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Essential Knowledge for Serving Bilingual Youth: The Perspectives of Adult Former English Learners[1]

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Abstract: This study, framed by dignity-focused language policy and intersectional anti-adultism, investigates how 74 adults misclassified as English learners (ELs) during U.S. K-12 education conceptualize essential knowledge for educating bilingual students. Through semi-structured interviews, participants stressed two key areas for schools that serve bilingual students: recognizing students' nuanced linguistic histories and acknowledging students as education partners. The findings emphasize centering impacted individuals' perspectives, advocating for eliminating racial bias in EL policy implementation, and addressing institutionalized adultism in EL policy. Implications include the need for professional learning, policy, and practices prioritizing EL youths' perspectives.
Keywords: English learners; language policy; anti-adultism; qualitative; youth voice

Conocimientos esenciales para atender a jóvenes bilingües: Las perspectivas de adultos exaprendices de inglés
Resumen: Este estudio, enmarcado en una política lingüística centrada en la dignidad y en un enfoque interseccional contra el adultismo, investiga cómo 74 adultos que fueron clasificados

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erróneamente como aprendices de inglés (ELs) durante su educación K-12 en los EE. UU. conceptualizan el conocimiento esencial para educar a estudiantes bilingües. A través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, los participantes destacaron dos áreas clave para las escuelas que atienden a estudiantes bilingües: reconocer las complejas trayectorias lingüísticas de los estudiantes y reconocerlos como socios en la educación. Los hallazgos subrayan la importancia de centrar las perspectivas de las personas afectadas, abogar por la eliminación del sesgo racial en la implementación de políticas para ELs y abordar el adultismo institucionalizado en dichas políticas. Las implicaciones incluyen la necesidad de desarrollar aprendizaje profesional, políticas y prácticas que prioricen las perspectivas de los jóvenes EL.
Palabras-clave: aprendices de inglés; política lingüística; anti-adultismo; cualitativo; voz juvenil

Conhecimentos essenciais para atender jovens bilíngues: As perspectivas de adultos ex-alunos de inglês

Resumo: Este estudo, fundamentado em uma política linguística focada na dignidade e em uma abordagem interseccional contra o adultismo, investiga como 74 adultos erroneamente classificados como estudantes de inglês (ELs) durante sua educação K-12 nos EUA conceituam o conhecimento essencial para a educação de estudantes bilíngues. Por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, os participantes destacaram duas áreas principais para as escolas que atendem estudantes bilíngues: reconhecer as trajetórias linguísticas complexas dos alunos e reconhecê-los como parceiros na educação. Os resultados enfatizam a importância de centralizar as perspectivas das pessoas afetadas, defender a eliminação do viés racial na implementação de políticas para ELs e abordar o adultismo institucionalizado nessas políticas. As implicações incluem a necessidade de aprendizagem profissional, políticas e práticas que priorizem as perspectivas dos jovens EL.
Palavras-chave: estudantes de inglês; política linguística; anti-adultismo; qualitativo; voz juvenil

Essential Knowledge for Serving Bilingual Youth: The Perspectives of Adult Former English Learners

On the surface, classifying students as English learners (ELs) appears to be a neutral process. A student's English language proficiency becomes eligible for assessment when they are identified as living within a household where a language other than or in addition to English is spoken—usually through a home language survey (HLS). Once the HLS identifies a student as a speaker of a language other than English, their English language proficiency is assessed. If the assessment results determine that the student should be classified as an EL, they can only exit this classification through a combination of English language proficiency test scores, academic achievement, and teacher recommendation. However, this process is far from impartial.

Decisions about which students are potential ELs, specific judgments about how and which assessments are used to assess English language proficiency, and what characteristics outside of English language proficiency assessments should be included in decision-making (e.g., English language arts grades) are based on particular conceptualizations of English language proficiency and those who are deemed to be ELs (Kibler & Valdés, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2023; Solano-Flores, 2008; Valdés, 2023). Whether these underlying conceptualizations are consistent across various realms and how they are operationalized impacts who is deemed proficient in English. For instance, the way in which an HLS is constructed shapes who is classified as an EL (Salerno & Andrei, 2021). When the question(s) on the HLS are limited or written narrowly, they can prevent bilingual students from accessing necessary academic resources (Goldenberg & Rutherford-Quach, 2012). When they are

overly broad, they can entrap students who may come from a bilingual family or live within a bilingual community but are not learning English (Zehr, 2010).

Beyond theoretical and ideological conceptualizations of English language proficiency and ELs that are embedded in the various mechanisms that influence how students are identified as ELs, there are also the techno-bureaucratic processes that can influence who is identified and remains an EL. That is, even if we were to assume that policies accurately identify students as (not) English proficient, they are not always applied correctly. As a result, students can remain classified as ELs even though they met the criteria because someone did not make the change in the system, they were incorrectly labeled initially as an EL, or they moved to a new district with distinct English language proficiency requirements (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Okhremtchouk, 2014). On the other hand, students who do not meet the criteria can also be exited from language services for other reasons like racial bias and colorism (e.g., Brooks, 2023; Malsbary, 2014). Therefore, being in the EL classification does not mean that a student is necessarily learning English or the converse. A student's official English language acquisition status is not a reliable proxy for their language use or abilities.

Within this broader policy context, research documents how individuals who self-identify as misclassified ELs make sense of the educational situations in which they find themselves. For instance, studies detail how individuals describe the role of incorrect placement within the EL classification and/or EL instructional services, like English as a second language (ESL), facilitated an erasure of their linguistic abilities that limited their educational opportunities and social isolation (Brooks, 2023; Karam et al., 2021). Moreover, they illustrate how individuals who consider themselves to be misclassified as ELs pinpoint their experiences of the EL classification as being the source of negative emotions ranging from frustration to anger (Abril-Gonzales & Shannon, 2021; Karam et al., 2021; Malsbary, 2014). This study builds upon existing research by using semi-structured interviews to investigate the following research question: What do adults who self-identify as misclassified ELs describe as essential knowledge for schools that educate bilingual students? Essential knowledge is defined as beliefs about students and/or educational practices that participants described as fundamental to successful schooling. This study centers on those aggrieved by their experience of EL education as central to designing and implementing equitable educational policies in schools.

While quantitative research provides insight into the various trajectories of ELs and adult former ELs (e.g., Callahan et al., 2023; Flores et al., 2012), this study does not examine these types of educational outcomes. Instead, it uses this adult former ELs' meaning-making to identify essential knowledge for schools that educate bilingual students. Thereby, contributing to the knowledge base that informs the development and implementation of policy that impacts EL-identified students in K-12 schools. The school level is an important area of EL policymaking and implementation because of its direct connection to the daily lives of young people. It is where Federal and state policies are implemented. As Cabral's (2023) conceptualization of linguistic confinement illustrates, there is a connection between students' individual experience of marginalization and broader structural and institutional "carceral organizing logics of exclusion, disposability, and containment" (p. 291). In this manner, focusing on individual-level experiences of adult former ELs has the power and possibility of reshaping these organizational logics. The participants' unique positionality with respect to EL education system provides novel sources of knowledge that can impact policymaking and implementation. Research focusing on the interplay between individuals and the school is pivotal.

A Note on Terminology

Since the enactment of the Bilingual Education Act in 1964, students identified as learning English within the school system have been referred to by various terms. Most recently, two terms have been more frequently used: English learner and emergent bilingual. The term emergent bilingual, although currently used in some state policy contexts, originates in the justice-oriented research that sought to move away from deficit orientations toward celebrating students' bi/multilingualism (García, 2009). In this paper, I use the term EL to reflect the common policy terminology and highlight that this category is of bureaucratic significance in the lives of young people. However, I diverge from common research usage when I employ the term former EL.

Quantitative researchers use the term ever-ELs to describe students classified as ELs at any point within their educational trajectory (Callahan et al., 2023; Johnson, 2023). This term includes students currently identified as ELs and those who were once, but no longer labeled, ELs. Within EL research, policy, and practice, the term former EL is usually exclusively used for those students who have been reclassified as English proficient or exited from the EL classification. However, this limited use of former is unique to ELs. When discussing people's experiences with various systems (e.g., prison or child welfare), the term former is used distinctly. For instance, the term former foster youth does not describe how the relationship with the child welfare system ended. One can be a former foster youth and returned to their family of origin, adopted by non-family members, or they could have aged out of the system. I use the term adult former ELs in line with how it is used among systems-involved individuals. Specifically, adult former ELs within this paper are those adults who at one point during their K-12 educational trajectory were classified as ELs. This conceptualization does not emphasize formal reclassification requirements, and thus assessments, but chronology. They become adult former ELs by no longer being a part of the K-12 institutional context which gave them this bureaucratic label. I use this language to reflect the linguistic confinement of the EL category (Cabral, 2023) and the similarities of the EL system with other bureaucracies like child welfare and prison.

Adult Former English Learners

Retrospective Research About K-12 Experiences

Retrospective qualitative research with adults that investigates their elementary and/or secondary educational experiences provides unique insight because participants' interpretation of their past is informed by proceeding life experiences (Conchas et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2016). For instance, López et al. (2022) noted that 10 years after being underserved by the Special Education system, one of the participants succinctly analyzed how her individual experience was part of a broader pattern of ableism within the school system. Her documented perceptions do not mean that 10 years earlier, she would have necessarily arrived at distinct conclusions. However, her life experience meant that she articulated how it functioned differently. Moreover, retrospective research with adults can cover their perspectives on larger swaths of their life experiences (Stiegler & Slovin, 2023; Vera et al., 2017). On the other hand, youth-focused research on a similar topic would necessarily center on current life experiences or fewer years of education. Nevertheless, this youth-focused research offers meaningful contributions (Kiramba & Oloo, 2023; Reid, 2022).

Adult Former ELs and Retrospective Research

Much of the existing qualitative research that examines adult former ELs' meaning-making about their elementary and secondary educational experiences occurs with individuals currently enrolled in various forms of postsecondary education (Brooks, 2019; Leo, 2021). The retrospective

lens has been applied to a variety of topics, like examining emotions the participants experienced in high school (Rawal & De Costa, 2018), how participants utilized both social and navigational capital to negotiate high school terrain (Oropeza et al., 2010), and participants' longitudinal reflections on their literacy development (Kibler, 2014). Research that includes the perspectives of adult former ELs who have graduated from, did not complete, or never attempted postsecondary is less common (e.g., Brooks, 2023; Kibler, 2018; Knight et al., 2016).

Within the body of literature that examines adult former ELs' meaning-making about their elementary and secondary educational experiences, participants incidentally use their experiences to share their thoughts and ideas about what schools that educated bilingual students should know about language (e.g., Varghese & Fuentes, 2020). However, it is not the focus of the research itself. As a result, this study's focus on participants' ideas about essential knowledge for schools that educate bilingual students represents a new contribution to the literature. Moreover, the fact that the participants include those who have graduated from institutions of higher education and those who have not pursued postsecondary education broadens the perspectives of the voices of adult former ELs within the qualitative research. Lastly, this manuscript's attention to those individuals who self-identify as misclassified recognized an oft-overlooked identity within the former EL population.

Dignity-Focused Language Policy

Through deftly integrating the work of scholars from across the Americas, Poza and colleagues (2022) offer a framework that extends existing work on educational dignity (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014; Poza, 2021) into developing and implementing language policy and practice. Specifically, Poza et al. (2022) argue for "dignity-focused language policy and practice that center the experiences and aspirations of racialized bilinguals instead align with the principles of humanizing pedagogy by regarding bilinguals in their full personhood and positioning them as knowing agents within their learning and their communities" (p. 469) This approach to language policy and practice coincides with multiple scholarly traditions, particularly Black and other woman of color feminisms (Boveda &McCray, 2021; Nyachae & Pham, 2024; Thomas et al., 2023), that emphasize the importance of knowledge gained through lived experiences of marginalization. Moreover, it echoes the emphasis on self-determination fundamental to initial pushes for educational equity that brought about pivotal legislation for students who identified as learning English (Flores et al., 2023; García & Sung, 2018). Poza and colleagues' conceptualization of dignity-focused language policy and practice necessitates embracing the perspectives of EL-identified youth.

Intersectional Anti-Adultism

Within this paper, I offer intersectional anti-adultism as the theoretical lens through which "regarding bilinguals in their full personhood and positioning them as knowing agents within their learning and their communities" is actualized. Namely, adultism "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). Youth are seen as incapable, lacking agency, and not worthy of respect (Hall, 2019; Love & Phillips, 2007). Anti-adultism rejects this conceptualization of youths. Rather, it affirms the rights of youths to know about and participate in educational decision-making. These rights of youths' educational decision-making include school and district-level policies (Bertrand et al., 2020) and their individual decisions about their own trajectory [e.g., course-taking, etc. (Brooks, 2022; 2023)]. Youths' centrality to educational decision-making reflects a commitment to embodying intersectional anti-adultism.

The intersectional descriptor placed in front of the anti-adultism recognizes that youths' experience of adultism is not monolithic but shaped by their other social identities. Reflecting what

Collins (2015) identified as the critical insight of intersectionality, this study does not draw on an analytic lens that views participants' social identities—like race, ability, and gender—as conceptually distinct. Instead, they are conceptualized "as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (p. 2). It facilitated the recognition that the participants who belonged to multiply marginalized groups shaped how they experienced age bias. As a result, the way anti-adultism is implemented must be intersectional to reject all institutionalized biases and resulting practices that diminish the capabilities of youth. Moreover, intersectional anti-adultism pushes back against hegemonic ideals of children, adults, and individualism embedded within the European child rights movement (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020).

The methodological choice to center adult former ELs within a system where institutionalized adultism shuts out the intellectual contributions and decision-making of youths can be misinterpreted. It can be seen to contribute to how policy and research rob self-determination from youths by implying that adults have a primary role in dignity-focused language policy and practice. Within this theoretical framework that undergirds this paper, research with adult former ELs is complementary to youth because it offers another way to engage in dignity-focused language policy and planning. This recognition of youth does not erase the meaningful contribution of adults' retrospection on their K-12 experiences.

Unlike their younger counterparts, adult former ELs are no longer the target of institutionalized adultism and the immediacy of the impacts of the PK-12 EL label. They offer a different perspective on their experiences with the EL classification. Firstly, they can look back on their entire K-12 educational experience. It is not distance from the experience of marginalization that provides adults with insight. The absence of the EL label and/or distance from being a student does not free certain bilinguals from gendered and racialized ideologies of linguistic deficiency (e.g., Catalano et al., 2020; Valdés, 2021). Instead, I contend that their life experience since their K-12 schooling means they can draw on distinct experiences. Moreover, it is vital that this population still vocalizes their discontent with their experience of classification after leaving K-12 education. Thus, this experience of EL classification is meaningful to their ongoing life experiences. Within this theoretical framework that undergirds this paper, research with adult former ELs is complementary to youth because it offers another pathway to engage in dignity-focused language policy and planning.

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 interview about being misclassified as learning English in the United States. The broader sample of participants included adults of all genders who responded affirmatively to one of the following questions: Has a school ever incorrectly labeled you as "learning English"? Have you ever been incorrectly placed in an English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education class? Have you ever participated in English language testing that you felt was unnecessary because you already knew English? This study examines the interviews of the 74 participants who reported that they were misclassified as learning during K-12 schooling in the United States and responded to the necessary interview questions for inclusion.

The transcripts that formed the basis for this analysis were from 61 adults who used she/her pronouns, 12 adults who used he/him pronouns, and one adult who used they/them pronouns. Participants described their misclassification as occurring in 28 different states and the District of Columbia. Half of the participants were Latinx (50%), Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) represented 31%, and Black participants with recent immigrant connections to Africa and the

Caribbean constituted 14%. The remaining three participants included two multigenerational U.S.-Black Americans and one person who identified as an Arab who was the child of immigrants from North Africa. All participants are high school graduates between the years of 1985 and 2020. However, the three graduation years that occurred most frequently were 2015, 2016, and 2018. As a result, the following description of educational attainment may not be the final for participants' lifetimes but at the point of this study. Forty-five percent of the participants were currently enrolled as full-time students at an institute of higher education, 31 as undergraduates, and two in master's degree programs. Of the remaining 55% who were no longer enrolled in formal schooling: 13 completed high school, three completed a trade school, and 25 completed a bachelor's degree. To provide a more detailed background of participants within the findings, information regarding individual participants' backgrounds is included in parenthesis after the first direct quotation. The information provided includes the year they graduated from high school, their ethnoracial identity, and the U.S. state in which they were misclassified.

Data Collection

Modalities for Qualitative Interviews

The interviews were conducted prior to and during the initial summer of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consent was received verbally. Interviews were conducted through four modalities: 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 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 of and responses to being misidentified as learning English. The interview closed with exploring participants' understandings of how schools should best serve linguistically diverse youth.

Researcher Positionality and Interviewing

As a non-Latina Black and Asian cis-gender woman who does not have the personal lived experience of being misidentified as an EL by school systems, I could not create the kind of personal shared experiences that others have identified in qualitative research (Burkhard, 2019). However, I listened to their recounted experiences with linguistic 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 framework. My lived experiences and research knowledge helped me develop a sense of solidarity as a woman of color.

Data Analysis

The initial phase required reading through each transcript to identify the section where participants responded to the following question: "As an adult, what do you wish schools would have understood about your linguistic abilities as a child?" In designing this question, I used the term school because it is used as a metaphor for policies, practices, and people and can be interpreted in various ways. However, it still delimited the area of focus for the participants. It allowed the participants to draw upon whichever interpretation of the word was relevant to them. Then, I began to code these sections following the research question: What do adults who self-identify as

misclassified ELs describe as essential knowledge for schools that educate bilingual students? As Saldaña (2009, p. 3) describes: "A code in qualitative data analysis is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." Initially, I identified 14 emergent codes. After this initial coding round, I wrote analytic memos that examined theoretical and other connections found within the analysis. Then, I read through each of the transcripts three times, collapsing and refining the definitions of initial emergent codes to arrive at the final list (see Table 1). Then, I continued writing analytic memos to refine my thinking about the codes and their interrelationships.

Table 1

Final Code List with Definitions and Code Frequency

Code	Definition	Code Frequency
Avoid Conflation	Schools should know to avoid the conflation of language proficiency and ethnoracial identity/country of origin/skin color.	13
Lived Experiences	Schools should know to recognize different types of English, avoid accent prejudice, and acknowledge students' years of schooling in the US.	20
Explanations Matter	Schools should know to respect student knowledge by explaining to students about the reasoning behind testing and other EL practices. Schools should also listen to students' explanations about their testing and schooling performance.	7
Student Input	Schools should know to ask for and act upon input from students about curriculum, instruction, and course placement.	22
Bilingualism is Positive	Schools should know that bilingualism is an asset.	11
Classroom performance matters	Schools know that they should rely more on classroom performance than one-time English language proficiency tests.	8

I examined codes' interrelationships (or lack thereof) through this process of writing analytic memos. In this process, the interrelationship between two pairs of codes became evident. As such, I developed categories to represent the clustering and interrelationship between these codes. The first category became *Nuanced Linguistic Background.* This category incorporated codes *Avoid Conflation* and *Lived Experiences* as the most prominent category. The second category, *Student Knowledge*, included both *Explanations Matter* and *Student Input*. The two remaining codes were not theoretically or practically connected to each other or the other two identified categories. Therefore, *Bilingualism is Positive,* and *Classroom Performance Matters* operate as individual codes and categories. This paper's analysis focuses on the most frequently occurring categories: *nuanced linguistic backgrounds* and *student knowledge* (see Table 2). This choice reflects the significance of the categories and codes in the overall analysis.

Table 2

Final Category List with Definitions and Category Frequency

Category	Definition	Codes	Category Frequency
Nuanced Linguistic Backgrounds	Schools should know that bilingual students have complex linguistic histories that cannot be reduced to (perceived) ethnoracial identity, (perceived) country of origin, or other (perceived) superficial characteristic.	Avoid Conflation Lived Experiences	31
Student Knowledge	Schools should know that that students are not recipients of but, partners in their own education.	Explanations Matter Student Input	28

Findings

Participants identified two areas of essential knowledge. The first indicated that schools should know that bilingual students have complex linguistic histories that cannot be reduced to (perceived) ethnoracial identity, (perceived) country of origin, or other static characteristics. The second area of essential knowledge emphasized that schools should know that students are partners in their own education. Participants' articulation of essential areas of knowledge emphasized their relationship to practice. Their responses emphasized the stipulation that schools knowing and doing should be interconnected.

Nuanced Linguistic Backgrounds

The concept that schools should respect the nuanced linguistic background of students may appear so simple that it could become a meaningless refrain. However, participants operationalized this concept in a way that articulated its importance in their daily lives. They emphasized that to respect students' nuanced linguistic backgrounds, schools should avoid conflation and recognize their lived experiences.

Avoid Conflation

Thirteen participants wanted their schools to explicitly recognize that perceptions of students' ethnoracial identity and country of origin should not be used as a proxy for the linguistic abilities of youth. They wanted schools to avoid simplistic thinking that erases the complexity of the interconnection between where someone appears to be from and what languages they speak. As Rebecca (2016/Black/Virginia) shared, this requires that schools operate with the baseline knowledge "That not everyone born in a different country speaks another language, [or]um, isn't proficient in English."

Examining existing EL policies would suggest that schools (and those implementing policies within schools) do not make these assumptions. For instance, country of origin or ethnoracial identity does not automatically qualify someone as an EL. However, research and participants' experience indicated that country of origin and/or ethnoracial identity can (and often does) facilitate

a student's entry and ongoing placement within the EL system (e.g., Abril-Gonzalez & Shannon, 2020; Cabral, 2023; Flores et al., 2020; Malsbary, 2014). Participants witnessed the inequities of whose English proficiency is initially tested, how standardized assessments judged what counts as English proficiency, and the distinct nature of instructional environments in which students were placed after being identified as ELs. Most notably, the existence of students who were monolingual English speakers within the EL classification, like Tiffany (2011/Latina/Oregon), who self-identified as the daughter of Mexican immigrants, illustrates how the EL categorization is racialized. Despite English being the only language that she spoke, Tiffany's racial positioning within society facilitated her labeling as deficient in English (Flores et al., 2023; Rosa & Flores, 2023).

Participants described the differential treatment of white bilingual and monolingual students. Chioma (2020/Black/Minnesota) shared: "My skin color is something that, you know, made them think that [I was less proficient in English]. Just 'cause, you know, look at the Russian kid, the Hungarian kid who were never in my reading circles or anything." Chioma expressed how racialized perceptions of linguistic ability impacted her educational opportunities in a manner distinct from white bilingual students. Similarly, Asha (2020/AAPI/Georgia) noted that white students' speech was not monitored or analyzed in the same manner as hers:

> I just wish they looked past my skin color; if I had actual like, problems. 'Cause I know plenty of white people that have problems with their speech, but nobody's, you know, bothering them about it. Nobody helping them. And I feel like that's an issue in itself.

Asha identified how her classmates' whiteness protected their linguistic abilities from being monitored in the same manner as hers—even if their English had "problems." While on the surface, it appears to outsiders that the EL labeling and reclassification is race-neutral, participants articulated how perceived ethnoracial identity and/or country of origin impacted their experience of schooling. As a result, they wanted schools to actively avoid this type of conflation of linguistic ability with perceived identity markers.

Recognize Lived Experiences

Twenty participants wanted schools to acknowledge that some bilingual students have linguistic histories and presents in which English plays an active or dominant role. For instance, bilingual students include individuals who have been speaking English all their lives, those who have extensive lived experiences in English in their out-of-school life, and others who became English speakers during their years in U.S. schools. As such, it called upon schools to recognize students' lived experiences in English. Ada (2016/Black/Virginia) shared:

> Um, I wish they would understand that there are different ways of speaking English than just Standard English—and people can learn English by just living and growing up here. ... And so, like, why can't—you know, why can't I just be able to be born here and just learn English?

As Ada and other participants intimately knew, there is no way to systematically account for students who are "born here and just learn English." EL-identified students must be able to perform at a particular level deemed academically proficient. Once students were classified as ELs, only testing in reading, writing, speaking, and listening could be their key to demonstrating English proficiency. Monolingual English speakers are not held to this standard. While some advocates for EL students may contend that these more stringent requirements for EL proficiency ensure youths equitable access to the curriculum, participants identified the overlooked negative consequences.

Participants felt that their language knowledge was erased because of the absence of asking and/or listening to students' descriptions of their language abilities. For instance, Khanh (2016/AAPI/New Jersey) shared how parent-oriented interviews overlooked their children's linguistic abilities and experiences. This concern about excluding students from discussions about their own language background was particularly prominent among participants who identified English as first language speakers, simultaneous bilinguals, or early childhood bilinguals. For example, Saori (2015/AAPI/Hawaii) shared:

> Um, that they would at least ask me if English was my first language. And if I said yes, then they could—I think it was very obvious that English was my first language. I had no problems in classes whatsoever with the language section. So, I wish they would've at least asked me. And then I would say, "No, English is not my second language." And they would look at my grades and be like, "Yeah, English is not your second language."

Despite the significance of incorporating students' perspectives and experiences into the EL classification and assessment process, asking and/or listening to youths is not a required part of EL policy. The focus is on adults' assessments of students' language and/or their performance of standardized assessments of English proficiency.

The participants' frustration with having their English abilities erased was decidedly pronounced in their discussion of English language proficiency assessments. Participants raised concerns about how their perceived accents or how they used English was interpreted as a lack of English proficiency. For instance, Zainab (2017/AAPI/North Carolina) shared: "Like lots of different Englishes exist, you know, like Diasporic English. There's like Jamaican English, Indian English. Like—and it's like Chicano English, Black American English. Like all those are valid, and those people aren't wrong, or like they're not dumb either." While Zainab was linguistically accurate in her interpretation of different kinds of English, assessments of English proficiency that are built into the system and educators' perceptions do not align with this understanding (Ascenzi-Moreno & Seltzer, 2023; Cabral, 2023; Flores et al., 2020). Participants also shared how English language proficiency assessments punished English-speaking bilingual racialized minorities for their life experiences. Olga (2018/Latinx/California) shared:

> I just wish they would have understood that I was 5. I was obviously gonna not know some words. Like, there is a picture in there, and it was a car motor. When, in my five to seven years of life, would I know what a car motor was? 'Cause those were the types of pictures that they showed us. Like, I remember they showed us a weight scale once, and the lady was like, do you know what this is? And I was like, I don't know what it's called, but I know I get on it when I go to the doctor and they check my weight, and she marked it as wrong. Like, I-I just wish they knew, like, there-there are—English is a big language, and it's-it's one of the hardest ones in the world. Like, there are gonna be some things that people know of but don't know what it's called or they mispronounce it, or maybe kids are just 5 and they ha- they don't know what it is.

Participants articulated the school's failure to recognize diversity within English use and a range of life experiences as facilitating their entrapment within the EL system.

Student Partnership in Assessment and Instruction

Participants were clear in their desire for schools to explain and involve students in decision-making processes. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed the desire to have

their younger selves treated as thought partners and active participants in educational decisions stemming from and involving the EL label. This partnership had multiple levels related to assessment and instructional practices.

Providing and Listening to Explanations

On the most superficial level, seven participants wanted to understand how adults had made decisions about their educational futures. As a youth and still today, Veda (2017/AAPI/Nebraska) wanted to understand why her English language proficiency was being assessed:

> I mean, I really wish they had at least given me a reason. Like, if you are going to test me, like, you should be able to give me what—what is the reason for that? Right? So, okay, fine, we're going to do this testing. But, like, why?

This excerpt illustrates how, with little information about the reasoning, Veda was forced to comply with the annual English language proficiency assessment. Veda shares that the absence of information led to her assuming that there was a more sinister reason for testing:

> I think once you start holding a school district or policies responsible for the why, when there is, like, um, you know, a - a - a problematic element to that reason, it becomes very obvious. So—and maybe it - maybe it wasn't. Maybe they had a good reason. But if you never give that to me, I'm kind of stuck in this way of thinking that there was no good reason, and you just, like, singled me out.

In addition to feeling singled out, participants shared how the continued testing without explanation nurtured their insecurity. Moreover, it is essential to note that required participation in a system without knowing the criteria and purpose for assessment is inequitable.

As well as explaining reasoning for specific EL practices, participants asked for the opportunity to explain the outcomes of some of the testing or course assignments that left them positioned as ELs. They wanted the opportunity to illustrate that these outcomes did not represent the fact that they were learning English. For instance, participants described feeling anxious, rushed, or distracted during testing. Matilda (2020/Latinx/Texas) describes her difficulties with computers for the speech portion of English language proficiency assessments:

> Like, it felt like they weren't paying attention to, like, their students' needs. Like, why - why test me with a computer? Like, a computer can't really tell who I am. Like, I'm a human. Like, a computer's not gonna know how I feel or know, like, what I struggle with. Like, I don't remember then. Like, at the end of the test, I guess, I wish they could've put, "What is—like, what are some things, like, you struggle with the English language?" Or, "What is something you struggle with and you think you need help in?" Or, "Do you have any improvements that you think that would benefit us?" Or stuff like that. Like taking our voice into account? That was basically the thing. Like, I just felt like they never took our voice into account. Like, they just - they just never died.

Matilda emphasizes that the assessment's modality removes the natural context in which speech occurs. Moreover, the lack of follow-up about the entire experience meant her perspectives were silenced. Matilda and other participants clearly desired schools to ask youth about the reasoning for outcomes on assessments and assignments.

While participants called for more open discussion about English language assessment, there was a sentiment among some participants that the lack of clarity was purposeful. As Anhe (2015/AAPI/Washington) articulated:

> I feel like the schools wouldn't do that because they would probably—I'm sure there would probably be parents that, um, would feel like their kids are being stereotyped and would probably complain, so they don't. And I think that's—now as an adult, I think that that's probably why they never really discussed problems or discussed the results or why they were doing the testing was because they didn't want to create some kind of or not—they didn't want people to have a reason to, like, give some kind of backlash about the testing.

The positioning of EL-identified students as passive recipients of adult decisions makes the system easier to follow and create. The absence of the requirements to explain processes or listen to students' explanations created an environment for inequitable practices to flourish unchallenged. Anhe and the other participants desired a different approach for themselves and the youths who have and will come after them.

Ongoing Student Partnership

In addition to the emphasis on giving or receiving explanations, 22 participants wanted ongoing youth participation in decision-making about instructional services. Youths identified as ELs are legally entitled to receive these 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). Most participants described schools as dismissive of their insight into their own learning trajectories. Lasksmi (2019/AAPI/Illinois) describes her feelings in the following way:

> Yeah, 'cause I - I feel like a lot of the problem, too, is the fact that, like, a lot of the administrators often think that, like, you know, you shouldn't, like, really take any of the kids seriously or, like, you know, like, what they h- have to say seriously, which is, like, I think a bad culture to promote, like, in schools in general just because of the fact that, like, yeah, like, you know, a teacher is a teacher, but like, I think that, like, there should be, like, more equality, like, in a classroom setting like that.

While participants expressed the significance of one-time questions about what kind of support is needed, they desired schools to check how previously selected options serve students. Through talking with youths about their experiences in the program, participants believed that the school could learn more about effective instruction in classroom environments. For example, Isla (2018/Latina/New York) shared: "Like, I would just wish that they formed their program to be, like, more inclusive, more inviting. Like, don't take your students out of the classrooms to further alienate them." For Isla, the separation that was part of receiving ESL services was seen as detrimental and stigmatizing. However, this separation was not the primary concern of other students. Cai (2020/AAPI/Nevada) shared: "And so, I feel like, by putting them in classes that kind of teach them the basics rather than really challenging them, don't extend their abilities as much as they should." As such, the feedback that Cai gives when asked centers more on the nature of instruction provided within environments deemed "EL instructional services." Nevertheless, the participants were dismayed that their concerns as youths were not addressed because there was no forum to share them.

Participants were straightforward about the consequences of schooling environments in which youths' perspectives are silenced. Sophie (2015/Black/Florida) shared that schools ignoring

her concerns about placement resulted in "Feeling less than, feeling like you're not smart enough, um, and confusion as to, like, why you're being pulled, um, into a class that you believe that you don't need to be in, and your other classmates just get to do whatever." Similarly, Emily (2020, Latinx, California) described the "weight' of EL instructional services:

> I kinda hope they would—they would see that class was, like, a kind of, like, a weight on students. Seeing as though it kind of put a weight on me and on, like, my perception of how I was. It kind of, like, you know, as I said, it made me feel, like, lower than others. And I feel like when you feel that way, it kinda sets you back on other things. It doesn't give you the confidence to do more. It doesn't give you the confidence to feel smart and do, like, more, like, smart things and, you know, attain, like, more knowledge.—I just hope they would, um, like, seeing as, like, of my perspective, it's—it's a class that's, uh, I don't even know if it's, like, beneficial, but it just—it's just another, like, setback, like a setback for people.

The emotional and psychological toll of EL instructional services was absent from the professional discourse of the school, and often, many of the adults involved in decision-making about students' lives. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke passionately about how they felt as youth and their current interpretations of their experiences as EL-identified students.

Participants were not asking adults to be eliminated from the decision-making role. Many gave cautionary warnings about solely relying on students' descriptions of their instructional support needs. Monica (2003/Latinx/California) shared: "I think schools need to talk to parents. They shouldn't come into classrooms asking kids things, relying on—on young kids to answer questions that are pretty—that can impact their lives. Like, that should definitely be a parent conversation- and then also ask the kid what they wanna do." Like Monica, no participant suggested that decisions about instruction should solely be in the wheelhouse of adults. Even those participants who were now parents, like Layla (2007/Arab/Illinois), acknowledged the necessity for youth perspectives and parental awareness:

> I definitely wish that they had even pulled me aside, y- you know, and asked me how I feel about that or asked me if they think I need additional help. Even if I was younger and I didn't, you know, really understand, you know, the concept, I think it's important to make the child—um, let the child in on the decision rather than just kinda pulling them on the side and, like, letting letting the parent know…um, you know, because it's—like, it's - it's - it's all about [the child] essentially.

Participants desired that youths be positioned as partners with schools in making decisions about their educational futures. However, this did not reflect the realities of their experiences in PK-12 education.

Discussion and Implications

The adult former ELs in this study identified two areas of essential knowledge for schools that educate bilingual students. These areas of knowledge integrated the experiences of their youth with their evolving understandings as adults. Despite different ethnoracial backgrounds, ages, educational attainment, gender identities, and geographical locations, the findings coalesced around two predominant categories. The first indicated that bilingual students have complex linguistic histories that cannot be reduced to (perceived) ethnoracial identity, (perceived) country of origin, or other static characteristics. The second area of essential knowledge emphasized that students are

partners in their own education. Participants' responses underscored that knowing and doing should be interconnected.

The conceptual framework in which this study is situated was central to the research design and analysis. Dignity-focused language policy and practices and intersectional anti-adultism emphasize the necessity to center the perspectives of those directly impacted. This orientation to EL practice and policy counteracts the attention to the decision-making of adults and compliance with adult-designed policies (Brooks, 2022; Mavrogordato & White, 2020). When the analytic lens was turned towards adult racialized bilinguals who described themselves as being misidentified as ELs, they highlighted the necessity of being attentive to the unique experiences and understandings of racialized bilingual youths. Even from their current life stage and positionality, the adult former EL participants wanted youths to have more power. It is possible that this study's findings are not unique to those who self-identified as misclassified ELs. Nevertheless, centering those aggrieved by their experience of the EL classification requires a shift in the organizational logics of schooling. Thereby facilitating the introduction of previously silenced perspectives into policy creation and implementation. As such, the findings contribute a necessary perspective to policy-focused research.

Shunning Political Neutrality

The understanding that students' linguistic abilities cannot be determined through seemingly static characteristics is an accepted and uncontroversial tenant within most fields that study language. As Baugh (2000) wrote more than 20 years ago: "One should never define a language or a speech community based solely on racial classification of its speakers. The history of colonialism proves this fact. [It is a] fundamental linguistic principle that a language can never be equated with a specific racial group" (p. 85). Nevertheless, previously published research and the interviewed participants in this study indicate that this does not impact the practice of assuming this to be true. Policies that appear to be race-neutral are deeply influenced by embedded racialized practices of identification, course placement, and instruction (Abril-Gonzalez & Shannon, 2021; Cabral, 2022; Malsbary, 2014). Emblematic of this type of experience within this study is Chioma's segregated reading groups within her elementary school classroom. She describes how being a Black student identified as an EL differed from being a White EL-identified student. Participants talk about the essential knowledge illustrates that those deemed policy creators and/or implementors need a keen understanding of how racism and xenophobia operate in these spaces.

This area of essential knowledge highlights the necessity of those working in schools to have a critical sociopolitical awareness about language. This perspective entails moving away from an understanding of static conceptualization language that centers monolingualism and toward a fluid understanding that recognizes the how race, nationality, and socioeconomic status impact our beliefs about language and language users (Flores et al., 2020). Specifically, having teachers and school leaders work with case studies of students where they need to go beyond initial information traditionally provided on school records to ask other questions about students' lives and abilities. As evidenced in the participants' descriptions of their own experiences of schooling, these conversations should entail robust discussion about EL-identified students' experiences of intersectional racism and xenophobia. Moreover, the intersectional theoretical lens that undergirds this study highlights the interconnectedness of the struggles of multiply minoritized youths for educational equity regardless of whether they are identified as bilingual by schools (Baker-Bell, 2020; Martínez et al., 2022). This type of information can allow educators and school leaders to use the tools required by policy but implement them in ways that challenge troubling beliefs inherent in these tools.

Rejecting Adultism

Participants' calls for youth participation in educational decision-making, ranging from in-depth partnerships to providing accessible explanations, illustrate a desire to end the EL policy's reliance on adultism. However, the United States, in policy and practice, has pushed back against recognizing the rights of children and given primacy to those of adults (Bartholet, 2020; Lee, 2017). In this way, participants explicitly asked schools to challenge the institutionalized adultism that is built in U.S. schooling overall and for EL-identified students. To challenge institutionalized adultism, existing research suggests that rejecting anti-adultism requires more than changes in practice to incorporate students into existing EL policies. For instance, Thompson & Rodriguez-Mojica (2023) examined how individualized lesson plans (ILP), which were intended to engage EL-identified students as partners in their education, became a tool of compliance within broader policy contexts. Incorporating youth as active partners requires intentionality. It is for this reason that Kangas and Cioè-Peña (2023) recommend that those using ILPs engage with a multiplicity of data and voices to counteract the tendency to move towards the standardization that can marginalize EL-identified youths.

Working with students as partners in their own education means that institutions, policies, individuals, and practices must have clarity of practice. A rich research literature exists around youth voices that can provide concrete insight for moving forward in more constructive ways. For instance, Hipolito-Delgado (2023) calls attention to the four most frequent ways educational leaders constrain or diminish students' voices: double-speak, the discourse of surprise, decorative student voice, and interest alignment. In considering how youths will be treated as active partners, the ability of youths and adults to call attention to these common roadblocks in action is a necessity for youth agency to flourish. Importantly, Hipolito-Delgado not only calls attention to roadblocks but also facilitators for positive change. His work highlights the importance of adult allies for youth in the process of navigating adult-dominated spaces. Moreover, this robust literature highlights the significance of intersectional perspectives to the cultivation of youth agency (Nyachae & Pham, 2023; Reid, 2022; Sheth & Salisbury, 2022). Racialized bilinguals are not all racialized in the same way, and thus, their experiences of how they are treated as partners in education will undoubtedly be different.

Pathways Forward

While the EL label has its origins in the advocacy for equitable educational opportunity for students who have been identified as learning English, decades of research has explicitly called attention to how this label has facilitated educational harm (Abril-Gonzalez & Shannon, 2020; Brooks, 2023; Cabral, 2023; Flores et al., 2020; González et al, 2024). This study's findings, which highlighted recognizing students nuanced linguistic background and their knowledge, asked those involved in policymaking to center the voices and experiences of students. Specifically, they highlight the power of those working at the school level to implement EL policy with these understandings in mind. To engage in this kind of work, school-affiliated adults require pre-service training and ongoing professional development to be sensitive to student knowledge and experiences. However, as I write this article, there is an orchestrated push in the United States to erase discussions about racism and other axes upon which are youths are discriminated from teacher education and other types of professional learning for school-affiliated adults that would help them negotiate and implement policy in the ways described as essential by this study's participants (Welton et al., 2023). As such, researchers, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who are concerned with the education of EL-identified students must explicitly advocate for the ability to learn about racism,

xenophobia, and its sister forms of marginalization to create equitable instructional environments for youths.

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