2022; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Malsbary, 2014; Smith, 2022; Valdés, 2020). As a result, color-evasive (Annamma & Jackson, 2007) research, policy, and practice about exit EL instructional services harm students. This research highlights how colorism within ethnoracial groups (e.g., Latinx students) impacts how youths experience EL instructional services. Whiteness and/or being lighter skinned brought or was expected to bring specific privileges. Moreover, research must continue to interrogate students' experience of the EL category through an intersectional lens because linguistic incompetency is not rendered through raciolinguistic ideologies in uniform ways. Both theoretical and practice-focused next steps must consider how intersectional perspectives offer ways of moving forward that account for differential experiences while lifting all.

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