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Stephanie Nunez

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Perfecting the Craft of Teaching

Stephanie Núñez

Claremont Graduate University

Teacher Education Program

### **Dedication**

Esta tesis y todos mis esfuerzos se los dedico a todos los que me apoyaron en el transcurso de este camino. En especial, me gustaría agradecer a mis padres por sus palabras alentadoras, a mis hermanos y cuñados por su amor y apoyo, a mis sobrinos y sobrina por ser la luz de mis ojos, y mi prometido por su cariño, paciencia, atención y amor. Sin ellos, este año no hubiera sido posible y esta meta no se hubiera cumplido. Todo lo que hago es por ustedes y gracias a ustedes.

I would also like to thank my 5th grade partner for her welcoming and encouraging role in my journey of becoming a teacher. Without her guidance and support, I am not sure that I would have made it through this first year of rigorous learning. Similarly, I want to thank my principal and the staff at my site. From the first day on campus, I was welcomed and accommodated with such loving arms. I hope that all first year teachers have a support team like the one that I was embraced by.

My team at Claremont Graduate University played an integral part in my development as a teacher and for that I will be eternally grateful. This program was rigorous beyond belief and shaped me to be the social justice/anti-racist teacher that I am today. I appreciate all of the tools and strategies that my professors, mentors, coaches, and peers have equipped me with. I know that these will all help me continue to develop as a teacher so that I can closely support all of my students regardless of the challenges that this world throws at us.

While my current successes can be attributed to my family, friends, peers, professors, and mentors, I must give credit to my first class of fifth graders. Being a first-year teacher comes with a lot of guilt and struggle. Thankfully, my students and their parents gracefully welcomed me into their community and helped me learn alongside them. Their resilience, enthusiasm,

encouragement, humor, and passion for learning were the motivators that kept me going during my toughest days. Even through distance learning, civil unrest, countywide curfews, and a global pandemic, these students never ceased to amaze me. Their social awareness and care for one another gave me hope for our future. Thank you, promoting class of 2020, from the bottom of my heart!

I, lastly, want to dedicate this thesis and my journey of becoming an anti-racist educator to all those who have died fighting the good fight against systemic oppression. No system in our country is perfect, nor do they actively work in favor of those who identify as Black/ Brown/ Indigenous people of color, LGBTQIA, or people with disabilities. My journey and responsibility as a teacher, however, is now to help build an educational system that ensures safe spaces for these identities. It is time for teachers to care for students' socio-emotional wellbeing so that they too can engage in conversations that will help our society continue to dismantle heteronormativity, the patriarchy, white supremacy, and any other system that prevents equity for all.

Si se puede,

-Stephanie Núñez

### **Abstract**

This ethnographic narrative follows my journey as a fifth grade teacher in the greater Los Angeles area. The purpose of this ethnography is to follow the development of my journey as a first-year teacher. In this ethnography, I explore my positionality and the levels of community, school, and classroom as ways to inform and improve my teaching practices as a social-justice educator. I begin this four part narrative by discussing my positionality and how it relates to my desires of becoming a teacher. Through this narrative, I was then able to conduct three case studies of students with different identities and needs. As I studied my students' environments: community, school, classroom, and home, I learned of the importance that student-teacher relationships have on student academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being. This ethnographic narrative, however, was abruptly interrupted by a global pandemic as a result of COVID-19. There were nationwide school closures and schooling resulted in distance learning. COVID-19 was a true testament that a successful classroom ecology and positive student-teacher relationships are key to academic excellence whether it is in a physical or virtual classroom.

Keywords: Classroom Ecology, Social Justice, Greater Los Angeles, Pandemic, Distance Learning

## Preface

This ethnographic narrative highlights my positionality and development as a first-year teacher during the 2019-2020 school year. Through this narrative I hope to inform readers of the importance that positive student-teacher and teacher-parent relationships have on student academic achievement and socio-emotional wellbeing. My ethnographic narrative was interrupted by a global pandemic which included civil unrest due to police brutality, county wide lockdowns, and distance learning. These tragic events changed the course of my traditional preparation for in-classroom teaching as we abruptly transitioned into virtual classrooms.

In my ethnography, I focus on three case studies conducted on specific students from my classroom. On a micro-level, I was able to use an analysis of student interviews, home visits, student work samples/assessments, and observations from personal interactions to learn about my students holistically. Through the data gathered, I identified my students' strengths, needs, and funds of knowledge to inform and redirect my teaching strategies in order to best accommodate their academic, social, and emotional needs. This ethnography includes pseudonyms to protect the identity of my students, colleagues and administrators.

At the macro-level, I researched the school and community and recounted my perspective on how these spaces its members. As I attended community events, spoke to community members, familiarized myself with our school's mission/vision, and sought ways in which the district supported its community during a pandemic, I was able to formulate an image of the opportunities that exist for students and families. I also learned of an unease that most parents shared as our students transitioned from elementary to middle school due to gang violence that is still present in the city. This narrative comes full circle as I reflect on the beginning and end of my first year teaching and all of the challenges that presented themselves along the way.

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## ***Part A: My Journey to Teaching***

### **My Positionality**

I am a daughter of two immigrants that sought goals beyond their imaginations for their four children. My journey begins with my first two teachers-- my parents. As a native Spanish speaker, I was fortunate to have had two well versed parents that were able to informally teach my siblings and I how to speak, read, and write in Spanish. This journey was not easy given that neither of my parents received any formal education let alone professional development in order to teach us what would be our first language. As first-generation Americans, it was very easy for my siblings and I to assimilate into the American culture especially as we attended public schools where we were required to learn English. Knowing that we would learn English at school and through cartoons, my parents were very adamant that my siblings and I spoke Spanish at home and English at school. Although many times we refused to communicate with them in Spanish, I now acknowledge the service that my parents did for us. While I did not receive any formal Spanish instruction during my time in elementary school, my mother did seek Spanish catechism classes at our church. There is where I would spend four years of my early childhood reading, writing, and engaging in biblical analysis. I was given homework and was expected to complete it to the best of my abilities. Even though this was not a formal Spanish class, it did allow me to put into practice the knowledge that I had received from my parents.

Navigating the U.S. public education system as a first-generation, low-income, student of color was not always easy but it sure helped that I not only enjoyed being in school but also excelled in school. As a student, I always sought opportunities that would challenge me academically as well as give me the opportunity to be engaged within my community. I found that my teachers were always very supportive of my curiosities and encouraged me to keep working hard. As a result, I applied to the Scripps College Academy (a college access program

run by Scripps College) during my first-year at Ontario High School which changed my life forever. This opportunity allowed me to learn about private liberal arts colleges and eventually assisted me in applying to many throughout the country. I am now a Scripps College graduate and am the first in my family to pursue a Masters degree.

The support that I received throughout my academic journey was always so heartfelt that I always assumed it was a norm for all students. It wasn't until my third year at Scripps that I was prompted to critically reflect on my experiences and differentiate them to those of my peers. That is when I formally learned about the injustices that come with tracking. I learned about how early in one's educational trajectory one can see the impacts that tracking has on students. It was at this moment that I realized how much I wanted to make my experiences an opportunity for all students.

### **My Decision to Be a Teacher**

Being a teacher has been a long time dream of mine because I have always been in awe of the great ability that students have to learn and retain information. I admire their curiosities and wish to be a resource for them as they work to discover these curiosities and learn about themselves. Learning about the educational achievement gap made me wonder why there was such a gap and how my work in the field could help students defeat the odds. In my classroom, I want to be able to create an environment in which my students feel supported and feel loved as they take on rigorous challenges. Learning to be an effective teacher, however, encompasses a lot more than just having good intentions for my students and this is something that I hope to be able to learn and put into practice.

My biggest belief as a student and teacher is that school and learning should be seen as a fun and challenging puzzle that one works to put together. It should be a puzzle that includes

piecing academics with social and personal experiences over the course of a person's life. Unfortunately, this becomes a strenuous task for many students because they lack the support from their educators especially when they face adversities in their day to day lives. Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015) suggest that "building relationships with students and teaching social skills along with academic skills" (p. 2) is an effective way for teachers to lead their classrooms in order to make these experiences more feasible for students. It is important for me, as a teacher, to be my students' biggest advocates and truly believe in their ability to learn and engage in challenging academics. As a teacher, I will guide my students through differentiated learning and work with them at their level in order to move forward. In doing so, I hope that my students will be able to work with material that meets their level and helps them grow instead of forcing them to begin at grade level which would therefore further the gap between their understanding while increasing their intolerance for school.

I have had great role models throughout my education that have inspired me to take action and strive to be a pivotal educator for all students. There were many teachers and administrators that believed in me and my abilities and always led me to the resources that have led me to all of my successes. I hope to be the educator that doesn't only focus and highlight those performing well but also celebrate and encourage those who find academia more difficult.

### **What and Who Do I Want to Teach?**

As an aspiring elementary school teacher, I have spent a great amount of time within classrooms observing and teaching Spanish and English to different students. I began navigating bilingual education as an educator in 2016 when I taught Spanish and hispanophone countries' cultures to a classroom of sixth graders. I was not shocked that my students knew little to no Spanish, given that they had never had a formal Spanish education but was quickly mesmerized

by how quickly they grasped onto everything that I taught them. They became curious and eager to learn more as they inquired about things that were not originally in the lesson plans. This experience encouraged me to seek a teaching position when I studied abroad in Spain the following semester. There I was placed into two first grade classes and taught formal English classes. I was mesmerized by their ability to express likes and dislikes as well as other short phrased sentences. My first grade students were able to retain even more information than my fifth graders had and were en route to becoming bilingual students. My curiosities for analyzing the United States' public education system stemmed from this experience and encouraged me to question why it did not promote bilingualism as much as countries overseas did.

I quickly came to learn that public education approached bilingualism with an assimilative mindset. It has mostly served as an opportunity for English Learners to assimilate into the American culture that comes with public education in the United States. Schools have made ELs feel as if they were behind academically when in reality they are having to quickly learning a second language. Although I am quite intrigued by general education as a whole, bilingual education brings me the most curiosity. I am a firm believer that with the opportunity to learn a second language comes a greater growth for empathy towards diversity in our communities at school and at home. As a first year teacher, I am curious to see how I will incorporate this into my classroom and how I will encourage my students to pursue opportunities of language acquisition.

I strive to be a teacher that is inclusive of all my students and hope that they feel validated as they come in and out of my class. After having attended a predominantly white, high socioeconomic status, private, liberal arts institution, it is important for me to work within a community that resembles my community in Ontario. Oftentimes I received the narrative that in

order to be successful I needed to leave my community, and while I didn't go too far, I recognize the value in going back to communities like mine that encourage similar narratives. I hope that through my experiences and my enthusiasm I am able to serve as a resource and guide students in their paths. I especially want to be a source of love, appreciation, and guidance for those who don't have someone at home that will listen and make them feel valuable. I would also like to teach those whose parents are new to public education in the United States because they are too often forgotten as they shy away from schools. In her blog, Genia Connell (2014) mentions that a great way to be effective in one's classroom, one needs to involve the parents. Connell suggests that "at conferences and in newsletters or phone calls, [teachers should] share with your parents what they can do at home to create a language-rich environment for their children." Many times parents don't know how to best support their students and this is where I would like to serve not only my students but their parents as well. I have found that being accessible requires being creative. Phone applications, phone calls, face-to-face meetings, and emails, are some of the forms of communication that I will be implementing into my classroom in order to meet parents'/households' needs. By pre-establishing how we will communicate, I hope that we are able to create partnerships that will allow me to offer instructional and personal resources for their students and households.

### **The Role of Critical Social Justice**

Approaching education with a Critical Social Justice mindset is very important as an educator, especially when working within diverse communities. The American public education system has historically fostered a hegemonic environment in which only one narrative has set the norm on content. I'd like to refer back to the anecdotes of my previous teaching experiences because these were pivotal experiences that allowed me to witness and question why our public

school system is failing to give our students multiple ways of expression. I wondered why our public education was so fixated on emphasizing English when almost all European countries required their students to engage in bilingual programming. A country that claims to offer the best public school education lacked programming that would allow students to be global ambassadors without having the need of translators. Dismantling anti-immigrant rhetoric and anti-bilingual/ pro-assimilationist ideologies can only be the beginning for creating and encouraging culturally diverse environments.

Incorporating critical social justice frameworks into my everyday teaching will not only foster the creation of global ambassadors but will also help students feel validated as they begin to see their realities represented in the academic and professional world. “A systematic approach to culturally responsive teaching is the perfect catalyst to stimulate the brain’s neuroplasticity so that it grows new brain cells that help students think in more sophisticated ways” (Hammond, 2015, p.15). Not only does this framework diversify representation in content but it also serves to help students think critically through neurological stimulation. Reflecting on my experiences in public schools, I remember believing that the United States was this great country that provided aid to many countries despite having its own people to take care of. I firmly believed that the U.S. entered other countries with the sole purpose of helping them achieve the level of greatness that only we knew how to achieve. I was very proud to be American. As I grew older but especially when I was in college, my teacher approached our classes with social justice lenses and that was when I learned about how intrusive and erasive the U.S. actually was.

It is important that I, as an educator, approach my role through social justice lenses so that students no longer learn just one narrative, so that all those who have been silenced and marginalized by the existing unequal social powers are validated. Critical Social Justice also

gives educators the opportunity to reflect on the way that their own lived experiences positions them on the power scale. Understanding where my privileges come from and how they are manifested in my classrooms allows me to more effectively engage with the communities that I work in because they allow me to understand how my experiences have shaped my way of thinking and how I therefore approach the communities I work with.

### **My Strengths**

I have grown up surrounded by children my whole life which is something that brings me much joy. As a result, I have been able to practice my patience but they have also served as great reminders to always follow my heart and curiosities. Academically, I have strove to be the best student I could be by being proactive when it came to finding the resources that would help me accomplish my dreams. Going to school has always brought me much joy despite the levels of rigor that sometimes get the best of me but nonetheless I have persevered. I am very fortunate to have been raised in a family that values community and teamwork because it has truly shown me what solidarity looks like. In many cultures, the saying goes “it takes a village to raise a child” and this was exactly my experience growing up. I was truly raised by a plethora of family members who served as role models for me but at the same time this saying was also a reason for the many responsibilities that have fallen on me as I’ve grown up. It has now become a shared responsibility to help raise the next generation of children in my family-- something that I hope to extend to my profession.

### **My Implicit and Explicit Biases**

Teaching is a very dynamic profession given that the world of education is always evolving and that teachers are coming into contact with large numbers of people on a daily basis. As I begin to teach new content, it is important to reflect on my positionality as well as my

biases. This will help drive my Critical Social Justice mindset and expectations while also recognizing that the way I process information might be different from others' perspectives as a result of my lived experiences. It's true that it is difficult to admit and address any biases that I carry, mostly because they are part of my norms and they therefore become difficult to point out, however, my goal of being an effective teacher can greatly be interrupted by my belief that having a great work ethic is a great lead to success and a way of caring. Of course, this is something that I must approach with an open mind, as I realize that we all have external factors that affect the way we are able to perform academically. I must, therefore, strive to be more empathetic and mindful of these situations and use them as opportunities to build stronger relationships with my students.

An explicit bias that I will often have to work on will be reading body language differently. Growing up, both at home and in school, I was taught that there is a proper body language that is to be used to show attentiveness, engagement, and respect. As a result, I have become very critical of the way people carry themselves. It is true, however, that for many it is very difficult to sit attentively for such long periods of time. This is something that I have slowly tried to unlearn as I have come to realize that often a disengaged body language is not intended to be disrespectful but rather a more comfortable way of receiving information.

While I acknowledge that it is almost impossible to remain completely neutral and objective in the classroom, I also know that recognizing my biases will help me become a more effective social justice educator. I hope to use my ability to form connections with my students to address any needs that they may have both in and out of the classroom so that they are able to perform at the best of their abilities. I also recognize that the classroom exists as a shared space

and that being able to hold conversations that will address any doubts will be important for all of our success.

### **My Goals**

As a first year teacher there are many responsibilities that make this journey feel daunting, however, being able to set personal goals makes me feel less overwhelmed. While I have always known that I want to be a *warm demander* as Bondy, Hambacher, & Acosta (2012) describe, I was missing the effective practices that come with being able to foster a welcoming yet rigorous environment. I have learned a lot over the course of my teacher-ed program and am beginning to feel more confident in what my beliefs, objectives, and goals are. My first goal is to show students that they are all important and let it be known to my students that they are more than capable of achieving anything. I hope that I will be able to relay these messages through genuine relationships with my students as well as their parents both in and out of the classroom.

Although I know that this will come with time and practice, my second goal for my first year will be to quickly learn how to design a curriculum that will address my students' experiences and any needs that they may have. Through this, I hope that my students will realize that it is important to be represented within any space they enter and that they should feel proud of where they come from. I know that there will be times in which I will struggle to be this effective but I hope that I will be teaching at a school that offers collaboration among the staff.

Being a first year teacher has been a challenge overall as I slowly learn about the responsibilities that come with educating our future, but I am confident that it is important to support our students so that they can be productive members in our communities. As a first year teacher, it will be especially challenging for me to recognize that some days some things may be out of my control and that it is okay. I tend to be my best self when I am able to plan and while

in times of crisis I am able to improvise, it's hard for me to let go. For now, these are challenges I can work towards overcoming with the help of my mentor teacher, classmates, and program staff and faculty. I look forward to continue learning from and alongside my students. I know that their experiences, funds of knowledge, and curiosities will further develop my efficacy as their teacher. My goal is to meet and get to know them as individuals and not just as students in my classroom. The next part of my narrative will further explore the importance of getting to know students as individuals and through various lenses.

## **Part B: *Getting to Know My Students***

### **Introduction**

Having a holistic understanding of students is an important strategy that helps teachers better serve their students. During the first trimester of my teaching, I had the opportunity to learn about three focus students more in depth. I began by identifying a student who was an English Learner, one who has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and a student who has lived a significant life experience. Through the analysis of student work and behavior in the classroom, student interviews, and home visits, I was able to learn about my students not only as academics but as people. I gathered information about their demographics, academic standings, funds of knowledge, their self-perception and was able to use this information to create action plans that would help me as an educator, be able to better serve them.

### **Case Study 1: Rodolfo**

#### Demographic Information:

Rodolfo is a hardworking and enthusiastic boy in our class. He is a ten year old boy who was born in Teocaltiche, Jalisco, Mexico and moved to the United States when he was seven years of age. Rodolfo is easy-going and tries his best to understand what we are working on in class especially when it comes to looking for translations. I appreciate that he is always looking for ways to be helpful as well as supportive of all of his peers. Rodolfo is an advocate and cooperates in all that he can. His enthusiasm for learning and his dedication drew me to learn more about him and what he is capable of doing both inside and outside of the classroom

Rodolfo is an impressive student in every subject that he works on. Despite having frequent trips to Mexico in which he is gone for ten or more days at a time, he is able to come back to school and catch up on his learning and assignments. He does this by being proactive

about his work, ensuring that he has everything that he would otherwise miss before leaving on his trips.

Rodolfo is generally very social and gets along well with others. He enjoys singing in our classroom as well as participating in our school showcases. He is a very lively student and is definitely a team player. I have seen him develop his sportsmanship as he has successfully engaged in soccer and kickball. Rodolfo is a student that likes to be involved and well-informed. He understands the importance of being fair and likes to hear what everyone has to say before trying to come up with any conflict resolutions. Rodolfo could benefit from more English support because when it comes to math he is able to understand the content and perform at grade level. He is fluent when it comes to speaking English and expressing himself but he lacks in reading comprehension and in his writing abilities. Rodolfo could also benefit from expanding beyond the common friends that he has he could do better in involving all those that he might not have every day interactions with.

#### Assets & Needs: Academic Standing

Rodolfo is classified as an English Learner (EL) and was tested using the ELPAC in the last two years. His overall score of 1490 placed him in the level 2 showing that he has somewhat developed English skills. Rodolfo scored as a Level 3 in the speaking and listening section of the test and a Level 2 in the reading and writing sections of the test. In class, Rodolfo took a diagnostic test in English reading comprehension which concluded that he is reading at a third grade- sixth month level. He can successfully write, read, and speak in his primary language.

Rodolfo has a grade point average equivalent to that of an expanding English Learner. He generally performs well on his mathematical exams whether they are summative or formative, however, according to his CAASP scores from fourth grade, he is not meeting standard requirements. Rodolfo tries hard on his work and during some of our exams he asks for word

translations. When preparing for exams, Rodolfo looks to join my tutoring sessions or join my tutoring groups during class time and lunch. He asks for study pieces that can help him be more successful.

Rodolfo does his best to complete all of his work. If he knows that he is going to be absent for an extended period of time, he makes it a priority to speak to me so that he can be provided with the materials that he would otherwise be missing. He is very responsible and always has his work turned in on time and accurate, for the most part. Rodolfo puts a lot of thought and meaning to the work that he does. From time to time, Rodolfo gets ahead of the class and completes inaccurate work but does not complain when he is asked to redo or he is corrected. In general, I can give Rodolfo instructions in English and he is able to complete the task at hand accurately. If instructions are not clear he will ask for clarification both in English and in Spanish. He is a very eager student which I know is what has helped him develop the English skills that he has thus far.

Rodolfo is a knowledgeable student. He often times has extensive conversations with me about what it is like to live on a large farm and even gives detailed reports of what his duties are while on the farm. He was especially able to use his knowledge when a Dairy on Wheels presentation was given at our school. At this moment, I learned about how Rodolfo could critically apply his experience with the one that we all had the opportunity to share together. Rodolfo was successfully and effectively able to communicate to the class what it took and the procedures that had to be done in order to milk and feed a cow and help them with their calves. While Rodolfo demonstrates very little trouble communicating, he does experience great difficulty with reading for comprehension and when it comes to decoding words. Rodolfo does

travel to Mexico often and for long periods of time. Although his work ethics help him be exposed to the material, he misses out on the scaffolding and direct instruction that he needs.

#### Assets & Needs: Socio Emotional Development & Social Identity

Oftentimes, Rodolfo will work in a group and feels most comfortable when doing so. It is very rare to see him working by himself as he is a very social student. When working with others, Rodolfo shows great leadership and ensures that the group is staying on task. He is a confident person and is expressive in the way that he speaks, does, and interacts. He enjoys working with others and is usually the leader of any group that he forms part of. Perhaps this is because of his easy-going nature or his charisma. Rodolfo acknowledges that math doesn't always come easy to him and he offers to support himself and others by organizing small work groups. Rodolfo stated that "Math is hard for me and learning English too" (Nunez, 2019). From our conversation, it was interesting to learn that Rodolfo tries his best to communicate his struggle with math with his peers but not so much when speaking English. I prompted him with what alternatives he did when he couldn't express himself in English. Rodolfo expressed "Sometimes I don't know how to say the words and I can't tell the other people what I'm trying to say...I speak in Spanish and if they don't know Spanish then I don't say it" (Nunez, 2019). Rodolfo is typically a confident person but speaking English is where his confidence is jeopardized.

#### Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge

I had the pleasure of visiting Rodolfo's home and family. From the very beginning I was warmly received by his siblings and parents who seemed nervous but equally enthusiastic for our meeting. Rodolfo lives in a small house very close to our school. The house is full of family pictures as well as some religious symbols. It was very clear from the beginning that Rodolfo's family values their family and home in Mexico. They had pictures and artifacts of their lives

from before they immigrated to the United States. When asked about their favorite family activities, Rodolfo's parents shared that they really enjoy taking him and his siblings to their soccer games. Rodolfo has been playing since he was seven years old and it has become a family experience since then. They shared that playing soccer has truly helped Rodolfo and his family build a community in this new city. It has given them the opportunity to meet new families that have been integral to their assimilation to the United States.

As a baby, Rodolfo was an active boy both physically and mentally. According to his parents, he was always up very early in the morning, ready to help his grandparents out with all of the chores on the farm. He especially liked herding cows and making sure that the rest of the animals were being fed. Rodolfo was an eager child who wanted to spend more time outdoors than indoors. He has always been a joyful child, never missing a chance for others to know how great of a dancer and singer he is. His mother shared a story about Rodolfo in which she stated "Rodolfo enjoyed going to the fiestas from our pueblo. His favorite part was participating in the town contests where little kids had to climb onto the stage and dance around. He was always the one to draw the crowd" (Nunez, 2019). I was thrilled to hear all of Rodolfo's anecdotes and was happy to know that despite the major changes in his life, I am still seeing parts of his enthusiasm in my class. Rodolfo's mother shared that the move to the United States was difficult for the whole family and understands that her children require a lot of support. Their ultimate goal was for their children to be happy, learn English, and live lives full of access.

Rodolfo has extensive knowledge of what growing up on the farm is like. These funds of knowledge have already been useful to Rodolfo as we learned about milk producing cows as well as during our third unit of our English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. Rodolfo's parents expressed that "Rodolfo had learned how to take care of animals and different crops from his

grandfather and that he took a lot of pride in being able to help around, despite only being five or six years old” (Nunez, 2019). Rodolfo’s knowledge of farm life practices has already shown great significance in Rodolfo’s reading comprehension. He has been able to focus on decoding and translating meaning because he understands the procedural steps of milking and feeding cows as well as growing corn crops. I know that applying the content that we are learning in class to farm life information, will greatly assist Rodolfo in his journey of English language acquisition.

For Rodolfo and his family, creating a home in the United States has been very difficult. Although they were able to immigrate along with other family members, a great majority of their family still remains in Mexico. Rodolfo’s parents shared “it almost feels as if we have two homes. We have been very fortunate to have our home, our kids, our family, but a big part of who we are still remains in Mexico” (Nunez, 2019). They explained that every year, their family makes multiple trips to Mexico to visit relatives who are unable to come to the United States. Having two homes is a difficult concept for many to grapple with, especially children who are Rodolfo’s age. At this age, a ten year old’s’ socio-emotional development is generally family and peers oriented, according to *GCISD -Curriculum Guides and Developmental Characteristics*. As Rodolfo’s teacher, it is concerning to know that he will continue to be pulled out of school for extensive periods of time, however, it is also understandable that his formation as a person is being nourished with every visit. I will continue to work very closely with Rodolfo and his parents to ensure that his transition and academic performance is affected as little as possible during these absences.

### **Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations**

Rodolfo has many academic and personal goals for this school year as well as for his future. He explained that he wants to “behave better and get 3s and 4s on [his] grades” (Nunez, 2019). He had mentioned that he had gotten bad grades the previous year and that he wanted to get better grades so that his parents “could be more happy” (Nunez, 2019). His previous grades and his parents are now serving as his motivation for his successes this year. Rodolfo understood that he had to improve his grades but his reasons for wanting to improve them were eye opening for me. Rodolfo expressed that “bad grades made [him] feel like [he] didn’t know nothing” (Nunez, 2019). It was astounding to know that he needed the validation of “good grades” to feel that he was knowledgeable. Rodolfo’s personal and long term goals included becoming an officer and going to Hawaii.

Rodolfo has had many successes in school and recalls the many times that he has felt proud of himself despite having had grades on his report cards that haven’t always reflected his abilities. He recalls receiving an achievement award that made him very happy and excited to keep learning. He understands that he has a lot of work to do when it comes to learning English and he shows this by ensuring that he has the necessary work to practice and learn during his trips to Mexico. Rodolfo has expressed to me that he is happiest when he is in Mexico working on the farm but that he misses his time in school when he is there.

Rodolfo has few people that inspire him or that serve as role models for him. He shared that his uncle is one of his biggest inspirations because he wants to be as athletic as him. Like Rodolfo, his uncle comes and goes between the United States and Mexico, allowing Rodolfo very few opportunities to see his uncle. Rodolfo also shared that his twelve year old sister is a role model to him. When asked why his sister was a role model to him, he explained that she was the only one that ever talked to him about college. He seldom speaks to his parents about his

future goals and was happy that he had her to talk to about these matters. It was apparent that his sister, uncle, and himself have a strong relationship in which they talk about their aspirations and goals. Rodolfo explained that his older sister wanted to become a nurse because his uncle had served as a nurse in Mexico and had taught them about basic health procedures. Rodolfo explained that although his parents and himself do not always talk about his future, they do serve as a support network for him. He expressed that his mom and sister were both people that he could turn to.

Despite not always being on campus because of family trips to Mexico, Rodolfo has found school to be a positive experience for him. He expressed that he feels most comfortable “in the classroom... because you can talk with your friends” (Nunez, 2019). In general, Rodolfo states that he feels safe and comfortable at our school. He states “I like to go play in recess and I don’t like to do homework that much” (Nunez, 2019). Rodolfo expressed that he enjoys the social aspect of school and the competitive games that we play in class that make learning fun.

Rodolfo displays typical socio-emotional and child development for his age. He is very active when playing soccer during our hour of physical education and often runs into issues of fairness. He, however, is also a quick problem solver and is able to talk through any conflict that may arise. According to Chip Wood (2007), Rodolfo’s cognitive growth is aligned with that of a typical ten year old. He is an active receptive learner and is able to memorize basic facts. He shows this as he is one of fifteen students that has his multiplication tables memorized.

Academically speaking, Wood describes that students that are ten years old find “independent reading to be a favorite activity” (Wood 2007, p114). This statement appears to be very true for Rodolfo as he is quickly going through all of the books that he is choosing from the school library. Rodolfo completes classwork in a timely manner and is generally a very responsible

student. He is very expressive, talkative, and cooperative, qualities that are typical for ten year olds according to the Adolescent Health Resource Center (SAHRC).

### **Action Plan**

Communication will also be key to Rodolfo's success and his parents' comfort with approaching the school. In the past, it had been more difficult for Rodolfo's parents to engage with the school because they had never been asked what support they needed. They were unsure about what assistance Rodolfo was receiving as a newcomer and were not sure how to approach this foreign education system. This home visit gave these concerned parents the space to voice their opinions and concerns. Until this visit, I had made it a purpose to send home communications in English and Spanish. I was glad that Rodolfo's parents expressed their gratitude for making these messages accessible to them. I will continue to build these opportunities of accessibility for all families as well as opportunities for them to voice concerns outside of the usually formalized parent/teacher meetings.

Rodolfo's older sister joined us in our home visit and was able to share her aspirations of going to college. Rodolfo had previously shared with me that his older sister wanted to be a nurse and that college was a conversation that she constantly spoke about because she knew that was one way to achieve this dream of hers. As I inquired about college and additional goals that they each had, Rodolfo's sister quickly lit up. She explained to me that her dream was to attend UCLA and eventually join their nursing programs. Rodolfo smiled and said that he just wanted to be a police officer. When I asked his parents, they said "we would like for them to follow their dreams and receive the education that we were not given, however, the longer we are here [in the U.S.] the more we realize that this is not going to be any easier for them" (Nunez, 2019). His parents began to reference the difficulty that the current political climate is creating for undocumented students. I know that as Rodolfo's educator, my goal is going to be to help this

family have access to resources that will facilitate their experiences when it comes time to apply to college for their children. I know that Rodolfo's narrative is relatable to many students' narratives on our campus. For these children, the topics of resistance, perseverance, and determination are going to need to be highlighted and embodied in my classroom. This family is resourceful in nature and I have no doubt that they will be successful in achieving their goals.

Entering Rodolfo's home felt very familiar to me. From the very beginning, I saw a family that has had to sacrifice the familiar for their children's future. I was reminded of where I come from and all of my experiences growing up. This is why I was not surprised when Rodolfo's father stated "I hope my children will never forget that all of the sacrifices that we have made as individuals and as a family have been for them. I hope that they are able to learn and work and live happy lives. We are not rich but we have made the sacrifices needed for them to be comfortable" (Nunez, 2019). Over the last three months, I have learned that many students in my class have experienced significant life experiences that have required many of their families to make painful but necessary sacrifices for their survival. Rodolfo's father reminded me that in many circumstances, making sacrifices might not be our first option but that it is necessary for the continued function of a unit. As I learn about my class and their academic formation, I have learned that it has been important to sacrifice an assignment in order to actively support my students' socio-emotional needs. This conversation with Rodolfo's father served as a moment of reflection on the sacrifices that my students have to make everyday to be active participants and producers of knowledge.

During this home visit, I realized that I wanted the conversations to flow a lot smoother than if it were a formal interview. I had my questions protocol in mind but decided to truly learn about my student and their family through their anecdotes and artifacts. Much like Williams

(n.d.), I believe that “seeking the advice of parents shows respect and helps gain and sustain their support.” I appreciated all that they had to share about Rodolfo and their experience in the United States and learned that I still have much more to learn about my student, his family, and his community.

## **Case Study 2: Daisy**

### **Demographic Information**

Daisy is a ten year old Latina who is kind and has a giving nature. Daisy was chosen to be a part of this study because she is a sweet and goal driven student. Daisy is very friendly and playful inside and outside of the classroom. She enjoys playing with all of her classmates and goes out of her way to include all of our EL students despite the fact that she doesn't speak Spanish. Daisy volunteers to work with others and invites everyone to play with her.

Daisy truly enjoys to dance and play tetherball. On her spare time she likes to draw and never loses a chance to express this creativity. Overall, Daisy is an active young lady who loves to share any and all comments that come to mind. She loves when people listen to her stories and is a great listener as well. When speaking to Daisy, it is evident that she is enthusiastic about working with her peers as well as reading. She is always looking for a new book and is starting to challenge herself more and more with reading chapter books. She becomes very excited every time she is able to complete a chapter book and is able to comprehend its content. It is clear, however, that Daisy tends to shut down whenever we are learning math. During this time, I ask Daisy to use her multiplication chart, math notebook, and her math textbook along with joining me in small group. These tools have helped her narrow her focus and subside her math anxieties, strategies that I hope she will be able to learn and practice on her own in the near future.

### **Assets & Needs: Academic Standing**

Daisy was born and raised in CA and is classified as an English Only (EO) student. She has significant difficulty with inattention and hyperactivity which adversely affect her ability to access grade level curriculum. Daisy benefits from additional support within the classroom. Her IEP goals include the following: 1. When given a writing assignment, she will provide a topic sentence with three details supported by facts and a conclusion, 2. 80% accuracy in 4 of 5 trials when given a multiplication table to complete, 3. Identify the main conflict to a plot and explain how it is resolved with 80% accuracy when reading/listening to an appropriate reading level text, and 4. Remain on task for 80% of the instructional time. Daisy's accommodations also include chunked classwork and homework in fifteen minute chunks with two to three minute breaks in between.

Daisy does not perform well on formative, summative, nor standardized tests. When reviewing Daisy's state test scores from the last two years, I was able to learn that on both tests she did not meet grade level standards and that she averaged way below the rest of her peers. I have noticed that for Daisy testing can look one way. She is always the first student to finish her tests even after being reminded to read every passage, problem, or question carefully and being told to review or check her work. Often times, Daisy has informed me that she is afraid to be the last one done with her exams and therefore strives to finish first. This has greatly affected the way that she has performed on many assessments. As part of her accommodations, Daisy's Special Education team and I have agreed that giving her multiple opportunities to complete the assessment and provide her a change in testing space would be the first steps we would take to help Daisy redirect her focus.

A big part of helping Daisy be more successful in class has been to help her maintain her focus on her studies. Daisy is generally drawing, writing notes to others, or coloring. This had

led to her not being able to complete tasks as directed and to therefore have many incomplete assignments. It is very difficult to let Daisy work on her own because she needs to be constantly reminded to stay on task even when given longer time to complete any assignment. Chunking her work and time has been a useful strategy that Daisy and I have been working on together. This has helped Daisy direct her attention to her work but even this strategy doesn't always work. Daisy does well when paired with someone that can gently remind her that their work needs to get done.

When it comes to critical thinking, Daisy has a harder time engaging in conversations. When other students have invited Daisy to share her thoughts, her common response has been that she is uncertain. Daisy struggles to understand grade level content and it has become evident in the classroom. She is currently reading at a level equivalent to that of a first grader who is in the seventh month of instruction. This greatly affects the way that she interacts in the classroom because she does not understand the content that her peers are reviewing or it takes longer for her to access it through the scaffolds that are placed to support her. Daisy is, however, able to explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

#### **Assets & Needs: Socio Emotional Development & Social Identity**

Daisy is a creative young lady and expresses her creativity using her artistic talents. Her creative mind allows her to tell some of the most interesting stories as she is able to add vivid detail to her characters and story plots. Although Daisy is an EO student, she is very creative with the way that she communicates with some of her peers. Oftentimes, I have seen Daisy using her hands and distinct facial expressions in order to communicate with peers that speak other languages. She tries her best to share her emotions, struggles, excitement and successes.

Although Daisy is a very sweet and inviting student, she does struggle to get along with some of her peers. There have been multiple occasions where other students have passed notes around our classroom expressing that they were no longer her friend. This has been very difficult for her because she doesn't always understand their motives. Fortunately, Daisy has responded with great maturity every time and has come to me for support. Her and I were able to address the situation and she has made new friends fairly quickly. Daisy and I were able to use these incidents to help talk about being socially aware and how to build relationship skills that would help her create positive friendships with others. Academically, Daisy has a very powerful growth mindset. She is quick to celebrate even the smallest amounts of progress that she makes and I make sure that I match her enthusiasm and compliment her for her work and appreciation of herself.

#### **Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge**

Visiting Daisy's family was an experience filled with quality time. Daisy lives in a small home not too far from our school with her parents and older brothers. From the very beginning, I was able to learn that they are big sports fans as I was able to observe flags and pictures of their family in different jerseys of their favorite teams. This family welcomed me very warmly and quickly offered food. I was able to share some pictures of my family and connected with Daisy's family with stories of my family and sports as well. Although the experience was welcoming, I could feel the nerves and anxieties at the beginning of this visit. Daisy's mom had taken the afternoon off from work so that she could prepare a meal for my arrival. I was very shocked to have been received in this manner but also felt great honor in being able to share a meal with their family.

Daisy has very supportive parents that work tirelessly with all of her support systems at school. It is obvious that she looks up to her parents for support and guidance, which is why I

was shocked when we began to talk about her future. When asked whether her parents talked about her future goals or aspirations she explained that those conversations are rare for her. “We don’t talk about college that much” (Nunez, 2019). Daisy did, however, share that “they ask me what I want to be, I tell them that I want to be a vet and they just say okay” (Nunez, 2019). Daisy did not seem to be bothered by their lack of interest in her future goals. She then explained that her older brother went to college and graduated this past year. I asked Daisy if he ever shared his experience with her or if he motivated her to do well in school so that she too could achieve the same academic goal. Once again, Daisy expressed that he also shared little to nothing about going to college and didn’t motivate her to pursue a college career.

#### **Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations**

Daisy knows that she is typically a happy and playful person and admits to being very competitive when playing out in the playground. Daisy’s goal for this year includes “to be a better person and help others” because she knows that “some people have hard times” (Nunez, 2019). This goal of hers is due to the fact that she sees her family always helping others and she admires that her parents are kind to people they don’t even know. She claims that she often reflects on her parents’ actions and hopes that she can be like them in the future. Daisy’s parents play an influential role in her life. She expressed that she wants to be like her parents because “they are really nice and kind and help each other when they need help” (Nunez, 2019). Daisy seems to have a positive self-concept and celebrates her accomplishments no matter how small they may be.

Daisy finds that school is a safe space for her and explained that she likes everything about school. Her favorite subjects include Language Arts and Science because she likes to read and do experiments with her hands. When asked why these were her favorite subjects, Daisy also explained that those two subjects help a lot inside and out of school, referring to the times that

she conducted her own experiments at home to help her community. When speaking to Daisy, she expressed that our classroom, her RSP classroom, and the playground were spaces where she felt most comfortable and happy. She, however, surprised me with the connections that she made with the front office. Daisy stated, “the office makes me uncomfortable, I feel sad because it’s either that I’m sick or I’m in trouble.” I had expected my students to associate the front office with punishment but not health related concerns. She was the first student to share a thorough remark on this question.

Daisy has had many accomplishments this year and is often reflective of how far she has come. She explains that her proudest moments have included getting all of her spelling words correct in third grade. Daisy has been working closely with her RSP teacher and have been making great strides in her reading comprehension goals. They have recently shifted part of their focus on her spelling words and she has been improving week by week. Daisy is very motivated with the progress that she has made and has taken it upon herself to do extra work in order to keep improving. She admits that math is more difficult for her because she doesn’t always understand it. Her solutions for this are to ask her partners or teachers for help from time to time. She acknowledged that working in small groups helps her get through the subjects that she is struggling in but that it is difficult for her to initiate small group work.

In general, Daisy demonstrates typical socio-emotional child development. She is a 10 year old young lady who finds it very easy to share her knowledge with her classmates. Cognitively speaking, she demonstrates atypical behaviors. Daisy has a hard time learning factual information, a typical performance for students in her age level, and she is unable to concentrate or read for extensive periods of time. Wood (2007) suggests that students who are nine years old often use “baby-talk” (p. 99). This has recently been an observation that I have

made when Daisy has shared stories about her weekends with me. Daisy absolutely benefits from a great deal of physical activity as she is always active in our class, making her attention to lessen on her academic work. According to GCISD- Curriculum Guides and Developmental Characteristics, students at this age tend to be “talkative; likes to tell stories about something they have seen, heard, or read about; and can talk something into the ground.” Daisy is a talkative young lady and repeats her stories, especially the ones that she is most proud of.

### **Action Plan**

Daisy’s family was open to sharing a discussion about their family and Daisy’s educational history both in school and outside of school. They immediately brought out pictures of their family over the years and shared about all of their family trips. Visiting Daisy’s home was both entertaining and informative for my pedagogical instruction. During my visit, I learned that Daisy had always had difficulty with completing typical aged tasks. Her parents had always been concerned with her ability to talk and recognize shapes as a toddler. They were not surprised at all when Daisy’s second grade teacher approached them with concerns of Daisy’s academic performance. Daisy’s mom explained that “her older brothers never had any trouble with school, they would come home and do their homework without me having to tell them” but that wasn’t the case with Daisy. They noticed that they had to spend more time with Daisy at the kitchen table every night and that this would usually end in tears and frustration.

Daisy’s parents realized that she was very energetic throughout the day and that these high amounts of energy affected her attention and focus. Jokingly, Daisy’s mom explained that they “bought her a trampoline and made sure the swimming pool was well conditioned so that she could spend the whole day exercising and tiring herself out” (Nunez, 2019). Her parents explained that keeping Daisy physically active was the only way that they could get her to focus on her studies. Daisy agreed with her parents and was very excited to give me a tour of her

backyard where she spends a lot of her time. When asked what their favorite family activities were, Daisy's parents explained that they enjoyed taking Daisy to her dance practices and recitals. They were excited to then share pictures of competitions that she has participated in and shared that Daisy has come a long way since she first began dancing. I was very pleased to have gotten this response from her parents because I quickly began to brainstorm ways in which I can facilitate Daisy's academic learning through the use of dance and perhaps the rest of the class as well. I recognized that my class as a whole could benefit from total physical response, something that I hope to continue to develop and incorporate into our classroom.

Daisy's parents are very aware of Daisy's needs and have tried various strategies that have been suggested to them over the years so that they could best support her. In the short time that I was at their house, I was able to see all of the efforts that these parents have devoted to helping their daughter be successful and yet, they seemed defeated. Daisy's dad expressed concerns for Daisy as he stated, "Since Daisy was a little girl, her mom and I both have had to work multiple jobs, something that did not happen with her older brothers. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better for her if one of us stayed home with her" (Nunez, 2019). Daisy's mom explained that for the last four years, Daisy had been getting picked up by a babysitter that could not devote the time necessary to ensure that Daisy was receiving the assistance needed with her school work. I assured her parents that they are raising a very kind, friendly, and intelligent young lady.

During my visit, we were able to talk about Daisy's love for drawing. I shared some of her artwork and asked if they were aware of her talents. Her parents were amazed by the drawings that I shared with them and told me that she often draws during her free time but rarely showed them her art. This moment in my visit was unique because I had presumed to be the one

learning a lot of new information on Daisy, but there I was sharing new information about Daisy with her parents. We agreed that together we would use her fondness for drawing to better explain grade level concepts for her. Daisy's parents were enthusiastic about this idea as they began to explain that they would be willing to try anything in their reach to help their daughter.

Daisy's parents are a very hard working and resilient couple. When asked what they hoped Daisy would learn from them as her first teachers, they explained that they wanted her to "do well in school so that she didn't have to work as much as [them]." During our conversation, they did share that they had hopes for Daisy to attend college and pursue a career after having focused on her academic development. It was interesting to hear this from her parents as I sat there and recalled my interview with Daisy in which she explained that her parents never really talked about college with her. I was glad to hear that they did have expectations for her to go to college and that they were very interested in continuing to work with Daisy's support team at our school in order to help Daisy accomplish her goal of becoming a veterinarian.

My home visit with Daisy and her family helped remind me that household members are the foundation of every student. In Daisy's case, her parents were the ones that applied their knowledge and understanding of who Daisy is in order to best support her. They were able to share with me that they saw a difference in the way that she behaved when compared to her older siblings and knew that because she was developing differently, they needed to use different strategies that would work best for Daisy. While they remained concerned for her future academic experiences, I believe that our conversation truly helped them foresee her future. I encouraged them to continue to work closely with her academic support team, especially during moments where they felt like they were running out of strategies that could support them as a family.

Parent involvement in students' education is vital in ensuring the best for the student. However, I could only hope that I am also preparing myself with the proper strategies to support not only my students but their families as well. Porter and McZeal Walters writes, "because teachers are primarily trained to provide student-focused services, they may lack formal training in working with families" (p.87). They build upon this point by writing, "culturally relevant training on how to involve families must be specific, results-driven, and monitored consistently" (p. 87). Parents should have the ability to advocate for their students, and teachers have the power to be able to inform this advocacy. The teacher and parent should be a team in supporting students. After our meeting, I am confident that Daisy's parents and I can and will achieve this.

### **Case Study 3: Patricia**

#### **Demographic Information**

Patricia is a very special student in my class. She is a 10 year old, Mexican female who is a wise student. The way that she carries herself and addresses her peers are all things that leave me very impressed. Inside the classroom, she is very aware of the expectations that I have for all students and she is always making sure that she is meeting those expectations as well as reminding others to do the same. Outside of the classroom, Patricia loves to draw and play with her friends. She gets along well with her peers and enjoys playing jump rope and isn't afraid to join a soccer or football game. I believe that Patricia does really well in social studies and Language Arts because she loves to understand the historical events that affected and continue to prevent some from living happy and free lives in our country. Patricia excels in art class. She loves to draw during free time and is always looking to improve her artistic abilities. I know that she has a hard time with math but I appreciate seeing her try her best every time that she asks for help and works towards understanding the concept that we are learning in class.

As her teacher this year, I am very aware of her academic and social abilities and know that she is more than capable of working through her struggles to excel as a student. I have learned that Patricia and her siblings have been involved in guardianship issues which I see continues to affect her in school. Often times, Patricia comes to school without her backpack and homework because she spent the weekend at her dad's house and forgot to take it back to her grandmother's house. During class, Patricia has shouted that she doesn't have a mother and that her life was chaotic. I would like Patricia to know that her life experiences are not the only things that define who she is. As previously stated, she is wise beyond her years and while this situation has made her extremely socially aware because of the great responsibilities that fall on her, I want her to remember that she can still enjoy being a 10 year old.

**Assets & Needs: Academic Standing**

Patricia's language classification is EO. She generally does well in her exams and works really hard to ensure that she is scoring at an average or above average level. In her 4th grade state tests, she exceeded the standards for English Language Arts and nearly met standards for Mathematics. Even now, she excels in language arts and history and takes a lot longer to complete her mathematics assessments. Patricia enjoys working in groups, especially if those groups include her friends. She ensures that they stay on task and that their conversations are productive. With that being said, she is also very capable of working on her own. She is an independent student and enjoys her alone time from time to time. Patricia completes mostly accurate work and gives insightful answers in her work. She is very capable of completing work as directed and even makes sure that those around her are also understanding and completing the work. Patricia is very socially aware and incorporates this awareness into our classroom conversations. She is able to talk about political events in relation to our class conversations and I'm always left impressed.

Her critical thinking abilities are far above most of her peers. Patricia, however, doesn't always speak up to share what she is thinking. Often times, she has to be called on so that she can express her ideas and arguments. She has a powerful voice and it is obvious that her peers respect her thinking and directions but she doesn't always use it to advocate for herself in the classroom. Patricia has a hard time conceptualizing numbers and translating words into numerical expressions. It is obvious that it takes Patricia a longer time to understand the math, and she eventually does, but it takes a lot of dedication and hard work on her behalf. She does ask for help but it is less often than she probably needs. She does, however, excel when it comes to her range of reading and understanding level of text complexity. Right now, Patricia's reading ability is comparable to that of an average sixth grader after the second month of the school year. She is an avid reader and her test scores definitely show it.

Patricia knows that she is a very bright student and that she is well liked by others. She appears to be confident about who she is and why she does what she does in school. After our interview I was able to learn that Patricia is determined to go to college, however, she doubts her abilities of being able to achieve this. When asked about a time she felt inspired she also added that she was "kind of nervous because whenever I'm happy I always have second thoughts about bad stuff, what if I don't get accepted...". Patricia is a student that shows great confidence when interacting with others but has a hard time seeing her own abilities. Creating an environment in which each student can see their self-worth is very important for me because students should be able to see that they are more than capable of changing their future based on their attitudes and actions.

Patricia is a bright and caring student in and out of my classroom. It has been a pleasure working with her thus far and I am excited to keep learning from and about her. Her cognitive

abilities leave me in shock every time that she and I share in conversation or when I hear her interacting with her classmates. I am confident that she will achieve any and all goals that she sets her mind to because it is in her nature to find solutions to problems that she and others encounter. I am thrilled to continue to see her development.

### **Assets & Needs: Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity**

Currently, Patricia's grandmother has custody over Patricia and it appears that dad is very present in her life. Patricia shared that she gets good grades so that she can impress her dad and grandmother. Patricia stated, "I want to go because I don't think my mom went to college but I know my grandma did (nursing school) and my dad did too but I want to be able to go to college." Patricia is the last child of four. Her three older brothers have shown little to no interest in school and Patricia claims that this makes her very sad. She mentioned that she wants to be different than her brothers because she doesn't like to be late or complain like they tend to do. Patricia's grandmother and father have mentioned the importance of going to college to Patricia. She claims that her dad motivates her "to do her homework so that she can stay in school because she needs her education in order to go to college."

### **Assets & Needs: Funds of Knowledge**

I had the opportunity to visit with Patricia's family in their house that is located about ten minutes from our school. It was explained to me prior to visiting that this house belonged to Patricia's grandmother where Patricia and her two older brothers lived. At our meeting, I was welcomed by Patricia, her grandmother, her dad, and occasionally her older brothers. This visit was a difficult one because I knew some information about Patricia's life experiences but did not want those pieces of information to create any kind of biases when going into their home. During this interview, I stuck to my interview questions and my photographic presentation of who I was in hopes that an organic conversation would come out of this. In the last few months, I had

primarily been in contact with Patricia's father, so this was my first time meeting her grandmother. I wanted her to feel just as comfortable and involved in our discussion as I bounced between English and Spanish to help accommodate her needs.

Patricia's home was very quiet and was decorated with a lot of spiritual pieces. There were some pictures of Patricia as a young girl but not many. Nonetheless, her home was warm and inviting. As we spoke and shared some food, I was able to learn more about Patricia's father and grandmother. Her father lives in Los Angeles where he works as a distributor for a big company and her grandmother works as a nurse at one of the local care centers. Although very briefly, her grandmother explained that Patricia's mother is not present in her life and that this has a great impact in Patricia's morale. This topic was one of the hardest that we engaged in because I knew that at this moment, her family was being very vulnerable with me. I knew that not only did I have to be an active listener but also practice compassion and empathy for what their family had gone through especially as the conversation continued and we addressed other questions.

### **Assets & Needs: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations**

Patricia seems motivated to go to college. This idea resulted after an activity done in 4th grade in which students were required to fill out their goals. Her previous teacher had talked to the class about the many possibilities of going to college. Patricia was left intrigued about the possibility for her to go to college and decided to do some research. She had remembered that in third grade, her class had done an activity for memorial day and had met some students' parents who had served in the military. Patricia had liked the idea of forming part in the military and then had been intrigued by the idea of attending a 4yr college as well. Patricia explained her research as she said "I googled Marine college because I want to be a marine when I grow up... Marine in the military not biologist, I saw diplomas and knew that I wanted one".

As I tried to understand Patricia's academic and future interests, I asked her to share who inspired her or were her role models. Quickly she shared that her friend's dad was her biggest inspiration because he used to be a Marine and now had a family, something that she wanted for herself as well. As I have seen these two students interact, I know that Patricia spends a lot of time with her friend and her family. It was no surprise that they had such a great influence on her goals. Patricia mentioned that she doesn't always talk to her friend's dad but that he has shared in class some of his experiences and has shown her pictures of his time in service. I did not ask if this family in particular knows about her dreams of going to college and joining the military or if they have encouraged her to continue her academic studies, but this is something that I hope to follow up with Patricia.

Patricia enjoys going to school and finds that it generally is a safe space for her. She enjoys being able to meet and interact with her friends and likes that she can be expressive through her art. Patricia has a hard time when students are disrespectful to one another and when they don't take care of common spaces. She explained that often times students throw a lot of trash in the playground, dirty restrooms and leave our class a mess. She does, however, like when we play music in the classroom and make our learning into games. Patricia claims that she loves when there is competition in the classroom because she feels most motivated to learn. Patricia looks forward to forming part of our end of the school year softball game. She wants to be able to show her athletic self and work towards being great in softball. Overall, Patricia enjoys being in school and claims that she feels most calm when she is drawing in her seat or playing on the playground with her friends.

Patricia's father was very proud of Patricia when I shared with him that she was serving as one of my peer-tutors. He explained to her that these were qualities that he had hoped she

would develop because they were “qualities that would help her get through life and hopefully college one day” (Nunez, 2019). Not only was I impressed by his words for her but I was also glad that he was sharing his dreams of college for her. During my interview with Patricia, she had mentioned that college was rarely spoken at home but that her father occasionally reminded her of the importance of attending. In that moment, I could see Patricia feeling proud of herself as she let out a big smile. I assured them that Patricia’s work habits, dedication, and collaboration skills would lay a great foundation for her journey to college. Her grandmother and father then shared some anecdotes about how times are very different from when they applied to college and wondered if there were any resources that they could tap into to make sure that they were doing everything on their behalf to support this academic journey. I assured them that it was never too early to plan for these steps and was able to connect them to some resources. I have many students in my classroom that will one day be first-generation college students. I know that they would benefit from some exposure to these topics and resources as well.

During this visit, I learned that Patricia alternates between her grandmother’s and her father’s house. They explained to me that communication between the grandmother, her father, Patricia, her brothers, and their aunt was something that they struggled keeping up with. I knew that there had been issues with this since on multiple occasions, I had to stay hours after school with Patricia waiting for her to be picked up. I shared with them the various methods of communication that they could resort to that would help all of us remain on the same page so that we could further support Patricia. I was able to assure this family that I was here to support them and Patricia’s academic journey. Much like Ginwright (2016), I knew that “when people build a sense of collective hope, they are more likely to engage in activities that will improve their

neighborhoods, schools, and cities” (pg. 22), but also create trust and hope for themselves and their children.

In general, Patricia demonstrates typical behaviors for a 10 yrs. old student. Physically, Patricia shows a large growth spurt when compared to her male counterparts. During class one day, she had a menstrual accident and was made aware of it by her male peers. She seemed unbothered by it, knew what she had to do and moved on with her day. According to the State Adolescent Health Resource Center (SAHRC), students between the ages of 10-12 enjoy physical activities that master specific skills and enjoy competitive games, something that Patricia has expressed on various occasions. During our interview, Patricia mentioned that she was looking forward to our end of the year softball game because she had been practicing her batting skills and was ready to show her abilities.

She enjoys being independent but also likes to spend time with her closest friends. It is very rare that you see Patricia interacting with students who don't normally form part of her friend group. Patricia's social-emotional behaviors tend to also be typical for her age. On many occasions, she has expressed that she likes to draw because it helps her focus. According to Chip Wood, in his book *Yardsticks*, ten year olds need time for play so that they are able to “bounce back and do even more school work” (Wood 2007, p108). This has been true for Patricia as she has taken up drawing as an escape from classwork.

### **Action Plan**

The most difficult conversations that I have had to sit through in my visit with Patricia's family had me reflecting well after our meeting. I understood that it was important for me to be more intentional about dismantling the traditional norms of family compositions. I knew that this was important for Patricia but my understanding only grew more as her grandmother and father shared this with me. Prior to my visit with Patricia's family, she had been acting more and more

disruptive in our classroom, something that she hardly ever does. Patricia had also randomly shouted to the classroom that she did not have a mom. I took my visit as an opportunity to discuss this with her family and her father then explained that “the holidays were difficult for Patricia because of her mother’s absence.” Ginwright (2016), adequately expresses Patricia’s experience as he states, “exposure to traumatic and high-stress environments often leads to behavioral challenges in schools” (p. 20). It quickly became evident why she had been behaving in this way and allowed me to reflect on how I can better support other students who are experiencing similar feelings during this time of the year. While many students were eager to talk about what their moms’ were cooking for the holidays, I tried sharing my experiences with friends, grandparents, and other close relatives so that she could feel included in the conversations that we had in class. With holidays such as Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day approaching in the new semester, I will continue to be more purposeful about being inclusive in the activities that we do so that this isn’t another painful experience for her.

Not only did Patricia have great difficulty because of her mother’s absence but they also shared that Patricia often spent a lot of time alone. Patricia is usually watched by her older brothers and while they care for her, there isn’t much interaction between them. Patricia’s grandmother stated that “Patricia has always loved to read. Since [she] could remember, Patricia always had a book in hand and would spend hours reading all on her own” (Nunez, 2019). I was not surprised by this comment because in our class, Patricia has proved to be very successful in her reading abilities. Patricia’s grandmother explained that Patricia had always been very independent and a happy child despite their experiences. She shared that on top of reading, she was an amazing artist. An anecdote that truly touched me was a moment that her father recalled in which Patricia had spent hours drawing and coloring. When they asked her to see her artwork,

she explained that she was saving them for when she was able to see her mother again. It was at this moment that I knew that I had to be more purposeful with my socio-emotional teaching instructions. I know that Patricia is not the only student in my classroom that has experienced traumatic life events that affect them in our everyday learning environment. I want to ensure stability, kindness, love, and compassion for all of my students and hope that they too share this with one another. I hope to encourage Patricia to continue to use her artistic abilities for self-expression.

Patricia's family taught me that their resilient nature and love has been the glue that keeps this family together. I know that in my teaching, I must too lead with resiliency, compassion, critical thinking, but ultimately with a sense of understanding. Viewing my work through socio-emotional teaching lenses will help my students overcome the difficulties that they are experiencing at home while helping them acknowledge strategies and practices that feel most organic for them. Teaching through socio-emotional lenses is critical for the grade and age level that I am teaching in because during this stage of their lives, they are learning about how they fit into society at large. My students are not only discovering themselves as people but they are also trying to piece this understanding with the many social expectations that exist. It is important that I teach my students to accept themselves and where they come from and help guide them to where they are going next.

### **Concluding Thoughts on Case Studies**

Having the opportunity to conduct research on three focus students has provided a full understanding of why it is so important to create and establish a safe and positive learning environment. All three of my focus students proved to need social and emotional support that would help them be more successful in the classroom. After meeting with these students and

their families, I was very impressed by all that I learned from them. I work in a city that I am not familiar with and therefore know very little about. It was important for me to meet with my focus students and their families because through them I had the opportunity to learn more about the site and city that I work in.

My three focus students demonstrated that their different learning styles and needs call for a learning environment that allows them to express their needs comfortably. My students have each experienced distinct adversities that could make learning difficult for them and therefore need a space that helps them feel safe, a space in which they can be their authentic selves. My students taught me that they learn best when they feel loved and supported. During my student interviews, I learned that my students looked up to people that guided them through difficult moments and those that would listen and give encouraging advice. I ultimately have striven to do the same in my classroom for these three focus students as well as the rest of my class by implementing practices that help foster a welcoming environment between my students and I, as well as among themselves. Learning from my students' household members truly showed me that families can be our greatest sources of information that can guide us as educators to be and do better for our students. Although my research only extends to my three focus students, the insight that I gained from engaging in this project extends across my classroom.

Conducting this micro-level research gave me great insight to who these students were as individuals and to the factors that motivated them to be the best version of themselves. However, it is important to recognize that these students are also shaped by their everyday experiences in the community that they live in. The next part of my narrative explores the greater community that my students are from and the kind of resources that are offered for the community's residents.

## **Part C: *Getting to Know the Community***

### **Community Context**

#### **Demographics**

High Road was originally an agricultural area that quickly evolved into a residential city with a booming industrial economy after World War II. High Road is a city that takes great pride in their commercial and industrial properties. According to the history section from the on-line city website, the industries that most employ their residents and most stimulate their economy include manufacturing, retail trade, educational services, health care and social services. This also largely impacts the organization of the community at large. High Road is found in the greater Los Angeles area. It is within reach of five southern California freeways – the 5, 60, 105, 605 and 710, allowing their industrial businesses quick access to a large part of southern California. Additionally, High Road is only minutes from Port of Long Beach and Los Angeles, the busiest container ports in the U.S. (*High Road, CA / Data USA*). The city is accessible by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) and the Union Pacific Railroad and is only 31 miles from LAX, 33 miles to Ontario International Airport and 25 miles to John Wayne Airport. It is no doubt that the city of High Road is in a prime location for the amount of success that their industrial businesses are experiencing.

In 2008-2010, the city of High Road had a total population of 63,000 people, of which 52% were female and 48% were males. Twenty-six percent of the population was under 18 years and 12% was 65 years and older. Demographically, High Road is a predominantly Latino community. “Families in High Road are second and third generation Hispanic families” (City of High Road, ). “The population of High Road, CA is 89.4% Hispanic or Latino, 5.95% White Alone, and 2.98% Asian Alone” (Data USA). Additionally, residents have reported that for those

reporting as one race alone reported to be 69% white while 91% reported to also be of Hispanic descent.

According to the *City of High Road* official city websites, the total school enrollment in the city was 19,000 students in 2008-2010. Nursery school and kindergarten enrollment was 1,700, elementary through high school enrollment was 12,000 children, and college or graduate school enrollment was 5,000. (City of High Road). Current statistics are yet to be reported.

### **Housing & Resources**

Housing in High Road is quite diverse. In 2008-2010, High Road had a total of 17,000 housing units, 3 percent of which were vacant. “Of the total housing units, 79 percent were in single-unit structures, 18 percent were in multi-unit structures, and 3 percent were mobile homes” (City of High Road). Many of the homes built in High Road are constructions that date to the early 1990s. Two-thirds of the residents in High Road are owners of their homes while a third are renters.

High Road is currently working on major road construction that will further develop their industrial success while maintaining the security and well-being of their residents. These include the recently completed projects such as the Kingston Boulevard railroad underpass project, the new High Road Library on Main Avenue and the completion of the Parks Renovation project, which provided much-needed improvement and expansion of city parks and recreational facilities throughout the community.

Many of my students live with other family members, in small apartments, or in hotels using vouchers that the district provides for them. Students who are newcomers to our school and country have expressed that they are living with other family members and have to travel by bus almost half an hour each way to attend school. For the most part, my students live within

walking distance to our school. This counters city demographics, indicating that my school is in a socio-economically lower pocket of the city.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Two cities merged into what is now known as High Road. According to the *LA County Library*, “the towns of [High and Road], from which the city originated, officially began in the 1880s when the Union Pacific and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads built rail lines through the region.” As reported in the library website, city page, and city museum, this was a decision made by the residents that formed part of both towns. While this city offers a lot of resources to their community, there are plenty of issues in which it falls short.

In February 2014, the City of High Road kicked-off a campaign to end homeless and panhandling within the City. Panhandlers have become a visible presence within high-traffic commercial locations citywide over the last several months. The City explains that these efforts were initiated because of aggression or loitering on behalf of panhandlers. In response, the City launched a campaign called “A Safe and Clean High Road” which according to the City website, “focuses on enforcing existing laws as well as partnering with our residents and business community to discourage anti-social behavior within our commercial centers” (*City of High Road—Help End Panhandling*).

Although hardly recognized on official city pages, High Road has experienced great issues with gang violence. Most of the community members in my school have expressed great concerns for their student’s transition to middle school. When prompted with follow up questions, parents explained that the feeder middle school that our students will be going into is located in what is known as *[High] Viejo*. *High Viejo* is a small section of High Road that used to be a barrio with a lot of gang activity and police brutality. It gets its name from the large gang

that still inhabits the region known as High Viejo. They fear for their children's safety because many of them walk to and from school. According to Google Maps' Gang Territories website, Ragnarok Elementary is located in a part of the city that is controlled by a gang named High Nuevo that is in constant feud with High Viejo. This means that our students would have to constantly be crossing from one territory to the other. In response to this, many parents are seeking to put students in private schools or petition to have them placed in other middle schools within the district.

## **Community Events & Community Members**

### **Events**

The city of High Road hosts many community events throughout the year. These events include weekly Wednesday Farmers Market, Easter Eggstravaganza, Summer Meal Program (SFSP), Fireworks Spectacular, Summer Street Fest (SSF), Drive-In Movies, Halloween Spooktacular, and Tree Lighting Festival (*City of High Road*). I had the opportunity to attend one of the community Farmers Market and was very satisfied to have seen that the community was being given access to fresh produce. The High Road Farmers Market provided community members with a source of low cost organic and NON GMO foods. The best part of this experience was to realize that the nutritious produce was locally grown, too. During the community market, I was able to see a group of educators that were offering a free class on nutrition. Many community members listened and participated attentively. Now and then they share about the many plants, trees, and crops that they had grown and harvested in their home countries. I spoke to many vendors who were very passionate about bringing fresh and organic food to their communities.

In a very different setting, I attended a district board meeting in which community members had the opportunity to express concerns for their child's education and advocate for

their school's needs. Many people were frustrated and there was a lot of yelling. The lack of response from the school board president was highly concerning. It was evident that this was not the first time that the community had tried to express concerns that were never listened to. In many of the board meetings, when community members stepped up to the podium to speak, the president cut people off, was accused of not making eye contact and interrupting peoples' speaking time. His response every time was "that's enough, your time is up, are you going to follow my rules, I will have you removed." He often repeated that they needed to have professional decorum at the meetings but he did not lead by example. It is impossible to get through any topic or come to a resolution for our students when there is a board member that refuses to listen to the community instead of shutting them down.

The issues that were brought forward included the construction and timeline of a large project at the local high school, equitable access to experiences across all of the elementary schools, and the dismissal of many members of the board. It was rather difficult to follow along in the meeting because I was mostly occupied with trying to piece the many comments that were being shouted across the room in order to have the mildest understanding. Union representatives were accusing the school board President of dismissing valid concerns made by community members and for not being able to adequately guide and direct district meetings. Many parents shared with me that this district has been notorious for making money disappear and hiring board members that don't seek the community's well-being.

Upon further research, I learned that one of the high schools has a large renovation project started. The school board president campaigned and promised to have the project completed by the end of 2020. Due to financial and now Covid-19 complications, there have been many questions regarding the project's completion. The school board president along with

his board members lack a lot of transparency and continue to push for the project to be completed despite any financial burdens that will be brought to taxpayers in the community as well as their safety. I later realized that the arguments during this board meeting were disbursed on a lot of social media pages and the Superintendent had to intervene. She released a statement in which she presented a timeline of all the bonds, grants, and measures that have been passed to fund this project and explained that pushing forward with this project would not be a responsible move on behalf of the district. She, therefore, stated that they will put a hold on the project until they have all of the money necessary to complete it and until they are able to ensure safety for all workers and community members. Since the release, there has been a lot of teacher and community support for the superintendent on many social media pages.

### **Services**

The City of High Road has a recreational center that provides many services to the community. Many of our students attend the public libraries, community pools, and other recreational centers. Before COVID-19, our school did not have any continuous partnerships with the local community, however, we did have a successful after school program named REACH in which many of my students attended. We did reach out to the local restaurants for fundraising opportunities and even participated in a Tupperware fundraiser that a parent led through their account. The Bots Unified School District (ERUSD) is a 2009 recipient of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant Initiative that “focuses on safe school environments and violence prevention activities, alcohol and drug prevention activities, student behavioral, social, and emotional supports, mental health services, and early childhood social and emotional learning programs” (ERUSD Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant Initiative Website). Our

school also partnered with local health clinics, such as *Alma Family Services* that helped provide counseling to a large number of our students.

As a result of COVID-19, our superintendent has helped our schools partner with Amazon Studios/NoKidHungry and Inland Harvest to help get fresh produce into our students' homes at no cost to them in addition to the school lunches that had been distributed to our families since the school closures occurred.

### **Problematize the Issue**

As I've surveyed community members, I've learned that there are very few services that help family members learn their rights as illegal residents of this country. Many parents fear advocating for their students out of fear of being noticed and risking being deported as a result of it. This year, I provided many school supplies for my students as do many teachers within my school and district. Even though our school provided many school supplies, they aren't enough to help our students throughout the year and there are many families who can't afford to have any in stock for their students. My students took advantage of food services, counseling support, and the public city libraries. I tried my best to complete a comprehensive list of the local services available to my students, something that their parents were grateful for.

### **Response to the Covid-19 Crisis**

Experiencing a nationwide school closure during the first year of teaching is not something that was expected and definitely not something that many can say. It has been a unique learning experience as a new teacher, an experience that has brought to light many of the issues that exist within our public education system. As events concerning Covid-19 arose, Ragnarok Elementary and the rest of the district were taking great measures to help prevent the spread of the virus. For example, in our staff meetings, our principal informed us that janitors

were being paid extra hours to sanitize all classrooms and communal spaces and classrooms were being equipped with plenty of soap, napkins, and hand sanitizer. Additionally, teachers were expected to incorporate at least five to six whole class opportunities for handwashing throughout the day. My students and I had a conversation regarding the importance of handwashing, limiting face touching, as well as snack sharing, something that they often enjoyed doing. We had begun talking about the possibility of schools closing, however, we never imagined this being the case.

The week that teachers found out about the school and district closure, we had experienced a short school week because teachers were to have a staff development day that Friday. As we went into work, our principal had directed us to begin to plan for a two week closure in case that was the direction we were to take. Within a matter of hours, our superintendent confirmed what we had all been dreading as we foresaw frightful and chaotic times ahead. Our district was closing down and we were told that we would have one more day with our students so that we could debrief them and also explain to them what our plan for distance learning would be during our two week school closure. Unfortunately, hours later President Trump declared a national emergency and those last few hours with our students were taken away. That day, we worked late hours creating packets, putting together student emails, passwords, and access codes in preparation for a three week closure. All of our staff was in disbelief. Some who have taught for more than thirty years could not recall a time in which schools had closed or when their job as a teacher could not be done in a classroom. It was a rainy day which I'm sure added to the somber feeling that I saw on my co-workers' faces and heard in their voices as we all tried to share one copy machine. I was mostly in disbelief but proud of the work that my partner and I accomplished in such a short amount of time for our students.

My administration has done everything possible to support our low-income students during these times of uncertainty. Our district quickly organized meals for all students and the middle schools and offered breakfast and lunch even during an observed holiday and spring break. Recently, our Superintendent advertised that they had partnered with Amazon to help get groceries into our students' homes. When we learned that the schools would remain closed until the end of the school year, the district quickly took action after realizing that packets would not be enough in order to provide academic support to our students. The leadership team at every school met at the schools and took apart chrome carts, sanitized and bagged them, and distributed the computers to families who lacked technology at home.

Our school, in particular, serves a vulnerable population and therefore provides counseling to more than half of our students. I feel that not enough is being done for our students who are in dire need of these services especially during times in which their mental and emotional health has been disrupted by the lack of daily school routines and security. I've had a couple of students constantly check in with me wondering how they will be able to continue their services. Additionally, students with learning disabilities have been expected to complete assignments given by their general education teacher as well as their RSP teacher which I'm sure can only be overwhelming for someone who already has a difficult time learning. Since our school first closed, RSP teachers have been directed to serve as a support system for assignments given by the general education teachers instead of assigning more academic work. As educators, we certainly did not expect a world pandemic to disrupt our daily routines and the lack of preparation is affecting us at large.

As a first year teacher, this is something that can't necessarily be taught in any program and definitely not something that one would expect to have to prepare for, however, it's been a

learning experience that is only to help me grow. I was devastated to realize that all of the projects that I had been spearheading alongside colleagues and parents were completely shut down. I am devastated to realize that I didn't get to say goodbye to my students and that their 5th grade promotion will no longer be celebrated as we had planned. There is a lot of anger that I feel for not being able to do more for a group of students that has helped me grow so much in such a short time. Emilia Minero (2017) expressed that "When you're learning to be a teacher, you think it's just about lesson plans, curriculum, and seating charts...I was blindsided by the emotional aspect of teaching—I didn't know how to handle it. I was hurt by my students' pain, and it was hard for me to leave that behind when I went home." Experiencing Covid-19 closures makes teaching all that more difficult as I think about what pains my students' might be experiencing at home and I am learning of new ways in which I can support them. I am realizing how important technology is for maintaining communication and am thankful for how great my students are adapting.

## **School Site Research**

### **The School Site**

Ragnarok Elementary is located in the outskirts of the city of High Road, only five minutes away from the 605 freeway. It is a few blocks away from a train track that divides High Road into what is known by the locals as "High Viejo" and "High Nuevo." This is something that I will be discussing in greater detail in the next section. Ragnarok Elementary is surrounded by the community that it serves and neighbors the district office. Our school is an outdoor campus with mostly established buildings and a few portables. Our students eat in an enclosed cafeteria and enjoy checking out books from our large library that holds materials both for our dual language program and our few English-Only strands. The hallways in our school are covered with words of encouragement and murals of our mascot, the bulldog.

Working at Ragnarok Elementary and the Bots Unified School District has opened my eyes to the great issues that exist within California's public education system. During my first district training, the last words I heard before starting a new school year were "don't let the politics [of this district] scare you away." At the time, I had no clue what these words meant, nor what they would mean during my first year teaching. It was during the first week of teaching and getting to know other teachers that I quickly learned about this school's reputation. Ragnarok Elementary, and the district as a whole, have experienced great changes in the administration. In the last five years, the district had had three superintendents and Ragnarok Elementary had seen six principals walk in and out of the front door. This year was no different. We had a new superintendent and principal and the staff was definitely talking about whether these two new administrators would last.

In the first few weeks of interacting with my colleagues, attending staff meetings, and spending time in the front office, I learned about drastic changes in the district and internal conflicts in our school that have caused turmoil for a lot of people. The biggest issue that I learned of was a change that occurred four years prior to my arrival at Ragnarok Elementary. Most of the schools in the district were changed into unique academies. Ragnarok Elementary became known as the dual language academy. According to teachers who have taught at Ragnarok Elementary for over 30 years and are now teaching in a dual language setting, this transition negatively affected the school climate as well as how parents viewed the work being done.

Teachers at Ragnarok Elementary have expressed that the expectation to become a dual language academy was abrupt. I was informed that they had learned of the transition during the spring semester of their school year and were expected to perform as a dual language academy in

the fall semester of the following school year. At the time, many of the teachers did not have the proper credentials, training, nor experience for teaching in a dual language setting. The district and school did not have a five year plan, which I learned was essential for the start of these kinds of transitions, and there was no curriculum that would assist them in becoming a dual language academy. Many teachers traveled to Mexico to gather sufficient resources to help them get through the school year. Since this change, there has been a lot of confusion in the school as they still lack a formal plan, enough teacher training, and now recognition by the district.

The constant change of administration has put a great strain in the success of a very broken school. I was very surprised when I learned of the amount of principals that had been at Ragnarok Elementary in such a short amount of time. I was not surprised, however, that I had joined a team of staff and teachers that were frustrated and overwhelmed. They had plenty of questions for our new principal as they held onto promises that had been made to them by the previous administration.

Upon engaging with parents who have been frequent volunteers and members in school committees, I was informed that many parents disagree with the transition to becoming a dual language academy as well as with the levels of low academic achievement, and lack of school-community functions. As a new teacher at Ragnarok Elementary, these findings were very alarming, shocking, and a cruel reality of the effects that administrative changes have on school, teacher, student, and community success. I was most surprised by the resilience that I saw in a lot of teachers that strongly believe in the program and benefits of providing an opportunity for our students to become proficient in multiple languages. Luckily for Ragnarok Elementary, our new superintendent is known for successfully opening dual language academies and is already

working closely with our principal to reimburse teachers for supplies bought during the first year of the transition and training for all those working in the dual immersion program.

### **Personnel**

My upper grade level colleagues have been of great support this school year. Their teaching experiences range from six to twenty years and combined have worked in three elementary schools and two middle schools within the district. Although their experiences at Ragnarok Elementary vary, they all coincided with their appreciation for the effective and supportive collaboration amongst the upper grade team. My colleagues form part of our school's Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) team, Site Support Team, CADRE, etc. and are very knowledgeable about the multiple efforts that our school tries to put forth for our students.

My colleagues have shared that our school has been trying hard to adopt a PBIS program across our school, however, these efforts have not been unsuccessful. Every year the school conducts a PBIS Launch day in which students are reminded of the behavior expectations that we have around the school. Teachers usually believe that this along with rewarding students with Bark Bucks (paper money that students can then cash in for goodies) is a waste of time and efforts. In response to this, teachers have maintained in their Zero Tolerance (Winter, 2016) strategies of approaching disruptive behavior and one too many students are constantly being removed from their classrooms. This has shown an increase in violent behavior at our school. Payne & Welch (2015) state, "a restorative justice paradigm offers a disciplinary model that can repair harm and create a whole-school communal environment, while reducing the frequency and severity of school violations" (540). Maintaining and reinforcing restorative practices on our campus is vital for our students' healthy growth and active academic participation especially as we begin to understand any roles that gang violence may play in their lives.

One of my colleagues has experienced a lot of the difficult transitions that our school has gone through and therefore has experienced the changing school and community relations. She has a strong social justice perspective on education and is truly working hard towards revolutionizing our school. A comment that she shared with me has kept in my mind as I've learned to navigate through this school. She expressed that "There is very little continuity throughout the grade levels... there is little to no communication between lower grade and upper grade teachers." I found this to be rather problematic because we are a team of educators that together are supposed to help our students be successful in their academic journey. As a fifth grade teacher, I wondered what I could do to help bridge the communication between upper and lower grade classes and questioned my partners of their thoughts regarding a 'Little Buddy' program with the Kinder or First Grade classes. They were thrilled, however, they explained that in the past, our counterparts had not always been as enthusiastic about this partnership.

My principal is also new to our school and our conversation therefore had a lot of resonating emotions and observations about Ragnarok Elementary. We both agreed that there was a lot of work that had to be done in order to help teachers, students, and parents move forward together. Our principal is happy to be working with a superintendent that has extensive background in opening dual immersion schools. She acknowledged that there were a lot of gaps in our school and agreed that the constant change in administration made the already complicated circumstances of Ragnarok Elementary's dual immersion program even worse. She explained that one of the main reasons why she wanted to work at Ragnarok Elementary was because she believed in the benefits that dual immersion schooling could bring to students and she therefore wanted to join a community that shared in her passion for dual language instruction. In our staff meetings she has shared about her young daughter's new educational journey and how now as a

parent, she takes dual immersion instruction very personally. She is proud of the rhythm that we were able to get into as we all learned to work with one another and was thankful that her staff was willing to trust in her to help guide them to resources that will further support them and their students in their classrooms.

During my time at Ragnarok Elementary, I've had the privilege of engaging with a lot of non-staff members that are truly the backbone to our school. They are noon-aides that greet our students with a warm hug every morning, guide our students to their meals, organize our academic books, make sure that our classrooms are stocked with supplies, and the list goes on. I had the privilege of working with an aide that although only part time, is highly visible to all staff and students. She is someone who is well respected in our community because of her inviting personality and willingness to go the extra mile for all students. When prompted about what she loved most about her job, she expressed that "our school is full of many students that need us. I try to make a connection with every family that brings their child to our school and I know what they are going through. If I can bring one smile or share a hug with these students every day, then I know I've done my part." I know this to be true because on my first day at Ragnarok Elementary, she was the one who shared that smile and hug with me. A small act that prevented me from running away from this profession!

I knew that my colleague had been around through the academic changes at Ragnarok Elementary and I wanted to gain her perspective on the many issues that came as a result of Ragnarok Elementary becoming a Dual Immersion school. She explained that the change had been difficult for everyone. Teachers had become angry and had moved on as did many families in the neighborhood. She acknowledged that it had been difficult to adjust to a new administrator every year because that within itself also brought many changes. Since the school first

transitioned into a dual immersion school, she has noticed a change in the school's morale. She believes that teachers are finally receiving the support that they need and that they are beginning to find a new rhythm that is helping the school become one again. She hopes that this will continue to be the uphill climb that our school needs.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Ragnarok Elementary is a school that has clung to their old ways of doing things while many other schools in our district have pushed for innovation. In many cases, new teachers have tried to suggest different field trips, fundraisers, events on campus, ways to reach out to our families, and many teachers have been opposed to it with the explanation that at Ragnarok Elementary, things have always been done a certain way. It is difficult to plan and bring innovation to our school when many put forth an individualistic front. This is something that many parents and staff members have shared with me. I have been informed, by staff who have worked at other schools in the district, of the many changes that those schools have made to better support one another in their school and have been told that they don't think it is possible at Ragnarok Elementary. Some parents have explained that they had hoped to move their child to another elementary school because of the lack of community outreach and community bridging. Ultimately they've decided to leave their children at our school because they didn't want to affect their students' social experience.

With technology being a driving force in our educational experiences, a lot of the parent communication has transitioned over to electronic outreach. While Ragnarok Elementary is still making efforts to communicate, it is clear that many families are not as technologically versed or have as much access to technology as our school assumes that they do. Paper communication has been reintegrated to our school.

Ragnarok Elementary has put great efforts into preparing our students to become well rounded with technology. A couple of years before I arrived at Ragnarok Elementary, the school had a shared computer lab for the whole school with very few computers within the classrooms. Since then, almost every classroom has gained a Chromebook cart with enough computers and headphones for every student. Teachers are expected to work with students on the basic uses of computers. Additionally, our district invested in creating Innovation Labs at every campus. Our Innovation Lab is run by a digital learning coach who sets up monthly stations in which students engage with coding, 3D printing, engineering practices, different art programs, as well as numerous applications. Our digital coach serves as a liaison between teachers and the integration of technology into their classrooms. With the school closures due to COVID-19, our digital coach has been vital to our school's efforts to engage in distance learning as well as ensuring that students have the necessary technology in their homes.

At Ragnarok Elementary, we have a wide variety of learners and our school does a lot to support all of our students' needs. However, I am not always sure that it is done in a very timely manner. A selected number of our English Learners receive support a couple of days out of the week during the Spring trimester. This occurs up until the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) is taken which gives me reason to believe that this support is an effort to help those that are nearing the opportunity to reclassify. I believe that teachers at Ragnarok Elementary are due for a quick training on what English Language Development (ELD) should be and look like because many teachers are confused between a designated ELD time and integrated EL support within our curriculum. This of course is only true for the English strands that exist within our school. According to Garcia & Kleifgen(2018) "Minoritized emergent bilinguals are the students who need the most support from the educational system"

(11) and therefore need their time in designated ELD time to be protected and effectively planned and taught. Given that our school is one of the schools that reclassifies students the most, it concerns me that students are not always being supported as much as needed.

Several of my students were recognized as Gifted and Talented students. Many of them were excited to be recognized for their academic achievements and wanted to know how this recognition would change their academic experience. Unable to answer their questions, I reached out to our principal who explained that “enrichment through the GATE program was based at each of our schools. This could look like field trips, bringing experts onto campus, or establishing programming before or after school... However right now, we do not have someone leading that.” Unfortunately at our school, a lot of effort goes into helping those with more academic needs than those who need enrichment. Our school largely depends on teachers differentiating in the classroom for our students.

## **School Mission & Demographics**

### **Demographics**

Ragnarok Elementary is one of the biggest elementary schools in the district. Our school welcomes students as early as TK and works last with students in 5th grade. According to the *Department of California-DataQuest*, Ragnarok Elementary serves a total of 501 students with 98.4% reporting to be of Hispanic or Latin descent followed by 0.6% white, 0.4% Asian, and 0.2% African American. Similarly, 23/23 of the reporting staff at Ragnarok Elementary during the 2018-19 school year reported to be Hispanic according to the *California Department of Education*. Today, I am sure these statistics would be slightly different as I do see a slight diversification in our staff as a result of new hires. 82% of the population that Ragnarok

Elementary serves identifies as Socioeconomically disadvantaged and 41% as English Learners according to *Ragnarok Elementary Summary | California School Dashboard*.

Ragnarok Elementary has been a Dual Language Academy for about four years now. This has largely impacted the qualities that they look for in their staff. Based on my experience these last few months, almost all of the staff at Ragnarok Elementary speaks Spanish and English. The interesting thing about coming to this realization is that five of the six grade levels at our school form part of the dual language program with a few English strands mixed in between. However, when staff members talk amongst one another, the English language is always most prominent in every conversation. Some of my colleagues have expressed that if we want our students to find a love for a different language and truly embrace the culture, we as staff must lead by example.

### **Mission/Vision**

Ragnarok Elementary's mission states the following: "Ragnarok Elementary, in collaboration with all stakeholders, will create a student-centered environment with a 21st century curriculum. We are committed to provide students with the opportunity to become bilingual and biliterate in a culturally diverse society." This mission statement is located on our school website in both English and Spanish as well as in the school's front office. It rarely is distributed to students' homes and classrooms. It is unknown to me who created our school's mission and vision, however, I was pleased to see that it had been updated to reflect the school's new role as a language academy. Additionally, the Ragnarok Elementary website includes the school's vision which states: "Students will: perform at high levels of proficiency in all academic content areas. Be empowered to take risks and be purposeful, honorable citizens."

Ragnarok Elementary's mission and vision are very student-centered and foster a positive space and opportunity for student success. However, these mission and vision statements don't explicitly promote any kind of collaboration between the community at large and those of us who enter this community to help educate students. In the school's mission it is stated that the school in collaboration with stakeholders hold a responsibility to educate students, however, the lack of explicitness in this statement can mislead the responsibility of bridging our surrounding community to the school and the district.

Our school's mission does not necessarily reflect seamlessly in my classroom for the sole reason that this school's mission is more geared towards the dual immersion portion of our school. This year will be the last year that 5th grade is part of the English Only (EO) strand and only then will the school's mission reflect seamlessly. Ragnarok Elementary's vision is most prominent in my classroom because my class-room is very student centered, all students are expected to be able to perform at grade level proficiency, and be honorable citizens. We constantly work on student empowerment and self-acceptance. It is very important for my classroom to serve as a bridge between the families that I serve and our public education system. While my students are still young, parents and I are already beginning to have conversations of college and career opportunities for our students.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Academically speaking, students at Ragnarok Elementary are 37.9 points below standard in English Language Arts and 42.7 points below standard in Mathematics when compared to California state averages. This measure is based on student performance on either the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment or the California Alternate Assessment. Along with this, the *Ragnarok Elementary Summary / California School Dashboard* also reported that 43.1% of

English Learners are making progress towards English language proficiency and that 15.2% of our students suffer chronically absent, this number only increasing over the last three years. As a teacher, I see the correlation between all of these statistics because even though I have thirty one students in my classroom, I rarely have a full class. I have seen the impact that being absent or even tardy has on my students. Additionally, many students come to school and leave before the end of the day, missing a great deal of information.

Parent involvement at my school is very limited. Our district has adopted a no volunteer unless fingerprints are presented policy as a result of the many school shootings that have occurred throughout the United States. This caused parents to shy away from coming to volunteer because fingerprinting not only comes with a cost, but many of our community members are undocumented and fear being fingerprinted. Recently, our district has been able to screen for free and we have seen a rise in parent volunteers. Our school is currently working on reestablishing a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). I've learned that in the past, the existing PTO became very selective and only certain parents were welcomed into the group. There was also a lack of teacher support and meetings were often canceled because there was hardly ever enough representation from both parties.

### **Class Reflection**

#### **Ecology**

My classroom serves as a space for creative freedom, self-expression, self-empowerment, and a long-life of learning. As students walk in every morning they are greeted with a boisterous good morning as well as their breakfast ready to be served. It has been a space for students to constantly engage with their peers both socially and academically. I began the academic school year with six groups of about six students and consistently moved the students around throughout

the months so that they could collaborate with almost everyone. Additionally, I reconfigured our physical space to help bring and normalize change within our space. I always encourage my students to be dynamic learners and believe that our space should also model that belief. In my classroom we use our kidney table for many things but what is most prominent is our small groups. I want my students to begin to take responsibility over their studies and I will often let my students know that I will be hosting a small group at the back of the classroom during their independent time and encourage those who need more support to join me until they feel sure about what they are doing. My students do really well in acknowledging their needs and seeking the extra support that I provide.

### **Demographics**

My class is composed of 31 students who all identify as Hispanic or of Latin descent. I have 15 boys and 16 girls in my classroom. Out of my 31 students, twelve of them are considered ELs, four as EOs, and fifteen as RFEPs. There are four students with Individualized Education Plans, one with a 504 plan, and three who were recently classified as GATE. My students with IEPs and 504 receive accommodations that include modified homework, extra time on assignments/assessments, text-speech, less problems per page, multiplication charts included in assessments, and testing in quieter spaces. My GATE students are often asked to become the teachers or peer-tutors in our classroom. They are provided with enrichment activities that include further researching a topic or idea as well as the opportunity to work ahead of the classroom using educational platforms such as Khan Academy and Imagine Math.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Beginning this academic year was fairly difficult for many reasons. To begin, my classroom appeared to be a classroom that was used for unwanted items. I began with different sized tables and chairs, old and dusty bookshelves with only one day to transform it into what

would appear as a classroom for 31 students. I slowly began to transform the physical space before realizing that I had no curriculum to teach. My colleagues and the school's aides soon found themselves hunting down the set of academic books and teacher editions that should have been left by the previous teacher. In the course of a month, pieces to the curriculum began to make their way to my classroom. Parents began to provide school supplies that allowed us to do various projects. Our class is still missing the grade leveled readers as well as the grade-level novel that accompanies the curriculum. This would have been beneficial to our ability to further analyze literature as a class.

I am delighted to share that our class had a college tutor that came in for an hour every day to help in our work. He helped me with small groups, math intervention, student projects, college talks, and so much more. Parents were constantly helping me celebrate our students, fundraise for field trips, and sell at our school events. Our classroom is a welcoming space in which students from other classes have come to meditate with my students. It is a second home to us all.

As an educator it was important for me to be respected by my students but also understand that I was another adult that was there to support them regardless of their situation. I wanted to build relationships that would be warm enough to help students feel welcomed but demanding enough so that students knew that there were expectations that were to be met. I deeply resonated with Poplin and Bermudez (2019) as they state, "when I mean building relationships, it's not being their friend. I think some people get mixed up with having a relationship with students and being their friend... Having a relationship means building that culture in your classroom where students understand who you are, what your expectations are, and where you're coming from. You also understand your students, who they are, where they are

coming from, what their shortcomings are, what their strengths are, but most importantly, holding them accountable to whatever expectations that you are setting for them” (p.20). Being a teacher is understanding our positionality as educators and learning to adapt it for students’ needs but also learning about the many institutional barriers that exist so we can maintain learning experiences as humane as possible.

A clear way for evaluating our role as educators and ensuring that we are performing in a way that is equitable for our students and ourselves is through reflection using the California teacher expectations/competencies. The following part of my narrative dives deeper into a reflection of my first year as a teacher.

### **Part D: Reflecting on My New Role**

As a candidate in a teacher education program, I did not really know what to expect. When I was first hired to teach my own group of students, I was excited and yet nervous because I once again was pushing myself towards unexpected new experiences. I appreciated having a framework of teacher performance expectations because they helped guide my growth, presence, and strategies during my first year of teaching. As this year comes to a conclusion, I begin to reflect on what this year has encompassed and what my new identity as a teacher has evolved into.

#### **Classroom Ecology and Teacher Presence**

When I was introduced to the “Classroom Ecology and Teacher Presence” teacher expectation, I recognized the importance of being intentional when entering a classroom space. I always knew that I wanted my classroom to be a safe space for learning and *convivencia* (social harmony, communal living, daily coexistence ), however, I did not think that I needed a plan in order to achieve this. I quickly learned that my personality and caring nature would not be enough in order to reach the diverse classroom that I was sure to step into. During this first year of being in my own classroom, I was able to achieve a classroom ecology that I could not have imagined possible. I am very proud of my students, aide, and supporting teachers who helped form and maintain our classroom a dynamic environment. I firmly believe that vulnerability, intentionality, and clear communication played a major role in the positive development of our *convivencia*.

The first day and first month of getting to know one another is very important because they are the first impressions that we all began to formulate of one another. On the first day of class, I knew that it was important for me to set the tone of what our year would look like. I

began with an introduction of myself as well as of circle, “a structural framework to build relationships and to address conflict within a community” (Amy Bintliff, 2014), and a restorative justice practice that I hoped to use in my classroom. Together we then created our classroom norms and expectations and agreed to abide by them. As I begin to reflect on this first day, I recognize that we did a fantastic job of naming norms that were attainable, however, we did not discuss how we would address anyone who did not follow our agreed norms of showing respect to self and others, be active listeners and contributors in class, and have open communication among others. This is something that I wish to incorporate in the future as a way of normalizing having tough conversations in respectful ways.

Building a classroom ecology that works for you and your students is highly dynamic depending on who is in your classroom. As previously mentioned, in our classroom we began by creating classroom norms and participating in a Restorative Justice Circle where we got to know more of one another. In addition, I created a mail center so that my students could send one another letters of affirmation, gratitude, compliments, encouragement, etc. Soon enough, my students realized that I did not have a mailbox and suggested that I too form part in the mail center since I was also part of their ecology! (A wise and obvious remark-- I was so proud and felt so appreciated.) My class, however, quickly outgrew these strategies especially as we became comfortable with one another. Instead as a class we decided to revisit our norms and update them according to what we were experiencing at the time. Instead of the mail center and circle, we spent a few afternoons out of the week playing C.A.T.S (Compliment, Apology[Affirmation], Thanks, Shout Out was introduced to me by one of my classmates [James Calderon] who had learned it from a colleague of his) with a stress ball that we got to throw

around. This was fantastic for our class because they were a very outspoken group and needed a more high energy activity, something that neither Circle nor a mail center could achieve.

As students became more overwhelmed with the rigor of fifth grade academics, the social expectations put on pre-teenagers, and the idea of transitioning to middle school, I saw an increase in anxiety and panic attacks in my classroom. I knew that as a student myself, I had a lot to share about these feelings and decided to share some practices that helped me. Together, we participated in numerous sessions of guided meditation, guided breathing, and vowed to verbally give ourselves daily affirmations.

There are plenty of other strategies that helped us during our physical time together on campus and even more that kept us united even during distance learning, our nation's civil unrest, and our harsh goodbye. Some of our class favorites included sharing ways in which we maintained connected with family/friends, teaching one another newly learned hobbies, and beginning online class with grounding exercises. Investing time into one's classroom ecology truly makes a difference in a student's ability to be successful. It is with no doubt that our loving and resilient classroom ecology allowed us to continue in our learning even through a global pandemic.

### **Content Knowledge to Promote Access, Learning, and Achievement**

After strategically developing and addressing a positive classroom culture and investing in one's students' socio-emotional learning, content and language objectives take precedence in a teacher's role. I have learned that presenting students with *why* they are to engage with the lessons of the day, they find more meaning in the content and are more willing to participate. Over the course of the year, I have learned of the importance of ensuring that language and

content objectives must function together in order to plan for all of my students but especially for my emergent bilinguals that often need more scaffolds and thought out lessons.

During my first year teaching, I learned that following my curriculum's objectives often watered down content and made our learning less meaningful. Oftentimes, instead of providing explicit definitions of words, it would provide descriptions relating to the vocabulary word. In response to this, I used the curriculum's standards and readings to create my own objectives and lesson activities so that they reflected my students' needs, abilities, and experiences. Throughout this year as a teacher candidate, I also learned that my planning process is very linear. I believe that this process of thinking and planning has helped me be able to create meaningful objectives that in turn have helped align our curriculum with the instruction.

When it comes to English Language Arts, our school's curriculum presents it with an interdisciplinary approach. I struggled to make sure that our English lessons were not turning into Social Studies or Science lessons because the reading content was not accessible to my students. During these situations, which happened often, I had to do some background investigation on the text in order to measure how it would support our task.

### **Instructional Practices to Promote Learning and Engagement**

This year I spent a lot of time developing my teacher strategies so that they could be more accessible to all of my students. I also learned that by developing my teacher strategies, I was also able to improve my lesson development and execution. When I first began teaching, I would complete a step by step list and based my lesson on that. It quickly became obvious that that was not enough support for myself nor my students. I often caught myself repeating and rewording sentences, instructions, main ideas, etc. It was then suggested by my coach that I spend more time in creating PowerPoints that would help guide my direct instruction. As I began

to organize my lesson in this way, I saw major differences in my thinking out loud and modeling. I was finally planning for every detail that my lessons entailed.

I have been most interested in being explicit in my teacher moves as Alvarez (2014) explains because I recognized that my emergent bilinguals had been suffering the most with my lack in planning. As I began to organize my lessons, I attempted making them more rich with academic language. I made sure to present students with common definitions to vocabulary words and sentence frames that could be used in their writing and speaking. After growing my knowledge on strategies for supporting emergent bilingual students, I now understand that there is much more to teaching emergent bilinguals than just frontloading vocabulary and providing sentence frames (Hoover, 2016). I am excited to get back into the classroom and continue to put into practice everything that I have been exposed to since the academic year ended. One of the practices that I am most excited about is incorporating a book study model to one of our class novels. I had the opportunity to develop jobs with proper scaffolds that each student will participate in. I appreciated this idea because I believe that it is important to give students agency in their work and academic journey, with the proper support of course.

### **Assessments to Inform Instruction and Promote Learning**

Implementing meaningful assessments to inform instruction is still a competency that I struggle with in general. I personally struggled with creating effective assessments that would provide timely feedback for my students and myself (Zwiers, 2014). Over the course of the last year, I have actively incorporated informal assessments in my classroom the most. My informal assessments ranged from using exit tickets, employing diverse check-ins throughout the lesson, asking certain students to demonstrate a solution or their thinking, using hand signals to indicate levels of comfort/understanding, etc. After reviewing my students' responses, I would typically

meet in small groups depending on the responses received and address any questions or common mistakes. If the simple mistakes were common throughout the whole class then I would explain it as a whole class and then do a mini-reteach activity. The data that I collected from these informal assessments helped me determine who I needed to meet with continuously in small groups as well as what students could be together during small group activities.

This year I believe I struggled with this competency because of the logistical side of tracking data and evidence. I know that I did a lot of teaching and informally assessing students but did not spend much time planning formal assessments that aligned properly with our lesson objectives and standards. I had a very difficult time determining what assessments were worth analyzing more in depth and which I could always address in a following unit. In her article, Alvarez (2014), claims that analyzing formative assessment is “most beneficial for ELLs because they are the students who are learning content, language, academic skills, and therefore are the ones that might run into most misconceptions that need addressing”(3). During the times that I was able to provide individual and global feedback to my students, I was able to recognize the growth that they achieved. While I agree that all students should receive feedback in a timely manner, I also believe that as teachers we need to be strategic about the kind of feedback we are providing for our emergent bilinguals, students with special needs, and those who have significant life experiences so that they too receive a rich and supportive learning environment.

In the years that follow, I know that I must ensure that the assessments I use in my classroom need to be properly aligned with content standards as well as language and content objectives. As I continue to develop this teacher performance competency, I will look to better organize my units so that there is cohesion from lesson to lesson and ultimately success in the assessment. During my last sequence class at Claremont Graduate University, I learned that my

planning style is very linear. I know that I can use this strength to focus on grade standards and then develop assessments for my units that will encompass the learning objectives for that unit. I don't want to say that it will be used in a way that checks boxes off, but definitely in a way that will allow me to organize my data efficiently.

### **Social Justice Dispositions to Promote Access, Learning, Achievement and Future Opportunity and Success**

My first year of teaching was no easy feat. I am sure that this had a lot to do with the fact I was very new to this profession and therefore had a large learning curve but also the fact that I was going to school and working full time. I begin this section in this way because I want to acknowledge that for the first time in my educational journey I experienced severe forms of anxiety. I knew that if I wanted to be the best teacher that I knew I could be for my students, I had to learn how to manage and learn to prevent my anxiety. This was no easy task but I credit my students and professors for helping me learn about my socio-emotional needs. This new experience truly helped me empathize with my students. I was more keen to recognize moments in which my students were having a harder time focusing and learned to introduce meditation, self-affirmations, breathing exercises, or simply stretch breaks. I found this to be necessary in my classroom because I often recalled not being taught how to cope with feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression. Growing up, those feelings were dismissed in my home and community with the excuse that I was young and there couldn't possibly be things that I could be worrying about or weighing heavy on me. I often shared my feelings and experiences with my students which helped create and bring awareness to mental health issues that can and do affect all ages. To my surprise, many students carried these practices home and parents began to notice the

improvement in their students' spirits ( I acknowledge that I am not a doctor and cannot diagnose anybody. The practices taught in our class were a part of our health and wellness courses.)

Becoming self-aware was a journey that took almost a year to process. As a new teacher there are great feelings of guilt and self-doubt. I began to give into these thoughts as I remembered the low-income community that I too had come from. I felt selfish because there I was trying to be a better scholar at the expense of my already vulnerable students. It was through my students' appreciation notes, celebratory moments, and eventually my growth, that I began to acknowledge myself as a teacher. I did a lot of self-awareness within my classroom. Along with my students, we were able to engage in various restorative practices that helped us all grow. This, however, did not always feel the case outside of our classroom.

In part C of this narrative, I mentioned that the school and district that I served in this year had experienced high turnover rates within the administration. On top of that, it was still a fairly new dual language academy and still has a lot of improvement to make. I learned that many teachers approached students' needs with a deficit mindset. Much like in Angela Valenzuela's (1999) study, teachers believed that a lot of students' lack of interest, distraction, and inability to complete work was related to student and parent disinterest in academics and school. While I recognized the teacher burnout in a lot of their faces, I believe that as teachers we need to put in greater efforts to further support our students. I was appreciative of the fact that I was able to do home visits this year because it helped me learn about my students and their families in a holistic manner. Valenzuela (1999) explains that "students argue that they should be assessed, valued, and engaged as whole people..." (p. 61). Participating in home visits provided me with first-hand accounts of the differences that can be made when students are engaged as whole people. They overall were more attentive, personal, and were likely to set goals for

themselves. Many teachers couldn't believe that I had made three visits this year but I suggested that they give it a try in hopes that they too could enter their classrooms with open minds.

This academic year was full of social justice learning and empowerment. I am beyond grateful to have built a positive and strong classroom ecology along with my students because it was something that allowed us to grow even during all of the unrest in our world. The work that we did in our classroom and in distance learning was pivotal to our growth as members of a greater community. This year we experienced a global pandemic, quarantine, civil unrest, city lockdowns, and unexpected family deaths. My students were very confused at times, scared and worried during others. It was very hard to engage in conversations with students whose parents serve in the military or in law enforcement during a time in which we are continually seeing police brutality unfairly claim the lives of so many African American people. It was very hard to ask students to remain focused during a time in which their family members were sick and dying at home or during a time where many were worried about their unstable housing. I ensured that before or after every meeting, we were able to share how we were feeling with one another. I also offered office hours in which students could log into and share one on one with me.

This year I taught my students the word *perseverance* and *resilience*. I know that having those conversations was not easy but as students who are transitioning into middle school and become more aware of the world around them, I knew that it would be harder for them to continue living with unanswered questions and feelings. I thought it would be time to begin introducing students to difficult conversations that encourage students to be self-aware of their positionality in this world and especially in their communities. The work of an antiracist social justice teacher is not to be neutral and avoid conversations that directly impact vulnerable students but to empower them to speak up about these systemic institutions that perpetuate white

supremacy, hatred, and fear. It is time that we begin to revolutionize our classrooms so that students are no longer indoctrinated to accept American patriotism and instead work to transform our country's values and beliefs so that they are inclusive of all human beings. I am thankful for this year of struggle and growth.

## Conclusion

As my first- year of teaching comes to an end, I reflect on the person that I was when I first began my master's program at Claremont Graduate University. I believe it safe to say that I had little to no experience in the classroom and therefore jumping into a classroom of my own resulted in one of the largest learning curves that I had ever experienced. While it was a rigorous year that only became more difficult as a pandemic, distance learning, and civil unrest interrupted our school year, I know that I have grown exponentially as a person and as a teacher. This ethnographic narrative pushed me to question my beliefs, intentions, and ability to learn and adapt. I was able to learn more about my students beyond our daily interactions and of their community beyond our classroom and school. I know that my journey of learning what it means to be a social justice and anti-racist educator does not end here but I am proud of everything that I was able to accomplish in such a short amount of time.

During this school year, I learned the importance of a positive classroom ecology. I attribute our successful transition to distance learning to our wonderful classroom ecology because the level of trust that we had in one another helped us remain present and ready to continue learning even as we were consumed with fear and uncertainty. Open levels of communication with my students and their parents ensured that I constantly reflected on my teaching practices, that my students were celebrated, supported, and held accountable, and that parents were involved in their students' academic journey.

Overall, this year of growth proved that a teacher's role is a dynamic one that must be open to reflection and adaptation. I am thankful for this year of struggle and growth and look forward to many years of learning and perfecting the craft along my students and their communities.

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